Home-Work

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Globalization, (Canadian) Culture, and Critical Pedagogy: A Primer

ROY MIKI

We always have to apprehend ourselves in the fullness of the historical moment in which we live.

— Dionne Brand, cited by Paulo da Costa

Prime the engine
my father used to say
and sure enough
it started
But primed too much
it would flood
the smell of gasoline
in a stalled time
And by the way
he would add
don't forget the primer
or the paint won't bind
He knew about machines
and about relationships
Let's start with a few selected definitions, drawn from The New Penguin English Dictionary:

"Prime": from the Latin, primus (first):

1. noun: the most active, thriving, or successful state
2. adjective: first in importance
3. verb: to put (something, especially a pump) into working order by filling or charging it with something; to apply a first coat, e.g., of paint or oil, to (a surface), especially in preparation for painting.

Hence, "Primer":

1. noun: a book that provides a basic introduction to a subject
2. noun: material used in priming a surface, especially a type of paint used as a first coat.

Three qualifications then follow:

1. Other meanings have been left in the dictionary as the unsaid.
2. I wouldn't deny the play of all the meanings cited.
3. But in this talk I'm interested primarily in "primer" as the first coat that prepares a surface for painting, and "prime" as an act of putting something into working order.

So this will be a speculative approach to what might form the methodological and conceptual parameters of a critical postcolonial pedagogy for the urgencies that motivate our practices as scholars and teachers at this moment.

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I feel very privileged to be sharing space in this volume with critical thinkers whose work I have drawn from in my own efforts to figure out
“where we’re at” these turbulent globalizing days. Figuring out “where we’re at,” of course, invokes a time-space complex, and for academics who may imagine themselves inhabiting a kind of trans-conditional sphere of neutrality, such efforts bring risks and perhaps even threaten to awaken the demons that always hover on the edges of ratiocination. Yet, for those of us who have chosen to take on the pleasures and the burdens of critical and literary thought, the search for full meaning—once the gold nugget of literary interpretation—has become all too familiarly slippery in these unruly post-post times (in the plural) of global drifts. In these drifts—and this is what makes them so shifting and shifty—the conditions of globalization are both referenced and produced, thus giving off a doubleness of effect and affect that is making the work of critical reflection much more fraught with the uncertainty of purpose and agency. At which points, we are asking ourselves more frequently than ever before, do the products of our labour—in the classroom, in our relations with colleagues, and in our social interactions—compromise the integrity of a critical relationship to systems of dominance and privilege? In other words, when the knowledge we produce loses the stability of referenced certainties, then the “truth” value of our work translates itself into discourses that can no longer be trusted to carry out the effects of our intentions. When every word, or at least the “primed” words in our academic language—the medium of our articulations—begins to be seen and heard in scare quotes, we quickly sense that it has taken on what I have referred to in a previous talk as the quality of counterfeit bills (“Living”). I’m drawing on Leslie Hall Finder’s essay in which she posits the incommensurability of applying, in the time-space territorial demarcations of a Canadian courtroom, the colonial discourse of laws based on property rights to the “land” as imagined by First Nations subjects who had been displaced. The language, in this instance, takes on the aura of fakeness and therefore becomes untrustworthy as a medium for equitable social transactions and intersubjective exchanges.

I would speculate, then, that the current conditions of postcolonial studies—if, indeed, we want to retain and advance this disciplinary framework—cannot avoid the pervasive social “ache” of indeterminacy and anxiety that has infiltrated the everyday in the wake of 9.11, the primary trauma that brought the violence of global forces into the immediacy of our local lives. Instead of dwelling on this event, however, I want to address some critical consequences that were drastically intensified by 9.11
but which are consistent, I think, with the intensity of the phenomenon of "globalization" that has become so pervasive in our recent history.

The implications of globalization are vast, as witnessed in the proliferation of research and publications on the subject. Here, in its Canadian contexts, I want to approach the phenomenon as both the medium and the product of the dramatic transformations that have occurred in the post–Cold War era (late 1980s on). Its forces are manifest, in the broadest strokes, in an unstable complex of interlocking trajectories: the undermining and/or unravelling of the social, political, and cultural machinations and mandates of the nation-state; the ascendancy of transnational corporate values that are obsessed with market-driven agendas, along with an anti-inflationary mental state that thrives on social policies primarily hurting the poorest and most vulnerable of social subjects; the devaluation of citizenship as the most legitimate means affecting state policies and directions, transforming politics into a public relations affair; and a frenzied and idolatrous relationship to the proliferation of commodities which sparked a social splurge of desires for an ever more fantasized—and fantastic—technologized future.

For those of us who struggle to retain a critical perspective on all the hyped up speed of changes that globalization appears to be generating, there are other signs—yet to be articulated perhaps—that cultural formations are in the midst of contradictory tensions. This horizon has brought some new and increasingly familiar patterns:

• Even in the loss of more locally controlled means of production, in the demise of small literary presses for instance, some cultural figures have come into the flow of enormous capital expansion.
• Even while a silence has descended on the so-called "politics of identity," corporate interests have embraced the commodification of difference as good for business.
• And even while the benefits of technology and finance capitalism have made it possible for everyone to become his or her own capitalist, social initiatives and policies that measure principles of equity have given way to class hierarchies deprivileging subjects outside the Information Technology (IT) monetary loops.

The cultural crisis marking the present is constituted on an ensemble of formations through which the politics of identity finds itself re-articulated
in the discourse of more mobile subjectivities. Our current interrogation of the limits of various critical frameworks, including the postcolonial, have brought into play questions that implicate the cultural effects of cross-border exchanges, diasporic processes, and hybrid relations. In part, these are terms that now expose what has been termed by Nestor García Canclini, John Tomlinson, and others a “determinitorialization” of the nation-state in the Cold War era—particularly the compromising of its power to manage (though obviously without complete success) hierarchies of raced, gendered, and classed identities. Cultural processes were then mediated through the constant making of policies and administrative support for dominant institutions that maintained the hegemony of a coherent national culture. In that construct the signs of incoherence and chaos were embodied in those “visible minorities” (in the state-produced discourse) who were both incorporated and identified simultaneously. The liberalism of the post-war period that underwrote the drive to produce a Canadian national culture was thus inherently riven by the riddle of “difference” that constituted its liberalism and, in this formation, called forth the struggle of “minority subjects” to transgress and transform its borders. This is why, I think, the demise of identity politics in the wake of globalization brought with it a silence that was not filled by a return to the good old days of the nation. That narrative of the nation had already moved elsewhere, i.e., had unravelled, and as a consequence the links between place (as territory) and identity (as a stable Canadianness) were also disarticulated in the process. All of the specific sites of the urban local, in turn, opened to the influx of the global—symptomatically so, as one minor instance within a plethora of instances, in the arrival say of Starbucks coffee houses all over Vancouver.

The activism of the social movements that characterized the Cold War era has been replaced by an omnipresent neo-liberalism that thrives on the consumerist values of commodity culture. As Masao Miyoshi writes, a “pervasive acceptance of consumerism is... both a cause and effect of neoliberalism. Without vast and rapid consumption, the capitalist economy would just collapse” (292). It is in this now familiar field of consumption and reception that cultural production and critical reflection must necessarily operate.

Is the nation as such then gone? Is the way now open for the unfettered magnification of the neo-liberal agenda of an ever engulfing capitalism? I don’t think so.
The catastrophic impact of the World Trade Center attacks on 9.11 in provoking the immediacy of a pervasive social and economic trauma in the United States, with its ripple effects in Canada, England, and Europe, exposed a strong and unpredictable undercurrent of resistance to—and even a hatred of—the capitalist commodity culture of which the United States is both the symbolic and material sign, and of which the twin towers of the World Trade Center were seen as that nation's synecdoche. The vast infrastructures that constitute the economic and financial networks of transnational corporations, including the nation-states woven into their operations, are not monolithic and immune to oppositional forces. Moreover, the mass protests against the World Trade Organization, the most powerful instrument for global free trade agreements, give further evidence that strategically positioned social activism through global coalitions has the potential to pressure corporate interests not to sidestep questions of social justice and the uneven distribution of material benefits. Massive disbelief and outright hostility towards neo-liberal capitalist agendas can threaten the microstructures of markets and cause unpredictable elements of chaos. Witness, for instance, the economic crisis of so-called “consumer confidence” in the wake of 9.11, and President Bush's injunction to spend as a sign of loyal citizenship.

But I am straying from the focus of this primer. What remains compelling, for those of us engaged in literary scholarship, is the recognition that globalization is far from being uniform, but is instead a multi-dimensional and multi-layered process of interactions in which local and national sites are inflected by global determinants. These determinants are heavily, but not wholly, driven by the agenda of corporate capitalism with its neo-liberal values that privilege the self-interested "individuals" who form the nexus of a social system of consumerism with its valorization of commodities. In other words, while the disseminating forces of globalization appear indomitable—i.e., have the air of inevitability—they can never be totalizing precisely because they are dependent on the continuing expansion of capital for sustenance, and this contingency makes their own processes vulnerable to unexpected events, such as 9.11, and the interventionist tactics by anti-capitalist activists. The flows that thus embody the uncertain and uneven interactions between the near and the far, the immediate and the distant—hence the local and the global—are themselves implicated in conditions of compromise that make positioning, for
critical thought, less the arrival at stability and much more a dynamic process of negotiations with subject formations that vary in relation to specific conditions.

The temptation, in these obviously challenging circumstances, is to succumb to the normative drive of self-interested individualism and to adopt the language of investment as a game in which the goal is to maximize profits. This has had, I think, a significant impact on younger writers and artists whose work has signified as cultural commodities in global economic terms. The pressure to provide more transparency of form and subject positionings that ride the crest of consumer-based dominant s has undermined the critical power of cultural work, particularly its power to resist and oppose normative assumptions, offering in their place alternative approaches to the real. On the other hand, in institutional frameworks, such as in the university, the temptation to follow the routes of maximum self-advancement and privilege is also strong. What David Li has termed the “gospel of privatization”—the favoured tactic of governments that are intent on finding a niche in the global economy—has been evident in the now normalized corporatization of the so-called “knowledge industry” that the university has become, and this “gospel,” he says in a provocative speculation, can have the “effect not only of polarizing the have-s and have-nots of the world, but also of infiltrating the psychic makeup of the individual who is now likely to regard predatory ‘self-interest’ and ‘optimal waste’ as the rational norm of life” (277).

The atomization of the “individual” who acts at a distance from sociality, protected by the institutional borders of the university, is of course the antithesis of critical discourses concerned with emancipatory goals and the transformation of social norms. But let’s not kid ourselves; the attraction of such a positioning is enormous in an academic culture that valorizes the holy grail of the appropriately weighty CV. In saying this, however, I do not intend to project an air of cynicism; rather, by reminding us of the corporate values that now pervade the terminology of academic research, I want to suggest—to recall what Pierre Bourdieu said some years back—that “there are no longer any innocent words” (40). Language is invested with the networks of production and consumption that mark the broader formations of global forces. This awareness, in turn, helps us comprehend how crucial positioning, and thus our responsibility, has become in shaping the intellectual sites of our research and
writing. Here the assumption is that no "point" in the trajectories of our scholarship is free from, or otherwise untouched by, the complicated ensemble of forces and conditions that function, in specific ways, to condition our formations as social subjects.

Given all this—and here I want to draw on Canadian contexts, the area of my own preoccupations over the past decade and more—it would seem imperative that we begin by acknowledging the limits of knowledge production in Canadian academic spheres. Just as we function without seeing ourselves from behind, so now we have become more acutely aware than ever before that we cannot anticipate and comprehend, at all times, the backside of its effects. In other words, in a situation similar to creative writers and artists, we cannot control the contexts of its reception and the uses to which it might be put, far beyond the limits of our intent. What we might read as a socially progressive act may, in certain contexts of elsewhere, be mobilized for contrary purposes. In the constraints of the corporatization of our knowledge, this threat is more dramatically visible for scientists and social scientists who rely on corporate funding to undertake their projects, but even literary scholars cannot be sure whether the critical approaches and methods they practise on any given text will lead to a questioning of dominant social relations or to their solidification. At what point, in other words, can we be certain that the products of our labour are enabling progressive change and not maintaining the very power relations we think we're undoing? I would suggest that the implications of this question are woven into the uncertainties that have entered our work to generate the "ache" that will not go away.

The crisis in CanLit studies, and the crisis in Canadian studies as a whole, has to do with a substantial disruption of purpose and direction, a disruption that has disabled its narrative formation. I am reminded of a passage from Néstor García Canclini's *Consumers and Citizens* on the effects of globalization on nation-state formations, which I think is uncanny for recent Canadian cultural history, given that he is talking about Latin American conditions:

Now we see vanish, once and for all, those identities conceived of as the expression of a collective being, of an idiosyncrasy, or of an imagined community secured by bonds of territory and blood. National culture is not extinguished, but it is converted into a formula that designates the
continuity of an unstable historical memory, continually reconstructed in interaction with transnational cultural referents. (29–30)

The "unstable historical memory" that arrives in the vanishing of a constructed national identity is then a present condition, but one that reconfigures all the elements that gave that identity the coherence of narrative origins. In the midst of global shifts, such an arrival becomes the occasion for an intense engagement with critically reflexive models of interpretation. For instance, in terms of the cultural theory of those such as Stuart Hall who have addressed the exclusionary discourses of the nation-state, the crisis opens up the potential for a process of re-articulation through which the nation as such is re-membered; that is, reconceived as a difference-producing formation enabled by a complex of discourses, including a pervasive language of racialization, that took as its normative core the white male heterosexual subject as its typical citizen.

This could, for instance, involve research that examines various constituting events in the narrative history of CanLit, its production and modes of reception, its institutional discourses, its complicit interactions with the shifting contours of the nation-state, its political and social affiliations with its enabling genealogies, and its function in the effects of racialization, ethnocentrism, gender and class relations, and representational schemata. Such work would not only reveal that globalization is not a movement "beyond" the problems of the nation-state, but a mode of translation in which previous hierarchies undergo reconstruction in their "interaction with transnational cultural referents." In this light, the concept of the "local" may be reinvented, no longer as the point of reference in a centralizing nation-state formation, but as itself the prime site where the uneven flows of the near and the distant, the immediate and the far, are both consumed and performed in our daily interactions. The local, then, is a geographical location, but it may also encompass all the specific events that condition our interactions with the vastly layered spaces of contemporary cultural formations that fan outward. The partiality (in both definitions of the word) of the local is obviously a limit, but then again the biological exigencies of daily life necessarily situate us in quotidian relations with material specifics. It may also be a vantage point in that the local, as a model of the intersection of contradictory forces, can provide the impetus for critical—and
perhaps postcolonial—studies that are attentive to points of intersection between cultures, creative texts, theories, discourses, and transnational movements.

With such an ethics in mind, it is interesting to ask: what then lies beyond the unravelling of the nation-state? Do we progress to more inclusive cultural conditions, perhaps in something resembling a renewed multiculturalism? Or do we reclaim or simply let go of cultural sovereignty as our collective right? If we do reclaim, what will that sovereignty look like? Can there be viable identity formations that are both collective and not limited by the exclusivity of nation-state formations (with their need for an other to constitute the self)? But maybe, on fourth or fifth thought, is the CEO language of the boardroom starting to make sense, and is there a happy future in neo-liberal capitalism that will bring on ever new cultural commodities in a feast of rare treats? But then again, perhaps social conditions can be likened to psychological states, and we have entered into the phase of the manic-depressive: on the one side a vision of eternal abundance made possible by the proliferation of capital but depressing because of the emptiness at the core of acquisition for its own sake; on the other side, the loss of hope in collectivities that can produce a sociality attentive to the democratic aims of social justice, cultural creativity, and economic security.

All of this speculation gets us to the slippery nitty-grits of agency in the face of all the complexities that are making our work as critical scholars both difficult and more necessary than ever before. We can no longer continue with our work as “business as usual.” Here I want us to consider the potential for a critical pedagogy in the historical juncture invoked in this primer. In doing so I suggest that the term pedagogy be approached as broader than the institutional confines of our teaching and research, and that it encompass a movement back and forth between their confines and the social and cultural variables of multiply formed subjects who are embedded in local/global networks—or the elements of a “glocalization”—that cannot be grasped in their totality. It is out of an inability to totalize without, in effect, closing off variables that would make our knowledge contingent, that we need more than ever to understand the specific limits making possible what we know and therefore to leave open the spaces of what we don’t know. So the question for a critical pedagogy becomes “what are we doing when we do what we do?” The what in turn implicates the
how, the why, and the where. These are basic frames of a reflexive methodology that will make our agency more attentive to the ethical dimensions of knowledge production and consumption in which the issue of “benefit” comes sharply into focus; that is, who ultimately benefits from the intellectual work we perform as teachers and scholars in highly invested institutions that are themselves nodes in the flows of transnational capital? The event of reading cultural texts, in the classroom and in our studies, brings into play a vast complex of interrelationships that incorporate, close by, the biological and social semiology of our living bodies in specific time and space, but fan out to interact with the local, national, and global conditions of all the material and symbolic values attached to the reception, containment, and interpretation of the diverse range of cultural productions.

In the midst of the structures producing indeterminacy, uncertainty, and ambivalence in our positioning vis-à-vis a desire to engage in progressive scholarship, the epistemological and social implications of pedagogy have moved directly into the foreground of our work as academics (who are themselves social subjects). Disciplinary positioning, and declarations of neutrality and objectivity, are no longer—and never really were—a guarantee that the effects of our research will not feed into hierarchic relations of power. Attention to the pedagogical scene of our practices would help us account for the contingencies of our own location(s)—whether in the classroom, or in our research and writing, or in our social and cultural relations with each other. It is at this location that we might be able to envision more malleable methods to negotiate the intellectual and social shifts occurring all around us and, at the same time, to prompt us to re-articulate the nation-based formations whose very limits have become the disturbances brought to prominence by the influx of global flows.

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Coda:

At the academy awards
she wears $3 million diamonds
around her bare neck and $3 million
diamond studded shoes
on her bare feet

and she is surrounded
by body guards —
the ultimate right guards

As the voice announces
"Reach out and globalize someone"

NOTES

1. While acknowledging the contested status of the term **postcolonial**, it nevertheless seems important not to blame the term but to critically question and qualify the always invested contexts of its referential deployments. Its potentially liberating powers are dependent on the critical modes through which it is performed. As a fixed and predetermining frame, it can easily fall prey to normalizing discourses that reproduce cultural hegemonies. For a cogent defense of postcolonial readings of literary texts, especially apropos those involved in CanLit studies, see Diana Brydon’s “Compromising Postcolonialisms: Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Contemporary Postcolonial Debates” where she argues for “acceptance of postcolonial literary critique as a partial, provisional, and imperfect approach that nonetheless allows pressing questions to be asked about the relations of text and world, the limits of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity; and the multiple contexts in which postcolonial critics conduct their work” (16).

2. Tomlinson adopts the term **deterritorialization** to describe “the weakening or dissolution of the connection between everyday lived culture and territorial location. However, this is not typically experienced as simply cultural loss or estrangement but as a complex and ambiguous blend: of familiarity and difference, expansion of cultural horizons and increased perceptions of vulnerability, access to the ‘world out there’ accompanied by penetration of our own private worlds, new opportunities and new levels” (128).

3. My understanding of the term “re-articulation” is informed by various discussions with Jeff Derksen. See especially his exceptional mobilization of the term as the basis for critical theory in his dissertation, “Globalism and the Role of the Cultural.” Hall explains the concept of articulation in “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall.”

4. Or another critical method, akin to the practice of re-articulation, could
involve, in Roland Bleiker's terms, "Nietzsche's method of genealogy, expanded and popularized through the work of Michel Foucault. . . . Genealogies focus on the process by which we have constructed origins and given meaning to particular representations of the past, representations that continuously guide our daily lives and set clear limits to political and social options" (25). And of course to cultural options as well. For Bleiker, the genealogical method is especially appropriate for constructing modes of dissent vis-à-vis the uneven and multi-dimensional effects of globalization. Drawing on the work of David Campbell and social theorists, he proposes the term "transversal" as a means of negotiating the complicities and contradictory flows that constitute the effects of global formations. My thanks to Heike Härting for pointing me towards Bleiker's book.

5. As Ian Ang reminds us, such studies enact a practice that "depends par excellence on the ethics (and a politics) of the encounter: on the claimed productivity of dialogue across disciplinary, geographical and cultural boundaries, on a committed desire to reach out to the 'other,' and on a refusal to homogenize plurality and heterogeneity as a way to resist, subvert or evade hegemonic forms of power" (163).

6. Tomlinson references Roland Robertson's use of this term to insist that "the local and the global . . . do not exist as cultural polarities but as mutually 'interpenetrating' principles." Robertson, he says, appropriated the term "from (originally Japanese) business discourse where essentially it refers to a 'micromarketing' strategy—the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets" (195–96).

WORKS CITED


