Migration, Rhizomic Identities, and the Black Atlantic in Postcolonial Literary Studies

The Trans-Space as Home in Pauline Melville’s Short Story “Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water”

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Charles Maier has suggested reading colonialism as a new supra-national master-narrative, thereby enabling a restatement of perspectives on history/the past, the present, and the future. Most decisive in this respect is to understand colonialism as a global player that has created transatlantic, transnational, and transracial entanglements and hierarchies on both local and global stages. Part and parcel of these hierarchical entanglements is the complex history of forced and voluntary migration and the rhizomic identities thus created. These processes are addressed by Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic and two postcolonial paradigms: critical Occidentalism and critical whiteness studies. The exploration of the theoretical framework and epistemological gain offered by these approaches is the purpose of this chapter. After discussing their theoretical grammar, I will demonstrate in how these postcolonial theories offer a means of approaching aesthetic processes. To make this point, I will examine the short story “Eat Labba and Drink Creek Water” by the British-Guyanese writer Pauline Melville. In conclusion, I will elaborate on the consequences that emerge from these considerations for the study of literature and suggest a framework for Transcultural Anglophone Studies (henceforth TAS).

Critical Whiteness Studies and Critical Occidentalism: Ways of Rereading Europe

To put the epistemological question of postcolonial studies most bluntly: how did colonialism affect the world – discursively and structurally – with respect to past, present, and future? It is true that, in its very beginnings, postcolonial
studies have been applied predominantly as black studies: i.e. as studies of the experiences and cultural identities of black people and people of colour, both in the colonial space and in related processes of racism, dispersal, and migration – and the white gaze on this. Yet theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Edward Said have always also focused on the fact that colonialism has affected both the colonizer and the colonized, the Occident and the Orient, Europe and beyond, whites and people of colour. In the early 1990s, with the emergence of critical whiteness studies and critical Occidentalism, this approach evolved as a new paradigm.

One of its most central objectives is to resituate the Occident/Europe as an identity construct. In the late-sixteenth century, Europe invented the concept of ‘human races’, thus fabricating racial and religious ‘Others’, in order to position itself as a superior white and Christian entity.1

This ideology involved, to apply Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of “provincializing Europe,” a rhetoric that translated cultural differences into historical time gaps, meaning that while encountering cultures that were different from their own, Europe simply reduced them to cultures that were allegedly lagging far behind European ‘normalities’. In other words, Europe invented a “waiting room of history,” where colonized societies were placed as “not-yet societies,” said to be longing to become like white Christian Europe. Part and parcel of this process of ‘othering’ was the myth of the ‘white man’s burden’, which defined the white man as being capable, legitimized, and even obliged to help those ‘Others’ – allegedly in need of developmental latitude in helping them towards progress and ‘civilization’. Thereby, due to the Others’ inborn inferiority, the condition of the white male subject could never be achieved by the ‘Others’. It was this rhetoric that was to legitimate and disguise the violence of slavery and colonialism which, in fact, contradicted everything that Europe claimed to have stood for ever since Antiquity and, more specifically, in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment: freedom, democracy, ethics, ‘civilization’, and the primacy of human dignity.

Against the background of these findings, critical Occidentalism and critical whiteness studies in general, and the stratagems of the Black Atlantic and of provincializing Europe as proposed by Paul Gilroy and Dipesh Chakrabarty in particular, demand a rereading of Antiquity, the Renaissance, Christianity, and the Enlightenment that repositions them in their ambivalences and emphasizes their responsibilities for both colonialism and National Socialism. What is more, conventional notions of ‘race’ as a matter of black and white as being ‘unraced’, ‘neutral’, and ‘universal’ are being challenged as well. When reading whiteness

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