

4. Conclusion: Truisms, Fallacies, and Complex Contradictions

Let us, for a moment, return to the thought experiment at the beginning of this thesis. After all that I have written and argued, would it not be consistent to include sentences such as “we came all the way from Nashville to Chicago so you could listen to music like this?” Yes; and no. Imagine the following story: we have a young heterosexual couple whose marriage is deteriorating. They work long hours, and they hardly talk to each other anymore. At some point, there is a temporary power failure that forces them to spend a few evenings together. They begin to talk and to share in each other’s lives again, and there is hope that their relationship may be revived. In the end, power is restored, putting an end to their shared evenings, and the wife moves out. In terms of style, while clearly distinct, the story’s subdued “simplicity” and straightforwardness are reminiscent of, if not the radical scarcity of Hemingway’s short stories, then, say, Raymond Carver or Richard Russo. I am talking, of course, about Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter.” How much does it really matter in, and for, this story that the protagonists are children of immigrants?

Another example: imagine a novel about an immigrant to another country who desperately wants to acculturate to what he thinks are that country’s prevalent values, social standards, customs, and codes of belonging. Throughout the novel, he identifies – and is clearly identified – as an immigrant who, hard as he tries, will never really belong. Ultimately, he has to choose between what he knows is right and another chance of being a fully accepted citizen of that country. This is, only slightly rephrased, a summary of Howell’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; it is no coincidence that it was the model for Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*. Similarly, the romantic comedy *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* about a “clash of cultures” could be “translated” into the romantic comedy *Meet the Parents* about another kind of “clash of cultures.” The “yes and no” from above, in other words, is not an evasion or fallacy, but actually the, albeit radically reduced, summary of my axioms, arguments, and methodology, and the only

consistent answer to the posed question; an answer I already adumbrate in my introduction, and an answer that entails much.

Let me elaborate. We can recapitulate the results of the previous chapter thus:

- There are a number of different faultlines in each novel; one or two may matter more than the others or prefigure them, *but all of them coexist*. They are usually *dynamic* and *interdependent*.
- Across the core corpus, the *diversity of faultlines is substantial*, not to mention the combined corpora.
- Among the extant faultlines, *neither “cultural identity” nor its correlates play a superordinate role*; in fact, while cultural practices certainly appear and matter, they do so sometimes more, sometimes less, and always in different ways. They *do not regularly, much less predominantly or invariably*, constitute a demarcating faultline. Put more bluntly, none of the texts yields a homogeneous, clear-cut, even hybrid, “cultural identity” or anything else (“racial,” “ethnic,” etc.) of the sort. The much-cherished assumption that migration literature inevitably and prevalently is about “culture” and “cultural identity” or “ethnic” or “racial” identity is simply not true.
- The contents of the identifications and differentiations demarcated by the faultlines are frequently *ambivalent, contradictory, and volatile*.
- The extant identificatory patterns are *complex, dynamic, and they come in all modes*.
- Similarities and differences between the different texts of the corpora (as well as between various other texts of US-American literature and other literatures) are both *intra- as well as cross-sectional*; and they *coexist*. This, in particular, has consequences for how we structure literary histories, themed anthologies, and disciplinary borders; it also has consequences for our methodologies, as I argue at length in chapter 2. In other words, even if we insist, if only for practical reasons, on broad labels such as “Chinese American literature,” any critical venture so labeled should never “just” look at “Chinese American literature” (or “Latina,” or “South Asian,” or “African American,” for that matter, and so on) but should be comparative and cross-sectional, and it should at least try to do justice to the variety of extant stories and discourses. In general, we need to be more open to comparative (synchronically, diachronically, etc.) and cross-sectional thematic approaches.
- Despite all the diversity, there are some recurrent patterns. Interestingly, the most noteworthy are 1) that poverty, struggle, class, and socioeconomic factors in general do not play as large a role as one could expect from literature that significantly deals with migration; 2) that most of the stories are success stories; and 3) that most of them feature protagonists

who are outsiders (or consider themselves such), but whose outsider-status makes them “American.” In a way, then, these narratives are fairly typical performances of, and contributions to, a modern “American identity.”

Adopting the vocabulary of possible worlds semantics used for the discussion of fictionality and referentiality in chapter two, we could summarize this list by saying that analogous to their heterogeneous (non)referentiality and segmented departure from the actual world, fictional possible worlds are also *composite* possible worlds regarding the system of identifications and differentiations they project. This means 1) that they can – and almost always do – project various different identifications and differentiations at one and the same time; it means 2) that these can variously overlap, correlate, or contradict each other. They do not have to “add up,” actually, since they often are ambivalent and volatile, it is much more likely that they do *not* make a complete, unified whole than that they do. To answer the question above: the migrational background does not really matter for the characters in “A Temporary Matter,” nor does it in a number of other stories by Lahiri, or by many other writers with a migrational background (e.g. Nam Le, Lao Can, James Farrell, Gene Luen Yang); then again, it does clearly matter for stories such as “The Third and Final Continent,” and for many others – also by writers that do *not* have a (first or second generation) migration background (e.g. Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, E. L. Doctorow). In some stories, it matters but is an issue that stands alongside other key issues, e.g. in “Once in a Lifetime.” In other words, we have to judge case by case, and our judgment should consider all faultlines and the particular constitution of the identificatory pattern. Otherwise, we run the danger of the kind of fallacious allocation that I discuss in the introduction; the kind of allocation that would identify *Studs Lonigan* as “Irish American” simply because the main character is Catholic, drinks, and brawls and/or because its author has an Irish background – it is, in fact, tricky to make out the “Irishness” of the novel without resorting to clichés.

Moreover, emphasizing that fictional worlds are composite possible worlds means acknowledging that fictional worlds are always incomplete and thus potentially inconsistent. This is a logical and, for some critical ventures, also a very uncomfortable consequence of the notion of degree of departure (among other explanations). No fictional world can possibly contain every statement about that world that could, theoretically, be stated. The different versions of possible world semantics disagree over the consequences of this “departure:” do we “complete” the inevitable blanks or do we work on the assumption that what there is, is all there is, so that we should refrain from inferences? The versions agree, nonetheless, that the fictional possible world itself cannot be complete, so that it is inevitably open to inconsistencies and statements about it that simply cannot be decided. As a result, if we complain that a

given text contains ambivalences that remain insoluble; that we may arrive at contradictory statements about it; that it “refuses” to “divulge” answers to some of the questions that we put to it – then we are quite simply making a logical mistake.

This is a helpful general epistemological reminder. It is true that our categories and differentiations shed light on the texts we analyze, and often show us or alert us to aspects that we would not see without those categories. But it is equally true that our “objects” – if they are sufficiently complex – invariably exceed our categories and may even put them into question.¹

The compositeness can also help sort out the issue of representativeness and with it the issue of intra- and cross-sectional similarities and differences; issues which are particularly loaded – for reasons I discuss in chapter 2 – whenever we talk about literary texts that deal with marked cultural practices in any significant way and are often subsequently taken to represent the *actual* particular community and its “products” and practices (just as often via the “autobiographical” “detour” of the author’s biographical background). This response is complicated by the usually undefined and all-encompassing “cultural” in “cultural practices.” To begin with, it is very difficult for literary and cultural studies to work empirically in a manner that is empirically sound. Even in the most comprehensive studies, our examples are just too few to lay claim to *quantitative* representativeness; even my extensive corpus is, really, scant in that regard, and it would still be scant if it included twenty, fifty, or one hundred more texts; even if we work and argue “new historically,” all of our quantitative claims would be approximations, and some of them very precarious ones indeed. In effect, our claims are, whether we admit it or not, usually based on *qualitative* representativeness, which is another term for exemplarity.

To complicate things, the kind of work we do – i.e. the texts we look at and the methodologies we use – inevitably produces particularity; in fact, one of the things we usually aim to show as critics, whether intentionally or inadvertently, is the uniqueness of a literary text, even if we take it to stand for many others; in fact, any close analysis cannot help doing so to some degree for the reasons mentioned above. As I have discussed above, and as my analyses show, on a micro-level none of the texts I have chosen is quite like any other, either within my corpus, or, in all likelihood, generally. But, of course, as my comparison and the resulting intra- and cross-sectional similarities show, all

1 | We can find a similarly abridged or fallacious logic in debates about the historical accuracy of fictional products about historical events: does one incorrect accessory or “fact” invalidate the entire text? Only if the entire text hinges on it. One wrong hat does not make an all-wrong text, but *many* faulty accessories, *crucially* wrong facts, do seriously devalue a text aspiring to historical precisions. *Fullness/completeness* is, however, impossible.

of the texts are like some others in some way, in some parts – recalling the paraphrase of Kluckhohn in the introduction. If we consider this a double bind, we are making another category mistake; not only because what we show depends on what we aim to show and/or the tools we use,² but also because fictional possible worlds are, once more, composite: they are composite in their intradiegetic composition (here: identifications and differentiations, faultlines), in their extradiegetic (non)referentiality to the actual world, and in their composition of representativeness (here: intra- and *cross*-sectional similarities) and particularity (here: *intra*- and *cross*-sectional differences).³

I suspect that this “both/and” is another reason for some of the reductionism in what I have dubbed “culturalist” (it could also be called identitarian) criticism. In addition to a deep-seated and perennial demand for the “real” that is satisfied via biographical authentication and for an identity-ascription that is flexible, politically noncommittal, and vacuous (i.e. “cultural identity”) where other formerly “safe havens” (nationality, class) have receded,⁴ much criticism does not cope well with ambivalence and noncoherence. To be fair, this excoriation has to be somewhat tempered: for almost all primary texts of the corpus (in as far as they have attracted attention), we can observe that over a long enough time span, secondary criticism tends to expand and focus on other issues apart from “culture” and “cultural identity.” Socioeconomic factors, nevertheless, hardly ever make an appearance.

What does all this mean in less abstract terms? I realize that it could be tempting to deduce from my analyses and my argument that we should go the way of ever more differences until there is nothing shared, not only between texts, but, ultimately, between people; an ever increasing variety of identities and identifications (or: of transdifference) might lead to the point that they become virtually meaningless and incommunicable. This would be a distortion. My basic propositions point exactly the other way: it is true that I believe our critical practice – and by implication our interaction with people – should avoid large identity aggregations, except where absolutely needed, because they tend to be vacuous and much more detrimental than useful; for this reason, I have tried to demonstrate the impressive variety of factors and aspects that shape fictional worlds, and to demonstrate this I have focused on those fictional worlds that criticism tends to reduce to being dominated by “culture” and “cultural identity” just because of that habitual reduction. Furthermore, I believe my

2 | This is what Anthony Appiah calls “noncoherence,” see my discussion in chapter 2.

3 | Note that cross-sectional similarities and intra-sectional differences persistently undermine large aggregate group-based literary histories (e.g. Chinese American Literature) and disciplinary “umbrellas” (e.g. South Asian American Studies).

4 | As Gitlin points out, “cultural identity” comes to serve as a kind of “surrogate politics” (Gitlin 404).

particular methodology has sufficiently highlighted that not only are many of the contents demarcated by identifications and differentiations ambivalent and volatile, but also that everything that shapes characters, who they think they are, and who they think they are not, and who they believe others are and are not, is interactive, interdependent, and dynamic. Shortly put: we cannot say “I” without saying “you,” and without constantly negotiating between them. So rather than pointing the way of difference, I point the way of interaction, responsibility (in the true sense of the word), and a shared world.

Ultimately, of course, I believe that what I say of fictional worlds is also true of our actual world, and that literary texts can help us realize this. The power of literary texts, anywhere between the poles of fictional and non-fictional, is their power to invent new stories, to tell hitherto untold stories, to complicate versions of “the truth” and of history/ies, to complement them, to suggest new ways of thinking about life, people, and what matters, so that we can empathize with characters and their context, immerse ourselves in their worlds and vicariously experience another life, fleshing out historical or factual reports, and make all this matter in our own lives – if we choose to act upon it. Whether we call what I propose “post-culturalist,” “post-identitarian,” or “transdifferent” does not matter – what it amounts to is simply more work: looking closer, accepting ambivalence, and embracing complication.