From "Border Studies" to "Trans-Americanity"

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Résumé: *Cet article vise à répondre à une question qui a été au cœur des débats postcoloniaux et de nombreuses études séminales depuis pas mal de temps: ce qui arrive quand, en réponse à une manière traditionnelle, Euro-centrique/Occidentale humaniste de considérer la modernité, on choisit de ré-conceptualiser et de localiser la modernité dans des termes qui mettent l'accent sur le lien entre ce dernier et les histoires du colonialisme et le commerce des esclaves? S'appuyant sur des exemples de Jose David Saldivar et les études de Walter Mignolo sur la pensée de frontière et la trans-américanité, mais aussi en s'appuyant sur les progrès dans la pensée postcoloniale faits par Paul Gilroy, Anthony Appiah, Arjun Appadurai et d'autres, cet article avance une série de moyens alternatifs pour conceptualiser la modernité. Ces approches visent à repositionner des cultures autrefois culturellement et économiquement dominantes dans un paradigme de la globalité, surgissant de divers endroits de culture et enraciné dans la diversité géopolitique.*

Keywords: *modernity, border writing, trans-Americanity, diversality, coloniality of power*

At the end of Ang Lee's spectacular movie, *The Life of Pi*, the main character, Piscine Molitor Patel, asks the investigators of the Japanese insurance company to choose themselves the story they prefer from the two versions of his extraordinary voyage and endurance at sea. The choice is between a narrative recounting Pi's survival in the company of Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger, a hyena, an orangutan, and a zebra who slaughter each other in a dire attempt to survive hunger – and a parallel plot, only populated by humans, in which the hero's survival proves that he was the most cunning and possibly the most cruel of all the humans who managed to make it to the lifeboat. In the first story, Pi is a victim of the storm and a hero who survives in extraordinary circumstances, managing to stay alive on the boat in the company of hungry, wild animals only because he can outwit and ultimately, tame the tiger. By contrast, the second plot unveils a human being whose inner self is cruel, dark, and almost unmanageable; as such, this inner self is allegorically transposed in the persona of the tiger, fact which does not clear Pi of the charge of surviving at the expense of almost all the others on board of the boat. Even after the insurance agents get to make their own choice, the viewers are still left with a question: which story do *we* prefer?

Preference in this case involves a set of quite complex individual choices ranging from aesthetics to ethics, morality, and self-projection. Depending on our choice, what we "get" out of this narrative of survival is either a marvellous exploration of human endurance, strength, imagination, courage and of the seemingly inextinguishable resources of the human spirit when faced with natural adversity, or a view on the confrontation with the dark limitations of our own nature (the opposite storyline). In rewriting the fantastic journey without the props of allegorical conversion, the second narrative would unveil the worst in human nature when faced with life-threatening circumstances, and thus forced to fight for survival.

The question thus becomes not only which story we find palatable, meaning *pleasant*, self-gratifying, entertaining, aesthetically pleasing, but also what *we*, as viewers, want to get from it. Do we want *the truth* or a beautiful lie, a fantasy? But how can we tell one from the other? Are they mutually exclusive, or do they necessarily retain points of contiguity, if only because they have the same narrator, who also happens to be the only surviving articulate witness of the events? What would happen if Richard Parker, the tiger, could speak? Would its story compel us to challenge Pi's reliability as a narrator, and to what ends? Considering that, under the circumstances, we have to choose between two stories with the same narrator, do we want to conclude, based on the parallels between the two plot lines, that human beings are inherently cruel, revengeful, egotistical and that, in order to handle/to mask such a revelation we need fantastic stories to cosmeticize reality and detract people's attention from a self-deprecating narrative? Are uplifting narratives mere lies? Considering that crimes really were committed on board of the boat, how are we going to regard the survivor: as a role model or as a criminal who was lucky to survive because he was cunning enough to devise such an ingenious narrative, sparing his own sanity, and now is delivering a self-serving story to confuse the investigators, and us, as well? Is the story about surviving on a boat in the middle of the ocean in the company of a tiger an intentional hoax, steeped in hypocrisy, or is it a normal psychological mechanism of self-defence employed by the human mind when faced with traumatic events? Is this "good fiction" an attempt to escape from responsibility or a manner of allegorically phrasing and addressing a difficult ethical question? By inventing the story, is the story teller seeking to engage us in a debate over an issue which goes beyond his personal life or is he delivering us a fairy tale to put us/our consciousness to sleep? Is the story a heuristic tool with which one can search for the truth or is it mere fiction – a lie, in Plato's view? Ultimately, are we going to denounce the culprit to the authorities or accept his story, meditate at its multi-layered implications and thus become an accomplice, going along with its logic and suffering its consequences?

I took this long rhetorical detour to preface and unfold the question which my paper actually seeks to address: what happens when, in response to a traditional, Eurocentric/Western, humanist way of understanding modernity, one chooses to re-conceptualize and localize modernity in terms that emphasize the connection between modernity, on the one hand, and the histories of colonialism and slave trade, on the other? This approach, already made famous by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, but also by Arjun

Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, by Walter Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs* and by José David Saldívar's *Border Matters* and *Trans-Americanity*, seeks to deconstruct the humanist "grand narratives" of the modern/colonial world and, "by shifting our attention from Paris, Berlin and London to Africa, England, the West Indies, and the American South" (Jay 85), attempts to refashion the terms in which the debates over modernity have been constructed (Gilroy 46). The result is a darker, more disturbing narrative of modernity, which awakens in the reader the awareness that there are competing stories about divergent, alternative modernities, which may not accept to be subsumed under any of the neatly wrought, existing grand narratives. Whether called *colonialism*, *globalisation*, or *cosmopolitanism*, critics argue that these macro-stories still lack legitimacy, precisely because they seek too hard to unite everything under a consensus-building umbrella-concept, instead of acknowledging the many points of rupture and the liminal character of modernity. José David Saldívar's and Walter Mignolo's "border thinking epistemology", inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and evolving into "trans-Americanity" and "diversality", is an attempt to listen to the "small voices of history" while also devising a cosmopolitan paradigm, critical and dialogical. The first result of such a radical rethinking and rewriting of modernity would be viewing American history in a hemispheric context, and would lead to the remapping of the origins of literature in the Americas from the perspective of the subaltern, ethnic-American studies.

A model for such an approach is outlined by Paul Jay in *Global Matters*. Jay reads Gilroy's theories about how the slave trade and the resulting African diasporas contributed to the creation of "Englishness" itself in conjunction with Mignolo's and Saldívar's texts in order to illuminate the Latino contribution to the creation of "American-ness." Mignolo and Saldívar focus on how the Spanish conquest and displacement of indigenous peoples complicate the narrative of the birth of "American literature by calling attention to its parallel sites of origin (from Spain and Mexico into the US Southwest; from the Caribbean into New Orleans" (Jay 86). With their interest in hybridity, diasporas, border thinking, and cosmopolitanism, ethnic American Studies can easily become the site from where a liminal, transnational project that criticises the "coloniality of power" and, along with it, the colonial difference produced and maintained by global designs (Jay 88) can be launched. The emphasis here falls on what Walter Mignolo calls *diversality* and Saldívar imagines as *trans-Americanity,* but both of these concepts trace their origin to "border thinking" as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*.

In his 1997 book, emphatically titled *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, José David Saldívar claimed that the focus on *la frontera* in Chicana/o studies had the potential to "challenge the homogeneity of U.S. nationalism and popular culture" by reconstructing the "things said and concealed about migration and immigration" and openly discussing "the legacy of conquest in the Americas" (*Border Matters* XIV). Saldívar's approach was consistent with Rafael PérezTorres's view that "the borderlands made history present: the tensions, contradictions, hatred, and violence as well as resistance and affirmation of self in the face of that violence" (qtd. in Saldívar,

Border Matters XIII). Moreover, in Saldívar's view, *border studies* provided a more realistic "potential for understanding 'the legacy of colonialism'" in the American borderlands, where, according to historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, "'trade, violence and cultural exchange' shaped nineteenth-century America and where 'conflicts over the restrictions of immigration […] punctuated late twentieth-century America'" (qtd. in Saldívar, *Border Matters* XIII).

From these very early remarks it is clear that *border studies* are engaged in a revisionary, historiographical project whose dimensions would be further developed over the years and illuminated by Saldívar's own study about *Trans-Americanity*, but also by scholars of modernity, globalisation and cosmopolitanism like Walter Mignolo, Paul Gilroy, Anthony Appiah, Arjun Appadurai, Paul Jay and others. In sketching the development of this revisionist enterprise, I am particularly interested in how the evolution of *border studies* into the theory of *trans-americanity* is reflective of the transformation experienced by ethnic and American Studies once they crossed paths and had to respond to each other's perplexities.

In *Border Matters*, Saldívar's argument is that the cultures of the US-Mexico borderlands, just like those of the black Atlantic diasporas, "cannot be reduced to any nationally-based 'tradition'" (*Border Matters* 12). In short, Saldívar intends *border studies* as a comparative mode of reading which redesigns spaces of comparison, based on a model that questions national, nationalistic, and "absolutist" paradigms of culture (Gilroy). Furthermore, for him *the transfrontera* culture zone is "the social space of subaltern encounters, the Janusfaced border line in which peoples geopolitically forced to separate themselves now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics" (Saldívar, *Border Matters* 13-14).

This *pensamiento fronterizo* emerges "from the critical reflections of undocumented immigrants, migrants, *bracero/a* workers, refugees, *campesinos*, women and children on the major structures of domination of our times" and as such represents a "new geopolitically located thinking from greater Mexico's borderlands and against the new imperialism of the United States" (Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity* 1). Its advantage is, according to Saldívar, that it casts doubt not so much on our "narratives of identity" as on the dominant narratives of the major, mainstream, and hegemonic cultures (3). Part of US minority studies and conceived as a comparative epistemic project, *border thinking* evolves naturally into *trans-Americanity* after Saldívar's encounter with the concept of *Americanity* in Anibal Quijano's and Immanuel Wallerstein's "prescient 1992 analysis" (Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity* IX).

According to these two scholars whom Saldivar quotes extensively in his preface to *Trans-Americanity*, "[a]ll the major categories[of ethnicity and race] into which we ethnically divide today in the Americas and the world (Native Americans or 'Indians', Blacks or 'Negroes', Whites or 'Creoles'/Europeans, Mestizos […]) – all these categories did not exist prior to the modern world system" (qtd. in Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity* XI), and by extension, notes Saldívar, they did not exist "before the invention of Americanity" (XII). This dystopian concept emerged together with what all these scholars call the "modern world system" and "coloniality of power" (Saldívar,

Trans-Americanity XIII) and as such, *Americanity* bears the marks of ethnicity, racism and colonial modernity. By contrast, *trans-Americanity* joins the project of subaltern studies and attempts to listen to what Ranajit Guha has called "the small voice of history" (qtd. in Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity* XVIII) in order to free itself of the epistemological constraints of Americanity, when drawing the history of the hemisphere.

Along the same lines, Walter Mignolo proposes *diversality* as "the horizon of critical and dialogic cosmopolitanism", an interpretive paradigm originating in border thinking, thus grounded "on the critique of all possible fundamentalism (Western and non-Western, national and religious, neoliberal and neosocialist)" ("The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis" 743) and intended as a response to globalisation, capitalism, and hegemonic modernity. Emerging from and directed against the experience of coloniality of power and the colonial difference, *diversality* (or diversity as a universal project) "cannot be reduced", according to Mignolo, to a "new form of cultural relativism, but should be thought out as new forms of projecting and imagining ethically and politically, from subaltern perspectives" ("The Many Faces of Cosmopolis" 743).

The result would not only be a multi-centric world, springing from various locations of culture, but a multi-directional pattern, grounded in globalism and in geopolitical diversity. "If we can imagine Western civilization as a large circle with a series of satellite circles intersecting the larger one but disconnected from each other", says Mignolo, "diversality would be the project that connects the diverse subaltern satellites appropriating and transforming Western global designs" (745). Such an approach would clearly validate a multi-centric perspective on the literatures of the Americas and a multi-ethnic take on the history of literature in the US, leading to transnational paradigms of interpretation.

In other words, according to such a pattern, all the animals from Pi's boat would have a voice and a story to share while we, as readers, could calmly assemble the pieces of the puzzle. The only pre-condition is that Richard Parker, the Bengal tiger, has either conveniently disappeared in the bushes or has been miraculously tamed.

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