Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism

Volume 3 | Issue 1 Article 12

2010

Forum Prompt: Problems in Comparative Ethnic Literary Studies

John A. Cutler
Northwestern University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Cutler, John A. (2010) "Forum Prompt: Problems in Comparative Ethnic Literary Studies," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol3/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Forum Prompt

Problems in Comparative Ethnic Literary Studies

John Alba Cutler
Northwestern University

Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1973) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977)—landmark novels of Chicano and Native American literature respectively—bear striking similarities to one another. Both are set in post–WWII New Mexico and thematically address the way that New Mexican communities dealt with the clash of tradition and modernity. Both feature characters traumatized by the horrors of war. And both texts seek to articulate the importance of indigenous worldviews to their protagonists' identities. Despite these resemblances, almost no work has been done explicitly comparing these important texts to one another. Meanwhile, the cottage industries of Anaya and Silko criticism continue to add to the already impressive number of studies of each novel. It is as if the novels inhabit parallel universes, rather than attempt to describe the same historical moment.

Nor is this an exceptional case. For the most part, since the formation and bourgeoning of ethnic studies in the 1960s and 70s, literary scholars have tended to consider the traditions of African American, Asian American, Chicano or Latino, and Native American literatures in isolation from one another. There are good reasons for this intra-group focus. Considering the political stakes involved in the formation of ethnic studies, scholars have been understandably motivated to demonstrate the richness and complexity of the literatures in question. Canon formation has been one method of accomplishing this political goal, as editors and critics have worked to

establish lists of the significant works of particular ethnic traditions. Anyone familiar with the scholarship and teaching of these ethnic literatures would have to conclude that such canon formation has been successful, with the caveat that it has functioned as much exclusively as inclusively. Any attempt to demarcate the field of Chicano literature, for instance, must work to establish both what it is and what it is *not*. Having established just that, it's no wonder that scholars of Chicano literature, myself included, might be unsettled by the proliferation of Latino literary texts that resonate thematically and formally with Chicano literature but concern not Mexican American but rather Central American, Cuban, or Dominican American characters and histories.

It would of course be hyperbolic to say that no comparative work has been done in American ethnic literatures. Luminaries in American literary studies—Betsy Erkkila, Werner Sollors, and Eric Sundquist, to name a few—have long done comparative work that has reshaped our understanding not only of particular traditions, such as African American literature, but also of American literature generally. That work has generally been limited, however, to studies of African American literature and what we might call "white ethnic" immigrant literatures. Only in recent years has an impetus been felt to examine comparatively the vast archive of texts in Asian American, Latino, Black Diaspora, and Native American traditions. This impetus is important not only because it more accurately illuminates literary production—texts are not written, after all, into racial vacuums—but also because the act of comparison opens up new vistas of landscapes previously well explored.

I invite interested students to submit essays to *Criterion* that engage seriously the challenge of comparative ethnic studies. Such essays might take a couple of different forms, both indicative of current trends in American literary studies. The first would be essays that grapple with the theory and practice of comparison itself. What does it mean to set texts, people, histories side by side? Is there any act of comparison that is not also an act of cooptation or colonization? How can scholars evaluate cultural products in politically and ethically viable ways? Although spoken in a world literature context, Rey Chow's warning is still apropos: "Languages and cultures rarely

enter the world stage and encounter one another on an equal footing, that 'languages embed relations of dominance,' and that the notion of parity embedded in comparison as it currently stands would need to be recognized perhaps as a form of utopianism that tends to run aground in practice" (295). How can literary scholars account for differences in cultural capital among the objects of their comparative analyses?

Essays on comparative ethnic studies might also seek to model what such a comparison might look like. The most obvious way of doing this would be to look at texts from different racial/ethnic traditions that converge on some important historical event. I have already suggested one such pair of texts in Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and Silko's *Ceremony*; other groupings of texts seem to emerge from virtually any particularly vexed moment in American history. Despite the breathtaking amount of criticism dedicated to literature of the war in Viet Nam, for instance, there is still ample room for comparing the representations of U.S. minority experiences of the war, as in John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman* (1972), Alfredo Véa's *Gods Go Begging* (1998), and Maxine Hong Kingston's *Chinamen* (1989). Essays in this vein need to be careful to account for the differing histories of their objects of comparison. In addressing Anaya and Silko's novels, to return to my first example, I would want to draw attention to the contentious historical relationship between *hispanos* and Native Americans in New Mexico. It may be that Anaya's use of indigenous imagery and tropes is less a sign of his own indigenous inheritance than it is a manifestation of the erasure of indigenous culture under the aegis of a colonizing *hispano* culture.

Finally, I invite students to consider texts that pressure identity politics in an age of globlization. These might be texts that draw attention to the shifting boundaries of an ethnic or racial category—how does Hector Tobar's *The Tatooed Soldier* (2000), about Guatemalan immigrants in LA, signify within the field of Chicano literature? or C.S. Giscombe's free-ranging poem *Giscome Road* (1998) within African American literature?—or texts that represent the collision of multiple racial or ethnic groups. John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854) plays pivotal roles in both Native American and Chicano literatures, for example. Meanwhile a novel

such as Sigrid Nuñez's *A Feather on the Breath of God* (2005), about a young girl in New York whose parents are Chinese-Panamanian and German immigrants, dramatizes the proliferating cultural and racial mixtures of contemporary urban life. Indeed, the very conditions of our global age demand that we give more attention to the problematics of comparative ethnic studies.