

REVISITING IMPERIAL CULTURAL STUDIES AND ETHNIC WRITING: *A Subaltern Speaks from the Boondocks*

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ABSTRACT

Applying a historical-materialist framework, this exploratory venture to critique Eurocentric cultural studies deploys certain oppositional events/discourses to point out the limitations of the hegemonic discipline. Deconstructing elite bourgeois culture via institutionalizing popular tastes and demystifying idealist rhetoric simply reinforce alienation with a postmodernist hubris. The resurgence of "third-world" resistance with its focus on racial/gender negativity (as in certain democratizing initiatives in the Philippines and among people of color in the metropole) may signal a return to the radical vision of cultural studies. Key to this renewal is the rediscovery of the dialectics of local/ethnic practice and the concrete universal of an anti-capitalist

liberation project of subalterns everywhere defying imperialism and the terrorist neoliberal global order.

Keywords: Cultural studies, ethnic writing, neocolonialism, imperialism, racism, hegemony

After the mammoth anthology *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, appeared in 1992, the death-spasms of an anti-Establishment social movement began without much fanfare. Conceived as a challenge to bourgeois high culture, Cultural Studies (CS) challenged Cold War ideology and monopoly-capitalist hegemony. Its practitioners promised the construction of a democratic, socialist renaissance of thought and sensibility in the public sphere and quotidian life. With the end of the Vietnam War, the ascendancy of the neoliberal program of Thatcher, Reagan, and their counterparts in Europe and Latin America, that promise ended in an anarchist *cul de sac*. Not even the formidable sub-Commandante Marcos, the veterans of the Battle of Seattle, and the World Social Forum could forge a way out. Could one have predicted this exhaustion of massive oppositional energies initially kindled by the Marxist revival embodied by E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, and inspired by Gramsci, Althusser, C.L.R. James, and others?

A recent anthology edited by Paul Smith seeks to renew CS by asserting its resistant, transformative potential, its political efficacy, within the disciplinary production of knowledge. But prioritizing this epistemological function over its dimension as social bloc or public consciousness has proven futile. Once institutionalized as an academic discipline in North America, and subsumed within the commodifying apparatus of the market, CS was appropriated by the instrumental rationality of the neoliberal exchange logic and converted into a nostrum to resolve the legitimization-crisis of neoconservative, social-Darwinist politics. It seems that however triumphalist its libertarian pluralist approach, CS could not overcome positivism, empiricism, reification, and pervasive commodification. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the Gulf War signaled the phenomenal ascent of this *fin-de-siecle* barbarism.

While the founding of the World Social Forum at the advent of the new millennium may have revived visions of a fugitive egalitarian utopia, September 11, 2001 intervened. It will take a whole decade of carnage and torture, genocidal onslaught, and assassinations by drones, to resurrect those visions in the September 2011 "Occupy Wall Street" mobilization

following the “Arab Spring.” But that is the topic of another essay. Here I want to record speculations of renewing classic CS themes and modes of sign-reading (Peirce’s triadic semiosis, in particular) in order to infer possible solutions to the predicament of nominalism and Nietzschean nihilism confronted by humanists in the wake of insidious humanitarian-esque globalization. Descriptive exploration, not moralization, is my modest intent here.

After 9/11, ineluctable Guantanamo torture chambers, the Chernobyl-like Fukushima disaster, and total surveillance of everyday life by the Homeland Security agencies, is literary study still worth pursuing? That question seems a nostalgic reprise of Theodor Adorno’s hard query: After Auschwitz, can one still write a lyric poem, or do a line-by-line hermeneutic gloss? Annual conferences on the crisis of the humanities and the war of antagonistic blogs in cyberspace have made the question anticlimactic, if not moot. An empty ritualized gesture of Cartesian doubt, or Derridean melancholia, cannot be easily sidetracked by the erudite antics of Žižek, Badiou, Agamben, etc. Perhaps the answer is yes, but not in the old way, if we want to connect the classroom and the fabled boudoir with the outside world, assuming that the binary opposition of inside/outside has not already been rendered useless by the intellectual ferment of the last three or four decades. Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze are all dead, but their *Doppelgangers* and avatars still haunt the corridors of the corporatized academe and think-tanks. Can the “Occupy Wall Street” activists and the ramifications of their actions worldwide exorcise these ghosts?

Desiring Cultural Studies

One way of elucidating the crisis of the humanities (rehearsed as “the death of the author,” the refusal of meta-narratives and ideas of progress, vertigos of multiple and incommensurable meanings) has passed through the site of laissez-faire “desire” called CS. The exemplary discourse of Stuart Hall, Meaghan Morris, John Fiske, Lawrence Grossberg, Tony Bennet, Manthia Diawara, Antony Easthope, and others are invoked by CS. While CS has remained open, loose, and unfinished, without any fixed methodological procedures or protocols, it seems that a convergence of interests has outlined at least a “problematic” or area of investigation. As director of the initiating force in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, UK, Hall himself reminds us that “there is no single unproblematic definition of culture” (263). True, CS avoids codification or reduction into privileged paradigms, but the protocols of interpretative reading and historicizing

metacommentary on the “social text” have been tutorial examples. Various experimental modes of reading have of course been invented and applied on diverse artifacts, processes, events, practices, and so on. CS as a new field of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural inquiry has burgeoned as an attempt to expand and refine the tools for interpretation and evaluation of texts, the principal focus or target of analysis being “culture” itself. Indeed, certain contexts—social, political, economic, historical, etc.—determine the cultural object or text being examined and comprehended.

Everything then becomes grist to the CS mill. Departing from the book-centered realm of traditional cultural authority, the target domain now includes not only canonical literature but every signifying or performative practice. Everything becomes a sign, not just written or spoken discourse. The scope of CS covers such a wide range of texts, discourses, and meaning-making activities, that it has offered more problems than solutions. If we can accept, for now, Hall’s definition of culture as “infinite semiosis, sense-making without end” (271), and qualify it by locating semiosis within determinate historical formations and socioeconomic structures, then we can arrive at a position in which our concern with form, aesthetic pleasure, and other traditional criteria of worth can be reconciled with our new interest in agency or identity and knowledge-production linked with ideology, power, and institutions. Epistemology will now synergistically interact with ethics and politics to produce a feasible scenario for the fusion of theory and practice not just for scholars or experts, but for the laity and proles.

What a CS orientation ultimately strives to accomplish is somewhat complex, all-encompassing, and amorphous. But it is neither arbitrary nor totalitarian in the pejorative sense. One way to formulate it is to say that it endeavors to move beyond a merely deconstructive semiotics such as that performed in deconstruction, Foucauldian discourse-analysis, and Heideggerian metaphysics. It seeks to do this by inducing a permanent “suspension of disbelief” which is often susceptible to a cynical or hedonistic inflection, to a point where the “final interpretant” (to use C. S. Peirce’s concept) involves a critical intervention in the epochal crux of historical experience. This can be achieved only by a community of inquirers, within a collective process of knowledge-production to transform social life (Liszka). It is thus not only an interpretive activity of articulating meaning, but also a revolutionary act of rebuilding whole patterns of practices, structures, and ways of communal living.

Since the controversies over the nature and direction of CS are ongoing and inexhaustible, a few observations will suffice. I hope that CS as a project of critical pedagogy and cultural democratization is not simply identified with the fashionable populism of Lyotard, de Certeau, Negri, and others who seek to destroy the boundaries between high and popular/mass culture by offering courses on the art of shopping, how to wear condoms, beauty pageants, and so on. Populism finds its limits in self-complacent repetition. What follows is more of a reading exercise invested with a heuristic proposal. The discovery of meanings via sign-interpretation (semiosis) becomes a prologue to the inquiry into the tactics and strategy of revolutionary mass struggles, given the inscription of the concrete text/reader in historically specific arenas of multi-sectoral conflicts and popular-democratic struggles.

Toward a Semiotic Critique

Reading/knowing a text is initially a process of contextualization. Its end is the formation of a habit of action. If CS is taken to be "a process, a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge," as Richard Johnson (75) puts it, let us see what is at stake if we call attention to the conditions of the production of knowledge that surrounds the reading of literary texts. We pursue one concrete goal of pedagogy in this exercise: the "elucidation and problematization of first principles" (Fuery and Mansfield xx), one first principle being the supposed self-sufficiency of a formalist reading. Our model artifact here is ethnic literature. In its rejection of the canonical standards of aesthetic judgment in which form occupies the privileged center, as New Critical formalism once pontificated, ethnic writing foregrounds the process of ethnicity as a dynamic relationship between the hegemonic order and resistance from the subjugated and colonized. This overturns the centrality of form and the rational coherent subject-citizen of the racial polity.

Ethnic writing opens up for interrogation the mechanisms and apparatus of subject-making or identity formation, the codes for the production of subjects, in a hegemonic market-dominated formation. Ethnic writing endorses the aim of CS to break habits, and alter or change social dispositions—*habitus*, in Bourdieu's (*Pascalian Meditations*) terminology—enhancing "the production of a desire to become another kind of subject, to live another kind of life" (Osborne 51). Such alteration has been the permanent goal of methods such as the romantic attempt to defamiliarize what is conventional and normalized, or the Brechtian technique of alienation and narrativization of what has been dehistoricized, frozen, and mystified. Awareness of

ethnicity blasts the continuum of the norm of “white supremacy” as the unmarked, conventionally accepted habit of social life.

An example of unorthodox CS interpretive reading might be instructive here. In the past, I have taught numerous courses on U.S. multi-ethnic literature which includes, among others, Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. The customary mode of reading, never really abandoned, is still geared toward the elucidation of form or the verbal icon, as confirmed by Harold Bloom, for example, in his introduction to a collection of critical essays on Morrison.

Bloom advises us to focus on “style, stance, tone, prose rhythm, and mimetic mode, and these do stem from an amalgam of Faulkner and Woolf, the father and mother of Morrison’s art, as it were” (4). No doubt such formal properties are important, but what is their function in constituting the reading experience and the overall appreciation of the work? Unlike the old New Critical fetishizing of “organic form,” we surely want to explore what is being formed or shaped and the effects produced, effects once dismissed by scholarly gatekeepers as unwarranted intentional and affective fallacies. Needless to say, the beliefs/ethos of formalism, individualism, and humanism are not necessarily shared by all audiences, in particular those victimized by Western “civilizing missions.” Bloom’s putative universal axioms have been exposed as specific to a formalist canon of criticism and interpretation geared towards upholding Western capitalist values and norms, but masquerading as global, transcendental, and authoritative for all time. There is no need to argue this further in this postmodern epoch of proliferating differences and nomadic multiple subjects floating in cyberspace and transnationalized megamalls.

Morrison herself urges us to locate her work within the African American archive that, for her, is richer, modern, and more complex. Her view in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) is dialectical and comparativistic. She urges us to consider how “the much celebrated themes of American literature—individualism, masculinity, the conflict between social engagement and historical isolation, an acute and ambiguous moral problematic, the juxtaposition of innocence with figures representing death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanistic presence” (“Black Matter(s)” 310). Morrison questions the frames of intelligibility deployed by the *Herrenvolk* arbiters of taste. She reads *Huckleberry Finn* through a cultural-studies prism sensitive to “rationalizing power grabs” that condition readers’ sensibilities and value-judgments. She instructs us to examine how the literary artifact

"redistributes and mutates in figurative language the social conventions of Africanism" ("Black Matter(s)" 322). Reading is here effectively contextualized, historicized, socialized.

One convention that has been refracted and certainly manipulated in *Tar Baby* is the folktale of Brer Rabbit and the tar baby ascribed to Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* narratives. In one reading, Morrison's characterization of her protagonist Son as the trickster rabbit who falls for and then evades Jadine, the seductive bait, overturns the Walt Disney 1948 version founded on the plantation myth. We can certainly appreciate this subversive re-staging of the West African material and its plausible re-articulation as an allegory of racial and class liberation.

Unmasking and displacement punctuate every point of crisis in the narrative. All the characters, except for the white master Valerian Street, can re-read the texts of experience and create their own "brier patch," their utopian destination, by altering emphases and perspectives. This is how Craig Werner apprehends Morrison's modernism:

Morrison explores the is-ness [of contemporary Afro-American experience] as a texture of competing myths and understandings of myths.... Son/Brer Rabbit provides an image of process, of a flexible encounter with the is-ness of the island which includes myth and history, repressed Afro-American history and the Euro-American plantation... the ever-present, ever-changing tar baby that tempts him to remove his eyes from the woman who can help him forge a unified mythic consciousness. For Morrison, the tar baby is everywhere. The brier patch remains to be seen. (*Tar Baby* 166)

This liberal interpretation ironically imposes an arbitrary closure on the text, terminating the open-ended semiosis of meanings. Can we reverse this and pursue a materialist stance in unraveling the signifying fabric?

Dialectics of Black Intervention

Let us reflect on the parameters of Son's open-ended journey. The location is important: the Caribbean island of Isle de Chevaliers colonized by Europeans and Americans. It is Therese, the ostracized black inhabitant, who purposefully misleads Son away from the plantation of L'Arbe de la Croix and deflects his search for Jadine, the "tar baby" of voluntary servitude.

"She has forgotten her ancient properties," as Therese remarks. Therese directs him to join the blind horsemen, phantom warriors descended from the escaped slaves of the historical past, who remain symbols of a future (not mythic) renewal. If Son trusts Therese—perhaps he has no alternative. Then, Morrison is suggesting that the brier patch is not forever suspended, permanently deferred, but is actually a product of human choices and collective decisions, even though the choice is to withdraw into the utopian realm of myth (Christian 89). Who is doing this interpreting, and what is the agenda behind it?

We need at the outset to specify concretely drawn coordinates and configure their dialectical linkages. A CS reading would allow a more all-encompassing grasp of the Caribbean setting and the geopolitics of colonialism and subaltern resistance that subtends the conflicts between the white (in particular, the "landlord" Valerian Street) and the black characters (in particular, Gideon and Therese, "re-colonized" by their dismissal from work for stealing apples). Attention to the last scene alone can distort our grasp of the complex social totality depicted in the novel. The ambivalence that critics have drawn from the failure of the black community may be re-shifted or remapped if we recall Son's angle of vision as he charts the "subject-position" of Valerian Street and his power to determine the fates of the black indigenous peoples.

In this context, I quote from the middle of the narrative this powerful critique of capitalist exploitation and racist colonialism which is not without its subtle aesthetic sublimation in the character's protean sensibility:

Son's mouth went dry as he watched Valerian chewing a piece of ham, his head-of-a-coin profile content, approving even of the flavor in his mouth although he had been able to dismiss with a flutter of his fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value; but he turned it into candy, the invention of which really was child's play, and sold it to other children and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them again according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself and when those

people wanted a little of what he wanted, some apples for their Christmas, and took some, he dismissed them with a flutter of the fingers, because they were thieves, and nobody knew thieves and thievery better than he did and he probably thought he was a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did, because they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land and that is why they loved property so, because they had killed it soiled it defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit. Would fight and fill to own the cesspools they made, and although they called it architecture it was in fact elaborately built toilets, decorated toilets, toilets surrounded with and by business and enterprise in order to have something to do in between defecations since waste was the order of the day and the ordering principle of the universe. And especially the Americans who were the worst because they were new at the business of defecation spent their whole lives bathing bathing washing away the stench of the cesspools as though pure soap had anything to do with purity. (*Tar Baby* 202-03)

The dynamic force of that passage would make even Faulkner, or Woolf, with her stream-of-consciousness tricks, gasp for breath. The resonance and allusions built into this powerful discourse cannot be weighed properly without understanding the historical record of predatory capitalism in the Caribbean, the role of the sugar plantations utilizing slave and serf labor, the function of religion as apologetic instruments of rule, the technological subjugation of the environment, and the ideology of commodity-exchange and necessary waste. We are engaged here with inscribing both characters and plot in the larger script of imperialism and its plot of racial and ethnic subordination. Semantics becomes embroiled in geopolitics and the pragmatics of class struggle.

The historical genealogy of the US empire needs to be kept in mind. The larger script of collective positioning in the formation of the U.S. racial polity was of course inaugurated by the slave narratives, the foundational matrix of U.S. literary production. It informs all the works of W.E.B Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and so on, up to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Soledad Brother*, King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," and

the writings of Angela Davis and other activists. It is the enabling paradigm or template for the lucid eloquence of Mumia Abu-Jamal's prison writings, *Live from Death Row and Death Blossoms*, part of a border-crossing genre that mixes autobiography, slave testimonies, psychological analysis, and empirical witnessing. We encounter here the genre of the *testimonio* adapted to local circumstances, a genre that departs profoundly from the exemplary monumental life-histories that one scholar, Fred Inglis considers the proper subject-matter of the discipline of CS. Plutarch's account of parallel lives does not include Spartacus and the thousands of slaves that built the Roman empire, nor do the *Federalist Papers* and sacrosanct Americana allow the voices of the Native Americans and African slaves to interrupt the discourse of empire-making. Neither are the 1.4 million dead Filipinos who resisted U.S. aggression in the Filipino-American War of 1899-1914 included in the discourse of American apologetics of imperial conquest from W. Cameron Forbes and Joseph Hayden to Stanley Karnow and Glenn Anthony May.

Resurrecting Master Narratives

We are engaged here with decoding the underlying master narrative that enables the text's production of knowledge/meaning. This historicized grammar and syntax of the racial polity, the quasi-Hegelian dispositioning of master and bondsman in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, also provides the enabling framework of Asian American writing such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, Frank Chin's plays and fiction, and Chang Rae-Lee's *Native Speaker*. One cannot conceive of an intelligent appraisal of *Woman Warrior*, for instance, without interfacing the syncretic narrative of the artist's maturation with the youth revolt and civil rights struggles of the Sixties. The splicing of the narrative voice of the young Chinese American woman in California with those of anonymous women in feudal China, the immigrant mother, and the legendary figures of Mulan and Tsai Yen, among others, generates a multifaceted artifact that allows the readers diverse subject-positions for critique and transgression. This approach to intertextuality, construing the "social text" as the space for the production of multiple enunciations, is designed to provide the occasion, or horizon of expectations, when readers can construct subject-positions that will make intelligible and useful (as practical knowledge) the signs/directions of the literary artifact. Without exploring the possible master narrative or hypothetical totality of social development, we are left with atomized particles of words that remain unintelligible.

We need to devise our own way of deriving emancipatory energies from ethnic texts. Surely this is the most productive way in which to appreciate such works as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* as a play of contexts and discourses. In this drama, we find elements from Puccini's opera, the newspaper reports about the trial of the erring French diplomat, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the heterogeneous archive of the Vietnamese people—fragments combined into a pastiche, collage, or multilayered theatrical spectacle. We begin to decode the palimpsest as the varying points of gravity or intensities in a historical continuum. We can then discern the pattern that renders the parts intelligible, sources of possible enlightenment and alternative pleasures.

The same holds for Native American cultural practices and its versatile repertoire of indigenous and adapted devices, exemplified by N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and the collection of short fiction by Sherman Alexie such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. In Alexie's practice, we find the modalities of parody and satire structuring a rich and complex assembly of quotations from media discourse, epistolary devices, court testimonies, mock chronicles, journalistic accounts, and so on. What this Native American style of postmodernist narrative seeks to do, in my judgment, is to invent a counterhegemonic discourse to thwart all conventional expectations about the American Indian "way of life" monumentalized in Hollywood movies and public consensus. These writers challenge the received transcendentalizing standard of literariness and its normative aura of multicultural harmony prevailing in the academy. Abstract form becomes informed by Spinoza's *conatus*, by will, hopes, dreams.

Meanwhile, the performance art of the Latino community offers a dazzling intertextuality of speech-acts for interpretation. Take Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's production of the videofilm *Couple in a Cage*. This video documentary is based on their actual performance of "a reversed anthropology," "The Guatinaui World Tour (1992-93)" which took place in various selected sites, from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC to the Columbus Plaza in Madrid Spain, and the Fundacion Banco Patricios in Buenos Aires. This meta-fiction has been mounted to deconstruct or transvalue the Columbus Quincentennial celebrations by evoking the suppressed "other" history, what Gomez-Peña calls the official ethnography of "authentic primitives, the mass media and pop cultural depictions of the Latin 'other'" (33). This is not only an art of resistance but an artifice to overthrow the illusions of the ruling system, a subtle Rabelaisian, carnivalesque assault on the aura of domination and oppression.

The recent Chiapas uprising led by Sub-Commandante Marcos might have derived inspiration from the anti-mimetic, parodic performance of our Latina comrades. After all, magic realism practiced by Garcia Marquez, Borges, and others, originated from the mixed genre of parody and satire dating back to the Middle Ages. Gomez-Peña describes a series of theatrical demonstrations in his book, *New World Border*, as a kind of metacommentary on the need for a more politicized multiethnic pedagogy amid the intractability of "common-cultural" doxa and stereotypes. Here is his report:

The meta-fiction of "The Guatinaui World Tour" was as follows: Coco and I lived for three-day periods in a gilded cage, on exhibition as "undiscovered Amerindians" from the (fictional) island of Guatinaui (Spanglishization of "what now"). I was dressed as a kind of Aztec wrestler from Las Vegas, and Coco as a Taina straight out of *Gilligan's Island*. We were hand-fed by fake museum docents, and taken to the bathroom on leashes. Taxonomic plates describing our costumes and physical characteristics were displayed next to the cage.

Besides performing "authentic rituals," we would write on a laptop computer, watch home videos of our native land, and listen to Latin American rock music on a boom box. For a modest amount, we would perform "authentic" Guatinaui dances, and chant or tell stories in our (made-up) Guatinaui language. Visitors also had the option to take a souvenir snapshot with the primitives. For the '93 Whitney Biennial, we added another activity to the menu: for \$5.00, the audience could "see the genitals of the male specimen"—and the well-heeled Whitney patrons really went for it....

As [the performance] traveled from site to site, it became more stylized, staged, and whimsical. Sadly, over 40 percent of our audience, no matter where we were, believed that the exhibit was real (at least during their first visit), and did not feel compelled to do anything about it. (97-98)

The pathos of his last statement registers the seeming ineffectuality of performance art of this type. Gomez-Peña's art of cognitive mapping seeks to prepare us for the complex challenges of living in the "multiracial

borderless society of the next century" (102). But unfortunately the habits of past centuries persist to re-establish borders unrelentingly where one least suspects. The misunderstandings occurring at the border zone continue to muddle the boundaries or limits internalized by the artist himself, leading to an aporia that can only be resolved by a community of interpretants geared for collective action—the subject of reasoned action “which grounds the interpretive process, pragmatically, giving shape to what would be an indeterminate and infinite semiosis” (Osborne 50). Knowledge for whom? For what? These questions remain to be answered by CS practitioners.

Symbolizing the Collective Agon

Let us take another text which I have recently assigned: the novel *Shark Dialogues* by Hawaiian-born Kiana Davenport. This novel is usually deciphered as a realist epic saga of seven generations of one family. It covers the principal events in the history of Hawaii, from independent island, to colony and U.S. state/neocolony. It centers on one heroic woman who, to quote one reviewer, “gathers her four granddaughters together in one erotic tale of villains and dreamers, queens and revolutionaries, lepers and healers” (Rampell). The habit of searching for a unifying principle of consistency and design centered on a major protagonist is fulfilled: the Polynesian matriarch becomes the focus of most commentaries, vindicating with it the transparency, versimilitude, and plausibility of the literary artifice.

Something is flagrantly wrong with that commentary since in that hermeneutic maneuver, ethnicity becomes reified. Cultural differences and values become naturalized in the seemingly convincing actions and language of “true-to-life” individual characters. The knowledge of Hawaiian society and history generated by this reading only folds back into the order and logic of imperial conquest against which the theme of revolt by the colonized indigenous peoples has been mounted by the narrator. The novel subverts this centering procedure that represses possibilities and alternatives to the iniquitous status quo.

A CS approach would modify this search for a unifying principle and call attention instead to those moments in the narrative where the logic of market exchange, of the commodity system, breaks down. Those moments can be conceived as an allegorical transcript of group antagonisms, the anatomy of subject-positions and their reproduction which, to my mind, constitutes the proper subject of CS as an oppositional and contestatory practice. The struggle over representation thus moves from the field of semiotics, the differential networks of language and discourse, to that of cultural politics

and social practice, indeed, to that of class struggle between the Native Hawaiians and the occupiers.

At this juncture, I conceive of CS as an intervention in reconceptualizing culture as the field where literary texts like *Shark Dialogues* can be rescued from the realm of apologetics and appreciated for their pedagogical and conscientizing (to borrow Freire's overused term) qualities. This is not meant to reduce art to programmatic and didactic ends. Rather, it is to re-situate the act of reading in the field of cultural practices where the final interpretant foregrounds habits, patterns of behavior, ethos, ideologemes, as Peirce theorized the culminating telos of signifying-production.

Following Fredric Jameson's suggestions, CS can be more effective when culture is viewed as the site *par excellence* of ideological struggle. In this arena of discursive practice and reflexive critique, group antagonisms are represented and fought through with the interpretive process of experience itself posing ethical questions to the reader/audience and, more urgently, political imperatives. Culture dramatizes the idea of the Other, the forms of relations among groups characterized by envy and loathing. CS allows us to interpret prestige as an emanation of group solidarity, the object of collective envy and struggle, which underlies racism and the ethnic conflicts that are thematized and dramatized by the writers and works I have mentioned. The investment in group fantasies, particularly in stereotypes (so evident in the customary book reviews and public responses), often results in a sublimation of the reader's response in the institution of the market and of consumption, leading to the resolution of ethnic antagonisms in the figure or subject-position offered to the reader: that of universal consumer.

We are not just engaged in liberating texts from the consumerist-spectatorial stranglehold. In my judgment, another alternative is possible, or feasible, when we see the text as the space in which the symbolic moves of groups, here ethnic collectives personified as individual protagonists, are rewritten in another modality. That is, they are transcoded as dialogically antagonistic processes emblemizing the tensions between forms of social relations, configurations of the synchrony/diachrony of social production and reproduction, thus rendering them intelligible to the community of interpreters and amenable to resolution via the radical transformation of the whole system. The final interpretant here is the habitual subject (to use Peirce's construal again) whose regular routine is interrupted by the recognition of something new, a discovery of something shocking or alarming, which ushers in a sense of discomfort, unease, anxiety. What is at stake is a renewed self-consciousness of the knowledge we act on, and insight into possibilities for transforming

modes of perception as well as patterns of social practice in everyday life. This is a history that students and readers of literature can make as subjects and movers/shapers of CS-in-process.

Across the Pacific, to the Tropical Outpost of Empire

Meanwhile, let us examine the situation of CS in the Philippines, a former U.S. colony and now, though nominally independent, subsisting as a neocolonial outpost of the globalized Wall Street/Washington/Pentagon axis. Note that the Philippines is not in the Caribbean or in Latin America, but in Southeast Asia, near China, Vietnam, and Indonesia—a geopolitical reality not registered in most cultural baedekers.

Practically a *faux mimesis* of Hawaii or Puerto Rico, the Philippines is now distinguished as the largest exporter of migrant labor in the world—more than 10 million Filipinos work as contracted labor around the planet—and as the burgeoning call-center headquarters of most transnational corporate firms. Apart from this, the Philippines boasts of one of the enduring terrorist groups, the Abu Sayyaf, that sprang from the US-trained mujahideens in Afghanistan (like Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda contingent), which lends justification to the permanent stationing of US “Special Forces,” military advisers, corporate technocrats, and CIA agents all over the islands. Unfortunately, just as CS has not given due attention to the post 9/11 “war on terrorism,” CS has also ignored the plight of the Moro and Lumad peoples who have been subjugated and exploited for centuries by Spanish, American, and Christian-Filipino colonialisms. This is perhaps a project or agenda for the next few decades, or even the next century.

As already indicated, CS, originating from the UK and North America, focuses on the complex relations of “power” and “knowledge” (knowledge-production) at a specific historical conjuncture (Seventies and Eighties). Its axioms include the rejection of Enlightenment modernity/progress, metanarratives (paradigms, worldviews), premised on the rational subject. Symptomatic of the alienation of Western intellectuals from technocratic market-society during the Cold War, CS reflects the crisis of finance/monopoly capitalism in its imperialist stage. It seeks to transcend reified systems by way of privileging the *differend*, *differance* (Lyotard, Derrida), diffuse power (Foucault, Deleuze), life-world or everyday life (Habermas, de Certeau) inspired by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and Saussure.

Orthodox CS identifies modernity with capitalism, hence its postmodernist temper. Despite acknowledging the historicity of the discipline, postmodernist academics (Geertz, Grossberg, Clifford) give primacy to “the flow of social

discourse" and the "essentially contestable" genealogy of culture. Engaged with the singularity of events centering on love, sentiments, conscience, and the existential or ethical moment in order to "bring us in touch with strangers," with Others, postmodern CS seeks to interrogate the foundational aims of linguistics (Jakobson), psychoanalysis (Freud), philosophy (Kant, Hegel) and political economy (Marx) by substituting the ambivalence, contingency, and hybridity of "lived experience" for labor/social praxis as the focus of investigation. Focused on what escapes language and thought, CS has fallen into the dualism it ritualistically condemns, complete with the mystique of a neoliberal individualism enabled by presumably value-free, normative "free market" absolutism.

Nihilism's Siren Song

Anti-foundationalism and anti-metanarratives distinguish orthodox CS today. Rejecting classical reason, CS refuses any grounding in political or social action as a perversion of knowledge for the ends of power. Valuing negative critique as an antidote to ideology, CS leads to a fetishism of the Void, the deconstructive "Sublime" as a substitute for a thoroughgoing critique of the authority of received values and institutions. By various ruses of irony, uncanny cynicism, and "sly mimicry," it ends up apologizing for the status quo. Anti-authoritarianism is trivialized in careerist anecdotes, and CS becomes reduced to conferences and publicity about fantasies of revolutionary social movements.

Submerged and eventually displaced, the critical dimension of CS drawn from Western Marxism (Gramsci, Althusser, Lukacs) has disappeared in the neoconservative tide that began with Reagan and Thatcher in the Eighties. This neoconservatism continues to this day under the slogan of the "global war on terrorism." Meanwhile, attention to racism, gender, sexism, and other non-class contradictions, particularly in the colonized and peripheral formations, sharpened with the Civil Rights struggles in the US, the youth revolt, the worldwide opposition to the Vietnam War, and the current if precarious hegemony of the Global North.

Mainstream CS today still focuses on consumption, audience response, Deleuzian desire, affects, irony, avoidance of the critique of ideology, the culture industry, and unequal division of social labor. However, some versions of CS invoke Simone de Beauvoir, Fanon, CLR James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rosa Luxemburg, Paulo Freire and other "third world" activists in an effort to renew its original vocation of contributing to fundamental social change. Its Foucauldian notion of "specific intellectuals" addressing a

“conjunctural constituency” may call attention to the need to address state violence and hegemonic apparatuses of public control and repression.

Like any global trend, CS can be “filipinized” by the creative application of its original radical critique to our conditions. Various forms of CS, as mediated by “subalternists” and other “third world” conduits, have influenced such historians concerned with the marginalized Others (peasants, women, religious and ethnic communities, etc.). But except for the Latin American “theology of liberation” as a form of CS, they have all wrongly assumed that the Philippines is no longer a neocolonial, dependent formation, replete with diverse contradictions centering on the oligarchic-comprador domination of majority of the people (workers, peasants, women, OFWs, Moros, and other indigenous groups). The question of a singular Filipino modernity—genuine national sovereignty, autonomous individuals free from Spanish or American tutelage, an informed bourgeois public sphere—has been conflated and transmogrified by insidious postmodern mystifications legitimized by the illusory promise of emancipation by avid consumption epitomized in megamalls, Internet/Facebook celebrity culture, and a predatory commodifying consumerist ethos. Evangelical religious fundamentalisms further complicate this overdetermined nexus of residual, ascendant, and emergent cultural strands characterizing the neocolonial polity.

Despite their shortcomings, those whom I consider the inventors of Filipino cultural studies—José Rizal (in “The Indolence of Filipinos” and “The Philippines a Century Hence”), Isabelo de los Reyes (folklore and ethnic studies), countless vernacular novelists, poets, and playwrights, and memoir-writers (Mabini, veterans of 1896 and the Huk uprising)—applied critical principles derived from Europe to the specific political and socioeconomic situations in the colony/neocolony. In the process, the power/knowledge complex acquired concrete elaboration in terms of how “everyday life”—culture as ordinary habits or patterns, according to Raymond Williams, cannot escape its over-determination by the historical institutions and practices imposed by the colonial powers and mediated by the regional/local ruling bloc. Time and space qualifications offer intelligible meanings by way of the contradictions between the colonial/neocolonial hegemonic institutions and the acceptance/resistance of the colonized natives. Such meanings can be found in the narratives of individuals/collectives in which the notion of subjectivity defined by various levels of contradictions (Filipino versus American, patriarchal power versus women, “civilized” versus indigenous, etc.) can be discerned, embedded in the totality of social relations at specific historical moments. I am thinking of a “knowable community” with institutions

and habitus, a structure of nuanced, differentiated power relations, not just a “structure of feeling” constituted by heterogeneous experiences.

Arguments for Indigenizing CS

In Philippine CS, the question of language assumes primacy because intellectual discourse and exchanges cannot sidetrack the problem of communicating to the larger public. Democratizing the means of communication is a part of the process of overthrowing the oligarchic elite and the reproduction of class and gender inequality. Such a public needs to be developed by the pedagogical program of a developing CS curriculum. The prevalence of English as an elite marker or imprimatur of privileged status will surely prevent this public sphere from emerging. Linked to this is the position of popular culture which has always radicalized CS by eliminating the divide between the elite/canonical culture and the proletarian/mass culture. Control of the means of communication needs to be addressed as well as the participation of a wider public in dialogues and exchanges.

CS, if it aspires to actualize its critical potential and transformative efficacy, needs to always address the major and minor contradictions of each society within a globalizing planet. The neoliberal market ideology that pervades everyday life/consciousness militates against the growth of a critical sensibility and the development of the faculties and powers of the species. Therefore, CS needs to focus its analytic instruments on the commodification of the life-world and everyday life by the oligopolistic capitalist order. In the Philippines, the unprecedented diaspora of domestics and overseas contract workers (OFWs) constitutes the prime specimen for study and critique. This involves not only the symbolic violence of language use, but also the material violence of class warfare and its effects: hunger, disease, impoverishment of the citizenry, State torture, and extrajudicial killings.

In this critique mainly focused on the aborted promise of CS in the Global North, it is neither strategic nor propitious to describe in detail what the adaptation — or indigenization — of a Eurocentric CS paradigm would look like attuned to the needs and demands of neocolonized subjects in the Global South. Parts of that description may be found in my previous works (San Juan *The Philippine Temptation; After Postcolonialism; “Ordeals of Indigenization”*). It would certainly require a longer, sustained mapping of the sociopolitical terrain of six decades after the 1946 formal independence. A political economy of group consensus and habits of belief such as, for example, the inventory of contradictions drawn up by social scientist Kenneth Bauzon (1991) would be useful in calculating the scale and degree

of continued Filipino mimicry of inhumane models to perpetuate inequity and underdevelopment.

My task here is circumscribed: to indicate in broad strokes the limitations and inadequacies of that paradigm for subjugated or dependent constituencies of the Empire. It is foolhardy to undertake this task before we have cleared up crucial theoretical hurdles. The first is the problem of naming the subaltern agency. Obviously, the identification of "Filipino" and "Filipino nation" remains contentious, unsettled, intractable. At best we can only handle the "interpretants" (both denoted and connoted items) of those signifiers provisionally, given not only the existence of heterogeneous components of that ethnic signified "Filipino," but also the fact that the whole ethos (moral, aesthetic, evaluative) of Filipino culture, not to speak of its cognitive and existential aspects, remains suspended in the undecided battlefields of the national-democratic revolution. Mutating modes of inclusion and exclusion of group actors prevail. We can only stipulate our parameters of discourse in light of what has been accomplished so far in liberating ourselves, neocolonized subjects, from imperialist political, sociocultural, and economic strangleholds.

For now, it will suffice to remark on the need to adhere to the axiom of historical specificity (Korsch) and a measure of philosophical rigor in defining such parameters. Above all, the question of ideology and the political economy of knowledge-production cannot be ignored. We cannot escape both the rules of our own communities and those of the totalizing diplomatic-technological state apparatuses of empire that modify, coopt, and sublimate those rules. The dialectical laws of motion of interlocked asymmetrical nation-states cannot be dismissed as simply reactive or aprioristic. In this light, Virgilio Enriquez's project of inventing *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* during the nationalist resurgence of the 1960s and early 1970s may be symptomatically read as a culmination of all previous decolonizing initiatives (from Rizal and the Propagandistas to Recto, Constantino, and Sison) to articulate a program and worldview for the masses struggling for social justice, popular democracy, and genuine independence. It was institutionally predictable, but also serendipitous.

An analogous clarification can be offered for the roles that Filipino historians adopted before, during, and after the Marcos dictatorship. While inspired by Indian subalternist historians (laboring under the aegis of Foucauldian/post-structuralist thought) to decenter what were perceived as bourgeois-oriented chronicles such as those by Teodoro Agoncillo, Renato Constantino, and Reynaldo Ileto succeeded to some extent in assaying the value of popular culture (the *pasyon*, etc.) and other marginal practices in the construction

of a “non-linear” narrative of Filipino events before and after the 1896 revolution. It is doubtful whether Agoncillo or Constantino really pursued a linear, one-directional bias. Nevertheless, the revisionist method is not an original “native” discovery. Even before the late twentieth century diaspora, the Filipino intelligentsia had been open-minded and highly susceptible to global influences. Subalternist historiography is the product of a long record of countering the positivist, Comte-Rankean version of historicism, from the British social history tradition (Samuel) to the French *Annales* school and its evolutionist/functionalist offshoot in the Alfred McCoy-Ben Kerkvliet interventions in rewriting Philippine history in a more sophisticated way than Stanley Karnow’s apologetic product, *In Our Image*. Meanwhile, the Marcos Establishment historian Zeus Salazar tried to retool Enriquez’s *sikolohiya* by purging it of its liberatory impulse and anchoring a populist version of the past in an evolving Filipino idiom via his *Pantayong Pananawscheme*. It may be premature to judge the reformist efficacy of this effort in renewing or rehabilitating the fields of local historiography and moribund anthropology. Salazar’s disciples seem resigned to the neoliberal dispensation of the post-Marcos order, ensconced in the academic commerce of fabricating idiosyncratic terminology for archaic ideas.

Ramon Guillermo has provided us a useful inventory of Salazar’s heroic effort, together with proposals for improving its method and scope. But both Salazar and Guillermo have so far sidestepped the fundamental issue (which transcends the old emic/etic binary) of how the notion of rationality — communicative action, in another framework — central to the intellectual *metier* of a global community of scientific inquirers to understand and appraise cultures can be surpassed or transcended. This issue has been elaborated in the volume *Rationality* (Wilson) in which a survey of the conflicting arguments prompted Alasdair MacIntyre’s observation that “the understanding of a people in terms of their own concepts and beliefs does in fact tend to preclude understanding them in any other terms” (130).

MacIntyre does not fully endorse the functionalist view that institutions must be grasped not in terms of what they mean for the agents, but in terms of what necessary needs and purposes they serve; however, he does not fully agree with Peter Winch’s untenable belief that communities can only be properly understood and judged in terms of their own internally generated norms and beliefs—a proposition that *Pantayong Pananaw* advocates seem to favor, despite earnest denials (see Santa Maria). But even assuming that isolated communities in a capitalist-globalized world are possible, long after Max Weber took time off from “value-free” pursuits

to distinguish explanation from interpretation, proponents of the primacy of hermeneutic understanding still need the benefit of analytic explanation if they want to avoid circularity and self-serving solipsism. After all, why bother understanding Others? Oppositional American thinkers such as Marcus Raskin, Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, Susan Buck-Morss, and others have begun to engage with the antinomies of knowledge-production faced earlier by the British in the context of the challenges of the postmodern era (Raskin), an engagement coopted by the debates on terrorism, Islamophobia, and other alibis of Empire.

Filipinization as a Concrete-Universal Project

My own position strives to be a dialectical-materialist stance that privileges historical specificity and counterhegemonic imperatives on the question of adapting ideas from other sources (San Juan *In the Wake of Terror*). In my view, language is only one of the criteria for hypothesizing the nation as “imagined community,” to use Benedict Anderson’s formula. However, the quest becomes more problematic when the language at issue, “Filipino,” is still a matter disputed by other participants of the polity such as the Cebuanos, the various Moro groups, and by the English-speaking intelligentsia and bureaucracy. More seriously, it is not possible to conceive of the notions of *pantayo* and *pangkami* without the whole dynamic network of differences first outlined by Saussure but complicated by the wide-ranging semiotic principles explored by C.S. Peirce, Lev Vygotsky, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Roman Jakobson, far beyond the findings of Whorf, Sapir, Humboldt, Frobenius, etc. The linguistic symbol, as Jakobson reminds us, is not only a vehicle of the sedimented past (icons) or the present (indices), but also of the future. He quotes Peirce’s speculation premised on the triadic theory of the sign: “The being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied.... The value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future” (Jacobson 427).

Language is, to be sure, only one signifier of national identity, not an absolute qualifier, whose correlation with other practices and collective actions needs delicate orchestration (Yinger 200-02). Earlier (“Ordeals of Indigenization”), I registered my discomfort with the logocentric tendency in Enriquez’s otherwise conscientious indigenization attempt. In the total program of liberating the majority of Filipinos (workers, peasants, women) from market exploitation and alien oppression, a nationalist ideology should prioritize the act of foregrounding democratic national rights and collective welfare.

Therefore, we need an internationalist worldview such as that provided by Marxism (articulated, of course, to our specific conditions) with its universalistic, critical position grounded on a “concrete universal,” with all the richness of the particular social-formation in the Philippines, in creating a sense of Filipino nationhood (Lowy 2000).

Filipinizing CS thus requires not merely linguistic readjustment but, more importantly, reconceiving the sense of rationality, justice, equality, and democratic participation that cannot be hermetically encapsulated within the bounds of a single Filipino language-in-the-making. Neither postcolonial hybridity, modernizing technocratic pragmatism, nor transnational flexibility will do; we need dialectical cunning and a *bricoleur’s* resourcefulness in taking advantage of what our forebears — Rizal, Recto, Agoncillo, Constantino, Hernandez, and others — have already won for us. After all, the enemy can also speak in Filipino, dance the *tinikling*, and sing “Dahil sa Iyo” in more seductive, innovative, postmodernist ways. We need to combine specifics and universals in both strategic and tactical ways that cannot be learned at this time from orthodox CS and its postcolonial, transnationalist variations.

To recap: Conceived as a reaction to capitalist high culture in the late twentieth century, CS initially challenged Cold War norms and Western hegemony. It promised a democratic, even radical, renaissance of thought and sensibility inside and outside the academy. Its early practitioners drew heavily from the Marxist and socialist traditions. But when it became institutionalized in the Eighties and Nineties, CS distanced itself rapidly from mass political struggles in the metropolises and the “third world.” It reverted to ethical individualism, aestheticism, Nietzschean performative displays, and the fetishism of differences/hybridity, becoming in the process a defensive ideology for predatory finance capitalism and technocratic globalization. If we want CS to be meaningful to the majority of Filipinos, it needs to address the urgent realities of our society and contribute to the democratic and egalitarian ideals of our history.

Prophetic Cognitive Mapping

The current war on terrorism by the imperial powers led by the United States exhibits its exemplary form of “epistemic violence” in its attack on national-liberation and popular-democratic struggles everywhere. One example is the US attack on Moro insurgents (chiefly belonging to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front), including the group notoriously publicized as the terrorist band, “Abu Sayyaf.” Working through neocolonial instrumentalities, as

well as regional alliances, Western hegemony continues to delegitimize this Moro demand for self-determination into a dangerous conspiracy that needs to be coopted or suppressed. Exploiting splinter groups utilized by local compradors and elite bureaucrats, the US tries to convert the age-old class conflicts in the Philippines into the discourse of war between civilizations. Mixing outright propaganda and vestiges of cold-war rhetoric and counterinsurgency policies, finance-capitalism seeks to resolve its accumulation crisis by intensifying ideological-cultural conflicts that hide the historical material grounds of injustice and oppression. The Moro struggle in the Philippines will remain a crucible for U.S. "manifest destiny" after 9/11, but no serious and substantive CS inquiry has been devoted to it.

So far, notwithstanding few notable instances such as Lauren Berlant's "The Face of America and the State of Emergency," I know of no serious and wide-ranging CS study of "terrorism"—except perhaps Naomi Klein's invaluable *The Shock Doctrine*—as the new ideological-political strategy of global capital to maintain its hegemonic stranglehold on the planet (contrast Berlant with the scholasticism of Tsing). This is a symptom of a profound malaise afflicting the intellectual public sphere of the Global North. Unless CS pays attention to what Fanon called "the wretched of the earth," in particular the situation of peoples of color fighting for survival with dignity and freedom, such as those in the Philippines, CS cannot renew its radical or oppositional beginnings, much less revive the proverbial "speaking" virtue of the much deconstructed postcolonial subaltern. We can see how, in two recent surveys of British Cultural Studies (Morley and Robbins) and French Cultural Studies (Forbes and Kelly), this new country-oriented CS has incorporated a reflexive, more critical optic into its nationalist provenance and shifted focus on the imperialist encroachments of the elite, as well as the impact of the "natives" and migrants on the nativist codes and ethos.

It may be redundant to rehearse what we have elaborated in various earlier discourses (*Beyond Postcolonial Theory; Racism and Cultural Studies*), but the capacity to remember (the historical sense or imagination) in consumer society is all but stultified and dessicated. So allow us this excess. In the Philippines and other subordinated formations, CS can be regenerated by renewing its anticolonial, popular, and democratic inspiration, and re-engaging in a radical, transformative critique of oligopolistic corporate power, the political economy of global finance capital and its commodified/commodifying culture. It can challenge US imperialism and its agent-satrap in its current modality of warring against "terrorism" or extremism (codewords for anti-imperialists) by returning to, first, the primacy of social labor; second, the complex

historical articulations of the mode of production and social relations; and, third, the importance of the materialist critique of norms, assumptions, and premises underlying existing inequalities, injustices, and oppressions.

The radical critic Teresa Ebert notes that CS capitulated to conservatism by abandoning Marxism and indulging in textual play, discursivity, the "troping of reality" and "textualizations of ethnography" (47). We thus need to rehabilitate if not remodel the inherited CS to conform to the needs and pressures of the Philippine situation. To Filipinize CS is to reconfigure the modality and thrust of Western CS in order to address the persistent and urgent problems of the exploitation of Filipino labor worldwide, the lack of genuine sovereignty and national independence, and the profound class, gender, and ethnic inequalities that have plagued the country for so long. In short, intellectuals engaged in CS need to situate their practice and vocation in the actual society that underwrites their labor and provides it some measure of intelligibility and significance. Otherwise, they will continue to serve the interests of the capitalist Leviathan and undermine their own claims to integrity and independence, not to speak of "academic freedom," humanistic ideals, and scientific objectivity. This is urgently the case today, when the advanced putrefaction of global capitalism, with its putatively postmodern cosmopolitan culture being offered as a panacea, characterized by enclosures, the "privatization of the global commons and the exploitation of wage laborers in the vast cultural corporations" (Denning 141). Given the truth that every cultural accomplishment is also a document of barbarism, we concur with Walter Benjamin that "no cultural history has yet done justice to this fundamental state of affairs, and it can hardly hope to do so" (682). Nor can CS do it. *De te fabula*.

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