Comparative Literature: Methodology and Critique – 15PCSH004

Week 10 (w/c 13th December)

Black Feminism

Octavia Butler considered through claiming of speculative fiction.

Speculative fiction: imagined futures – sci fi dealing with human rather than tech issues – world constructed from our everyday but not about the tech advance – includes fantasy, horror, weird fiction, dystopia, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales etc.

What is distinct about spec fiction? What does it achieve?

Afrofuturism – spec fiction that treats AfrAm concerns in context of C20th technoculture

Important connection betw/ race and futurist fiction

Intersections between Black Feminism and Afro Futurism – just as AfroFut seeks to liberate the possibilities that open up when blackness is linked to futurity, so does black feminist thought seek to uncouple dominance from power as blacks assert their agency, as bell hooks declares.

Much of Afrofuturism's transgressive politics align w/ the fundamental tenets of black feminist thought, I argue that it is critical to understand these epistemologies not only as related but as, in fact, in conversation w/ one anotherand potentially even symbiotic.

The Black Woman is voiced by the category of Black feminism

Moving from silence into speech is moving from oppression to ---

Holly: female lit characters who are self-reliant, independent, strong courageous – healthy, sane, mature – these ideas lie in white fem? Holly reading these traits against the paradigm

Afrofuturist feminism is a reflection of the shared central tenets of afrofuturism and black feminist transgressive feminist practices born of or from across the Afrodiaspora are key to a progressive future.

Feminist criticism is not monolithic, but feminism and the way in which we model feminism sweepingly changes the way we read texts. Feminist criticism as a way to evaluate individual female characters you get one kind of reading. Butler takes a model – the perfect fem character – and shows that it doesn't work, she can never be fully recognised unless she creates her own space because of systemic questions of dominance and power. The experience of womanhood is different because of intersection of systemic distinctions in the position of the Black woman as a universal category.

- study of influence [intertextuality], [borrowing vs theft as in legitimate distribution? Imitated or adopted]
- tendency to glorify the past [national chauvinism: literature at school has aspect of glorifying past e.g. Learning Chaucer/Shakespeare at an early age for greatness rather than the actual significance];
- cultural colonialism [Chow's work starts here] [negative comparison e.g. For showing superiority/inferiority]

C19th – Paradox of Comparative Lit

- Comp lit forged 'in the spirit of the universal' - meant to transcend the national
- **Yet** obsessively concerned with defining national culture – by saying let's compare french, german, english, France Germany and England becamse more reified and solidified. Even in the most contemporary iterations of comp lit – the paradox remains – it's meant to move beyond 1 language, 1 nation, but does it ever manage to do that?
- According to Bassnett, the project of comp lit turns inwards – concerned with defining itself
- Keep having to redefining because continuously going back to the idea of the nation
- Comp lit claims to be a discipline – meaning it has specific mode of enquiry and specific object of enquiry.
- Postcolonial studies emerged out of comp lit – Said, Spivak and Bhabha were comparativists

C20th Comp Lit Practice

- The American School – relationships between literature and other areas of knowledge
- Theoretical; interdisciplinary; apolitical (a flat network of influence)

Rey Chow (2004)

- Comparison from frame of geopolitical hierarchies
- Theoretical ideal of an inclusive world literature on the one hand
- On the other hand – actual events that take place in name of comparison
- Gap between theory and practice – theory doesn't always lead to ideal practice.
- The responsibility of comparison especially as it comes out in practice.
- Post-national – first iteration of being post-national in Europe looks like colonialism.
- Idea of representation as a kind of violence (e.g. not studying cultures before the colonial encounter)
- Inheritance: multilingualism – comparative literature is meant to be multilingual
- Assumption that there ought to be a degree of commonality and equiavlence – and thus comparability – among them, that they are somehow on par with each other despite their obvious differences.
- Language has come to be viewed as a stand-in for method
- When we conflate language with method, we open the door to misunderstanding what comp lit should be
- Understanding the language isn't the same as understanding the literature piece (and the literary tradition of the text?)
- Moves from multilingualism to grid of intelligibility
- Problem with bringing together unthinkingly idea of differentiation through commonality as the act of comparison, bringing two paradoxical components together. Difference through mutlilingualness and sameness through comparison. Because you take many lanauges and

Appropriate question should be: *what circumstances are appropriate to the use of the word 'literature'?*

The word 'is' -- what is definition (explanation of word) and what is statement of fact that says something about the thing concerned, meaning of word already being assumed. e.g. 'What is the temperature?'

H.Adams: 'Unfortunately [what is literature?] is an ambiguous question. It may mean, what things will we can literature? Or it may mean, Assuming we know what objects we are talking about, how are we to define the word? In terms of what these objects do, how they are made or what they resemble?'

Information about a category is not a definition. - to begin seeking a definition by investigating the possible common features of the category is a misconception.

When we seek a definition, what we are seeking is not a statement of the features held in common by the members of the category, but the **appropriate circumstances for the use of the word** & the features of those circumstances that determine the willingness or unwillingness of the speakers of the language to use the word.

Must look at the category's edges, the marginal members, to find out what factors cause speakers to hesitate as to whether the word is appropriate or not in a given case.

All categories have shaded edges, but we learn most about those categories by examining the critical decisions made at their edges.

The definition that [Ellis has] reached is a necessary consequence of adopting a logic of definition that unlike the logic of the reference theory of meaning is appropriate for the concept of literature.

The membership of the category of literary texts is simply what is currently agreed to be usable in this way by members of the community.

Because of the constant supply of new possibilities, there will be a steady stream of new instances accepted for inclusion and old members discarded. Central principle: texts are made into literature by the community, not by their authors. Authors endow them with the qualities that are the causes of their being so treated by the community. But it is the agreement of the community that makes them into literature, in that the category is defined as those texts used in this way by the community, not as those texts offered for that use.

The category of literary texts is not distinguished by defining characteristics but by the characteristic use to which those texts are put by the community.

Literary texts of those used in a way that is characteristically different from other uses of language. This invalidates much of the work of those linguists who attempt to find distinguishing characteristics of poetry in poetic language, in practise they are really dealing with the permitted extra stock of expressive devices , which literary takes may or may not exploit and not with the nature of literary texts.