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WHAT IS MODERNITY? :
USING LITERARY MODERNISM TO SHOW
HOW CONTROLLING THE TERMS
AFFECTS THE CULTURE DEEMED 'OTHER'

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Synopsis:

This paper explores the way modernity, particularly literary modernism, shaped the way the culture of the 'other' was viewed and treated.

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This paper will explore the way culture of the 'other' is constructed by white, privileged cultural expectations, how and if marked cultures can succeed in changing the framing and what that has to do with modernity. Literary modernism contains different kinds of cultural construction that echoes forms of colonialism. Ezra Pound's *Cathay* is a collection of translated Chinese poetry. Willa Cather's novel, *The Professor's House* has a character occupy an empty Native American space. By looking at both works in conjunction with modernist works written by people of the groups that had been occupying that space-Younghill Kang and D'Arcy McNickle, respectively-I will explore how the perceived cultural 'othering' is represented by the 'othered' culture. By examining the impacts Pound's translations had on Asian Americans, in conjunction with representations of culture and perceived notions of culture in Kang's *East Goes West*, I will examine how dominant culture affects 'othered' culture. Similarly, by looking at Cather's novel in conjunction with McNickle's *The Surrounded*, I will show how projected ideas of cultural space by privileged culture are different for the marked culture. In addition to criticism of various works, drawing on Gaonkar's and Pratt's ideas about modernity and culture will help me explore and come to a better conclusion of how the culture of the 'other' is formed by white culture and expectations and how that operates within modernity.

One of the framing ideas for this paper is Gaonkar's claim that there need to be alternative modernities:

To think in terms of alternative modernities is to recognize the need to revise the distinction between societal modernization and cultural modernity. That distinction is

implicated in the irresistible but somewhat misleading narrative about the two types of modernities, the good and the bad, a judgment that is reversible depending on one's stance and sensibility. (Gaonkar 1)

Gaonkar's claim that there needs to be an alternative modernity, and that there are different forms of modernity will help advance my argument of how culture is dictated by the unmarked culture. By using Gaonkar I can further put into context and argue the problem of the culture of the 'other' being formed by the unmarked and the tensions that arise for the marked characters throughout literary modernism. Instead of realizing that there can be more than one type of modernity, the characters in the various books either project a kind of modernity or are framed as primitive if they do not adhere to the projections. As a result, there is a good and bad modernity, which creates tension and misunderstanding.

While all four texts I will write about are examples of framing modernity in terms of what is good and bad, what fits within modernity as described by the unmarked culture and what doesn't, Cather's *The Professor's House* and McNickle's *The Surrounded* are two good examples of what projections of modernity do in framing a culture. Cather's character Tom is occupying a space that formerly belonged to a Native American tribe. In their absence, Tom is romanticizing what happened to the tribe and what life was like for them. However, amidst the irony and the ignorance about the people, Tom is actually portraying how a culture was wiped about because of their "primitivism":

Probably these people buried their dead...I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for

their dead, protecting the children, doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and sentiment for this stronghold where they were at once so safe and so comfortable, where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had to fear. They were, perhaps, too far advanced for their time and environment. They were probably wiped out, utterly exterminated, by some roving Indian tribe without culture or domestic virtues, some horde that fell upon them in their summer camp and destroyed them for their hides and clothing and weapons, or from mere love of slaughter. I feel sure that these brutal invaders never even learned of the existence of this mesa, honeycombed with habitations. If they had come here, they would have destroyed. They killed and went their way. (Cather 176, 181)

The fact that Tom projects idea about the tribe to satisfy his own curiosity and understanding, regardless if accurate, shows the lack of understanding of a more modern culture about a primitive culture. Tom blaming the tribe for being at once primitive (burning their dead and actually calling them primitive) while at the same time speculating that the reason the tribe was wiped out was because they were not primitive enough, demonstrates a weird tension of respecting the tribe because they were more modern while also saying they did not belong, because they did not stay with their markings. Instead of finding out what happened, and ignoring what happened, Tom changes the story of the tribe to fit his needs, his terms. He all at once sees the tribe as failing because they were too modern for their culture while also failing because their culture was too primitive.

Another tension and the problem with Tom projecting his own ideas about the Native American tribe and culture is that he is projecting his ideas while occupying the space once occupied by the modern-primitive tribe. The way in which Tom's story is positioned in the

narrative gives respite to St. Peter's story. The fact that Tom's story takes place in a former Native American dwelling shows that cultures marked as "other" can operate as convenient literal narrative breaks and give respite for characters and readers. The different ways marked cultures are used in narrative is another example of the discrepancy and tension of how cultures operate within a dominant and white culture.

The narrative and special reprieve for both characters and people is a topic further explored by Woidat. Woidat writes about the space of the American Southwest and how it was used by Cather and tourists. Woidat writes that, in addition to Cather's fiction and travel advertisements preferring:

vanished Native Americans to those still living... It is also crucial to remember that the Southwest was perceived as an escape from the pattern of life somewhere else... The Indian-detour provides a metaphor for Cather's novels of the Southwest, which offer an escape to her readers in the form of 'detours' to the cliff dwellings. Together, Cather's three Southwestern novels form a trilogy that offers such a retreat into the past... She depicts these retreats to the past not as veritable escapes, but rather mere detours that must return us to present realities. (Woidat 23, 31-32, 41)

Woidat's essay explains how Native American space was constructed by white culture. The fact that a space formerly occupied by a culture marked as primitive and other served as a tourist attraction, a reprieve, a retreat and a detour shows not only the disconnect between two cultures but the convenience of the privileged culture shaping a space to fit their needs. The literal Southwest became an escape while the narrative Southwest in Cather's fiction became a respite for a character's story. It is through this framing that one culture is modern and the culture of the

'other' is marked primitive. Members of the modern culture want to explore what the primitive culture was like. Both cultures cannot be viewed as modern under these terms. Instead, there is the viewer and the viewed, and the viewer is dictating how the viewed operates within the unmarked culture.

While Cather's *The Professor's House* shows how Native American space was constructed by white culture-whether it be tourists or the narrative-McNickle's *The Surrounded* shows the problem of Native American space being constructed by white culture. Instead of the space being occupied by a lone white man romanticizing what happened and instead of the narrative having a reprieve, McNickle's work portrays a different space. As opposed to the Native American space Cather provides for her characters (none of whom are Native American) in *The Professor's House*, McNickle shows a tense and confusing space in *The Surrounded*. By showing the detrimental effects of Euroamerican modernization, McNickle shows a tragic and confused Native American culture, a space that is not a quaint reprieve for characters that live there or visit. *The Surrounded* shows what happens when cultures are approached with an allochronistic mindset¹. Instead of two cultures living in harmony, the Native American culture in the novel has been framed as a primitive way of life, something that cannot be reconciled with the new "modern" way of life of Euroamericans. The tension that arises from not understanding how either culture functions in the new world of the 20th century is what causes the tragedy of Louis's death and the killing of a game warden, both of which follow Archilde and Catherine through the rest of the novel and dictates their actions. If there wasn't a miscommunication

¹ For a more thorough understanding of allochronism see Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Print.

between the game warden, Louis, Catherine and even Archilde, the two characters would not have died.

The character of Archilde and the narrator of McNickle's novel show a different way Native American space is negotiated, and that, with actual people inhabiting that space, there is more tension and tragedy than romance. One of the ways McNickle shows that the Native American space is not a reprieve or a romantic utterance of the white culture is through Archilde not being able to fully communicate with his mother where he has been. Right away there is a tension between the old Native American world in which Archilde was a part of and the new "modern" world which Archilde cannot fully communicate to his mother: "'Where have you been all this time?' 'To Portland...'" She let the word echo in her ears, saying nothing herself, but it had no meaning. If he had said he had been down toward the mouth of the Snpoilshi (Columbia) River, she would have known what he meant. But Portland!"(2). The lack of understanding the modern terms, and not being able to translate, sets up Archilde trying any way he can to bond with and understand his mother. For although they may not always be speaking the same language they are both trying to negotiate the space they inhabit. Archilde is an example of a character trying to negotiate both spaces-those of modernity and those that are deemed primitive. The fact that he cannot negotiate both spaces successfully shows that setting up modern terms in opposition to other's cultural terms shows the tension that arises when negotiating a space in modern terms that is not modern. Unlike Tom, who does the same thing, Archilde finds this problematic, and the fact that he cannot communicate with his own mother is a testimony to that.

However, even though mother and son cannot directly communicate, one of the ways Archilde bonds with his mother is through hunting. Although he is resistant, he knows his

mother wants to go hunting and takes her. However, it is in the woods where the old world (i.e. primitive Native American culture) and new (i.e. modern white culture) come to clash when they run into Sheriff Quigley and tell him what they are doing: “ As he came up to the Sheriff, Archilde halted for the customary time-passing when people meet in the mountains. ‘We’re looking for game. See anything?’ ...The Sheriff only grunted, as if game-hunting were beneath the notice of anyone who enjoyed *his* kind of hunting” (117-18). A customary greeting, as the narrator suggest through the description of Archilde halting, would seem to be a time for the two cultures to meet. However, through language such as “grunt” and “beneath” in addition to the emphasis on the word “his”, the reader is convinced that the meeting is not a time of reconciliation. It is through this communication that even something like the love of hunting cannot be fully reconciled with the modern, Euroamerican way of hunting. There are still barriers put in place that mark the Native American practice of hunting as “primitive” and the Euroamerican practice as “modern” and “civilized”.

The “modern” culture, as represented by Quigley, feels inclined to distance itself from the primitive culture and projects its way of hunting on the Native American way of hunting, which is what causes the conflict that leads to two deaths. This modern vs. primitive idea is furthered in a direct confrontation with a game warden who approaches Archilde’s camp and asks about the game they have caught. Archilde defends the fact that he and his family have been hunting deer. However, once again, cultural signifiers of modern and primitive are in play that inhibit understanding: “‘You’ve got a doe here. You know there’s a law against killing female deer, don’t you?’ ...Archilde spoke for his brother. ‘We’re Indians, and we’re free of game laws.’ ‘I guess I’d know you was Indians...But far’s I know there’s no exemption on female deer’” (McNickle 125). The modern and new way of hunting, which puts stipulations and

limitations on what can and can't be hunted, is conflicting with the traditional Native American way of hunting. The latter way of hunting is one that existed when there wasn't a bureaucratic dictate behind the land and animals and everything that could be hunted was. Neither party tries to understand one another. Instead, a couple of pages later both Louis and the game warden are dead. It is as though the message of the effects of allochronism is that neither culture can survive, or at least, negotiate the same space successfully.

Moreover, the fate of Catherine and Archilde shows both the perils of allochronism and reinvents the idea that the Native American space is a signifier for sacred and different for Euroamerican characters in other Modernist novels. Catherine struggles with her dueling identity as a Christian woman and a Native American woman and decides to renounce her Christian identity. Archilde changes his plans and stays on the reservation longer in order to protect his mother and ends up being captured at the close of the novel. Neither character can reconcile the two worlds in which they are asked to inhabit. Spoken language and cultural language-hunting-are divided into modern and primitive which just continues the misunderstanding and leads to tragedy for both sides. McNickle's novel shows how the Native American culture was framed as primitive while the white American culture was framed as modern. The result is a novel that shows that Native American space is not a quaint reprieve that had been framed through novels such as Cather's *The Professor's House*. The problems of allochronism come out through the reframing of Native American space through the Native American perspective, as opposed to the framing of Native American space and culture through the unmarked cultural lens.

Another way the unmarked culture causes problems framing the culture of the 'other' is through translation. Like Cather's Native American narrative that serves as a reprieve for the characters and shapes the space of the 'other' however she and her characters choose, Pound

inhabits a space and shapes it to fit his needs. However, instead of a physical space, Pound occupies the space of Chinese poetry and shapes it according to his own imagination and romanticizing in *Cathay*, his “translation” of Chinese poems. One of the ways to look at *Cathay* and its perplexing translations is to understand translation as a form of colonization². Although this is not always the case for every work of translation, by looking at how Pound translated “The Beautiful Toilet”, as just one example, in the context of how others had translated the same poem and considering Yao’s statements of how Chinese-American culture was framed, one can view Pound’s translation as a writerly form of colonization-suppressing the needs and intent of one culture by domineering and changing to fit the needs for one’s own culture, or, in other words, a form of cultural diffusion by someone who is not part of the culture.

Translation is always an interesting form of power and literary form. It is especially interesting and thought provoking in the context of playing a part in cultural diffusion and how the work shapes and negotiates different cultures and literary spaces. Pound’s collection of translated poems is a thought provoking example of how cultures are framed within a literary landscape and why. By viewing *Cathay* as a form of colonial cultural diffusion-the poems were translated and thus shaped and formed by someone outside of the Chinese culture yet shaped Chinese and Asian American discourse, changed the way Chinese and Asian Americans negotiated within their own culture, etc.-one can understand the power the translator has and why that is important³.

² For more a more thorough understanding of postcolonial translation theory, see *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and practice*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print, edited by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. Another good source is Douglas Robinson’s *Translation and Empire: Postcolonial Theories Explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1997. Print.

³ For a better understanding of how Asian culture was constructed through Pound’s translations, see Yunte Huang’s *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Print.

Pound's translation of "The Beautiful Toilet" is very different than other scholarly translations of the same poem. Not only is the poem in two stanzas, as opposed to one, the rhyming scheme and form of the poem differs. Yao writes that the scholarly poem stuck to the tradition of Chinese poetry while "Pound entirely dispenses with rhyme and fixed stress counts...the techniques and paradoxical discipline of modernist free verse provide the formal structuring logic for this poem, as well as, indeed, for all poems throughout the collection"(Yao 149-50). The fact that Pound took the traditional form of Chinese poetry and changed it to suit his and modernist needs is particularly alarming. The rhyme and fixed stress counts were in the poem because symbols have different meanings and affixations that need to be taken into account. However, Pound disregarded this form in order to put the poem into modernist free verse. As a result of the Chinese form not being a modern form, Pound changed it. This is important to recognize and understand, not only because *Cathay* changed the way Asian American writers negotiated the cultural terrain but because it shows how poetic forms could even be an excuse to dominate a culture (Yao 137).

Before I go any further, I want to bring in Pratt's argument of modernity in order to further my exploration and demonstration of how cultural ideas of the unmarked shape the marked. Pratt writes:

Again, note the centralizing, monopolistic use of these categories: given the interpretive power, the interpreter can read anything that fails to correspond to preconception as an instance of either outsidersness or behindness, rather, say, than as an instance of alternative, emergent, diasporic, or counter-forms of modernity. Nor can the schema

recognize phenomena that participate simultaneously in modernity and some other historical trajectory, as with postconquest indigenous social formations in the Americas, for example. This is a conceptual limit of vast consequence. (Pratt 29)

Quite literally, Pound is interpreting a culture for his terms, under his terms. In doing so, he is placing Chinese poetry and culture in the periphery, outside of modernity. Pratt writes that the interpreter, whether literal like Pound or figurative like Cather and her characters, failing to see anything that does not fit in with their terms, as having consequences. Unfortunately, the consequences fall upon the marked cultures that are misinterpreted, as previously mentioned in regard to Cather.

The consequences for Asian American identity can be seen in Kang's *East Goes West*, which will be discussed later, and the cultural repercussions of Pound's shaping of Chinese poetic space. Yao's essay shows how Chinese identity in the Western world was formed as a result of *Cathay*:

Cathay remains so important because of the role it played in shaping, or perhaps more accurately *reconfiguring*, the very *conception* of Chinese culture and identity in the United States and Europe, from the early twentieth century onward, by virtually inaugurating the category of Chinese poetry as a discursive field within the English-speaking world and even throughout "the West" more generally... Thus, by successfully advancing a notion of individual Chinese subjectivity, *Cathay* helped to lay the conceptual, cultural, and discursive foundations for the subsequent emergence of the very ideas of Asian American identity in general and Chinese American ethnic identity in particular. (Yao 133-34)

Yao emphasizes the fact that Pound's translations *reconfigured* how Westerners viewed Chinese identity and culture. This creates concern, for *Cathay* is portrayed as a powerful tool for viewing Chinese and Asian identity. It is here where the concern of cultural diffusion becomes pertinent. It is one thing to have a culture's identity spread throughout other cultures by the hand of someone or a group of people who are a part of said culture. It is another thing for a culture's identity to be spread and framed by someone who is outside of the culture. The fact that Pound had so much power in shaping Chinese and Asian American identity and discourse through his translations of Chinese poetry is the cause for concern, for instead of a culture being in charge of its own diffusion, a person outside of that culture is in charge of framing how that culture is seen and how the culture acts- almost the very definition of colonialism. Chinese identity was not advanced in the Western world because of something they did; it was advanced at the hand of a Westerner.

To further problematize the way Chinese and Asian American identity was formed as a result of *Cathay*, Yao writes how Pound's translations dictated the discourse of Chinese culture in the Western world: "*Cathay* sets forth terms-tonal, rhetorical, thematic, and formal-for articulating the categories of Chinese culture and identity in English" (141). Not only was the culture and identity dictated by *Cathay*, but the literary framework was formed by *Cathay* as well. The fact that literary categories such as tone, rhetoric, theme and form had to be negotiated by Chinese writers because of Pound's *Cathay* speaks to the power of Pound as a writer and cultural dictator.

One of the ways the reader can see the unmarked cultural dictations playing out for the marked culture is in Kang's *East Goes West*. Once again, there is a problem between white

cultural ideas and the actual body of the 'other.' Before examining the text, however, it will be helpful to bring in Pratt's ideas about modernity and identity. Pratt writes:

modernity as an *identity discourse*, as Europe's (or the white world's) identity discourse as it assumed global dominance. The need for narratives of origins, distinctive features, and reified Others, and the policing of boundaries combined with the slippery capacity to create and erase otherness as needed are the signposts of identity discourses. Hence, the centrism of modernity is in part ethnocentrism, though it does not readily identify itself in this manner. (Pratt 27-28)

Modernity, like any other terms, automatically creates a marked and an unmarked. Modernity, as framed by the dominant, needs to be framed through identity. As a result, people are marked as modern or not according to what culture that person belongs to, if it is outside the terms of modernity or not.

Kang's protagonist, Chungpa, is an example of how the narrative of the 'other' is changed depending upon what narrative the unmarked culture wants to project in order to fit into the white terms of modernity. The problem/tension Chungpa faces is the exoticism and commodification of Asian bodies and Asian products that results from the white culture's framing. The identity of Chungpa is reduced to a marketable good; his worth and success depending on what that whims of the white market wants and needs. This is evidenced in a conversation between Chungpa and Kim:

"There is a great future for Oriental scholarship in the West. Have you ever thought of that? Nowadays in the West we see a definite trend. People begin to be interested in the Orient scientifically and esthetically. Before they thought in terms of Christianity and

Western institutions. They are going deeper now, and this interest will increase year by year. I have come at a very unfortunate time. There has been little room for an Oriental intellectual in the West.” (Kang 256)

This scene of commodification of oneself because the white and dominant culture is dictating the marketability of “oriental” is important in understanding Chungpa’s struggles. The way the “other” culture is translated into white terms is through goods marked as oriental and, therefore, exotic. As a result, there is a tension between the marketable good and the person. Cultural diffusion has caused the Asian culture to become a commodity. Chungpa, instead of operating within the terms of either his culture, or the terms of the dominant culture, is resigned to operate in a space that is at the mercy of modernity.

As we have learned, there is a type of modernity—a correct type of modernity, if you will—that is formed by the unmarked culture. This framing of modernity, although not one-size-fits-all in the sense that not all cultures find it appropriate or attainable to fit into these terms of modernity, sets up the marked culture for failure. If they do not fit into the terms of modernity, they are framed as primitive. If the terms of modernity want to shape the culture to fit the unmarked needs, the marked culture suffers. Instead of allowing for alternative modernities, as Gaonkar argues, literary modernism only allowed for one type of modernity—the type deemed correct by the unmarked, white culture, and left various marked cultures, such as Native and Asian Americans, out of the terms and marked as primitive or not correct. While this does get confusing, especially in the context of romanticizing the ‘other’, the primitive, it is important to realize that regardless of how the unmarked culture frames the marked culture, it is an act of colonialism. Tom romanticizing about the Native American tribe that used to occupy the space his is now occupying is a form of colonialism. Pound taking Chinese poetry and changing it to

fit his idea of modernity is an act of colonialism. While the reader sees the colonizers and their actions in both works, the reader is also able to understand the repercussions of these colonial acts upon those who are colonized. Archilde and his family cannot translate their culture's tradition into the terms of modernity as framed by the white culture. As a result, tragedy ensues. Chungpa is at the mercy of the "modern culture's" fascination with all things Asian, and is not sure if there is a market for himself. Overall, the characters of the marked culture show the repercussions of framing the culture of the other by the unmarked culture. Terms used by the dominant culture that were placed upon the marked cultures caused confusion and commodification. If the terms were different, or if there was room for different forms of modernity, the culture of the 'other' may have a chance in succeeding where the unmarked culture dominates. However, as seen through the four works, until that changes, the marked cultures will grapple with the terms placed upon them by the dominant culture.

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