

Deconstructions, Reductions, Speculations: Toward a Re-reading and Re-writing of Cultural Studies in a Time of Empiricism

Ricky Varghese
B.A. (Queen's), B.S.W. (York), M.S.W. (Toronto),
M.A. (Toronto), PhD. Candidate (Toronto)
rvarghese@oise.utoronto.ca

Negotiating a History of the Loss of the Lyrical in Pedagogy

There is a tendency in contemporary university pedagogy against the notion of lyricism. The lyrical text is banished, put aside, and the quantitative aesthetic is becoming almost fanatically privileged. This is rapidly beginning to become the tenor by which disciplinarity and disciplinary boundaries become bounded, begin to negotiate their own tenuous boundaries, and mark their territorially-defined and concretized tendencies toward specialization, specification, and the giving-to-birth of a canon – a strange what-to-read, what-not-to-read, how-to-read, how-not-to-read, how-to-write, how not-to-write list of things-to-do in order to consume what is considered a marketable education. While my desire is not to belittle the necessity, the urgency, and importance of the need to understand how labor, production, and value are accounted for in the context of contemporary university pedagogy (my inner Marxist is well aware of the circuits of power, privilege, and production that are in play in who and how one gets what degrees), I am more interested in how the question of choice, the question of labor, and the question of marketability are devised to re-think the notion of an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach that moves beyond rhetorical quantification.

A pertinent example of this quantification of the “Humanities” or the study of what makes contemporary culture is now taking a firm and almost tragic foothold within the space of philosophical studies in much of the Anglo-world of the West, where Philosophy departments are increasingly and rather rapidly eradicating entire areas of study that pertain to ethical, existential, or continental tendencies toward European and non-European thought, analysis, and philosophical inquiry. For instance, one can see the sad state of this eradication if one were to go on to the websites of any of the major universities in North

America. At the University of Toronto, for instance, the Department of Philosophy has become heavily centered on the notion of a primacy given to the philosophies of the sciences, mathematics, logic, and the analytic tradition. The lyrical side of philosophy, with all its leaning toward the sublimely obscure, the beauty of its own self-annihilating ambiguity, and the existential has been offered the backseat in the ride toward the future. The lyrical is slowly and surely being put to death in an attempt to make the world – an already nonsensical world – a sensible place. It is this putting-to-death of the lyrical that I want to hone in on when I think carefully about the poetics of a new way of understanding the traditions of Philosophy, of Cultural Studies, and of the broad space of the Humanities. The loss seems imminent and the murmuring death-beat of the heart of lyricism in pedagogy can be heard from afar, as we are locked away, lock ourselves away in the heady spaces of theoretically quantified knowledge.

But, what is this lyricism I allude to? And, how is it related to the loose terms of engagement by which we read and write in the field of Cultural Studies? Why do I allude to, melancholically, perhaps even mournfully, to the death of a lyrical way of living, learning to live, and existing within the pedagogical space of the university, specifically in the humanistic fields of Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Comparative Literature, and many others being led to the operating room to be cut, grafted, and reformulated as something other than “what” they are or might endeavor “be”? How do we begin to negotiate what is clearly becoming a historical moment, perhaps has always been a historical moment in the making, in the formation (a birth) of the ‘death of a discipline’ (Spivak 2003)? Here, I am moved to think as Gayatri Spivak did in her poignantly touching work on the state of Comparative Literature, under the rubric that a discipline was in the process of gasping its final breaths. In doing so, I wonder at what our responsibilities are, as pedagogues, toward this death? Toward a memory of lyricism in how we learned to write, to read, and to live in the era of a Cultural Studies that truly allowed for that which one might consider “interdisciplinary” work? What are our responsibilities toward what happens (a forgetting) after this death? What are our responsibilities toward the students we hope to encounter and train? What is

our responsibility toward knowledge? Toward ourselves? In the moment when the lyrical is taken out of the realm of pedagogy, and when we have to begin to account for what has been lost in the age of quantified, segregated, segmented, and metastasized knowledge? In the age of empiricism, not just politically speaking – in the sense of an Empire that is grounded, to an extent, on empirical knowledge when seeking to understand subjectivity and subject formation – but academically, as well?

Notes on Ambiguity in Reading and Writing Cultural Studies, or How “I” came to Cultural Studies by Forcing the Personal onto to the Political, or Learning to Live Finally (Responsibly): Reading Derrida and the Loss Incurred by Cultural Studies in a Time of Empiricism

A few days ago, I was in Paris attending and presenting some work in relation to my dissertation on shame and subjectivity at the 5th International Conference on the New Directions in the Humanities, which was being hosted by and held at the American University of Paris. The general impulse for the conference, which in spite of this implicit tendency was brilliantly organized, was to make the “Humanities” into some “thing” or make it to do some “thing” – to create a socio-political end to it that could be marketable. There seemed to have been, prevalent at the conference, a desire to name what the “Humanities” was, is, or will be. The creation of a discipline unto itself was the order of the proceedings, it seemed. While again, my desire is not to entirely critique this approach, but to think about what happens when lyricism – the earlier allusion to a freedom for and toward knowledge, perhaps – is lost, when a meandering of thought and knowledge (as ambiguous as that meandering might have been) is no longer. Can we possibly ever come to an agreement, a rational space of conversation to agree upon that which we call the “Humanities” or “Cultural Studies”? When interdisciplinary programs, such as the broad space of the “Humanities” and the “Cultural Studies” begin to sacrifice the lyric fluidity of being able to move with the ebb and flow of the opening up and closing off of fissures, ruptures, rhizomes, and abysses of knowledge, for a more canonized way of

thinking, understanding, and being in the world, are we truly left with something that is interdisciplinary in the classical or traditional sense? Classical and traditional, here, referring to the liberality of a bygone era when students and teachers alike were encouraged and felt encouraged to explore the openings and closings across the broad space of such an object as Cultural Studies. In fact, I will refer to, henceforth here, to Cultural Studies in the lower case, to make of it less an object of inquiry per se and more of a possibility toward, tending always and already toward the open end, again an inspired attempt to bring to life Spivak's considerations of the "open end", as explored by Sara Harasym in an interview of the former (1987).

In fact, the lyrical is about that "ebb and flow" that I just alluded to – a movement toward movement itself, a movement up against movement and with movement, a movement toward the open end of a myriad possibilities of understanding the subject/object split, of understanding how the subject comes to "be", of understanding how the "I" might be understood. Cultural studies, in the era of specialization, disciplinary boundedness, and canonization has left the subject or the "human" out, to some extent, or rather has left the question of movement out, a movement toward understanding the subject or the "human" of the "I", the "I" that exists in the confines of an always and already unstable body – blood, flesh, consciousness, and all. Lyricism in the form of a movement toward the open end of knowledge and its myriad possible permutations and hybrid states of being was supposed to take into account the unstable subject of the "I". Lyricism and the movement it inspired in knowing the subject – blood, flesh, consciousness and all – was to be a moment in which we could live and learn in the space of an ethical responsibility toward the other of the subject "I".

In the spirit of political work, I want to take a brief moment to reflect on how it is that I came to cultural studies and discovered a disappointment, a melancholia. In my academic career as a student, engaging in Psychology, English and Comparative Literature, Philosophy, History, Sociology, Jewish Studies, South Asian Studies, Anti-racist Studies, Women Studies, and Disability Studies, to name but a few, I discovered a certain fragmenting of the being, the

subject of the “I”, occurring – perhaps, a necessary fragmenting that allows for a sort of consciousness-raising moment to arrive, at first, but a fragmenting that, if allowed to continue, becomes remorselessly dangerous to the subject of the “I” or any student that we come across and hope to train. A few examples from my own personal experiences seem warranted here of how empiricism in the academic setting negotiates and affects how subjectivity is understood: Psychology wanted to symptomize me due to the pigment I carry with and on me; English and Comparative Literature wanted to turn me to the direction of Postcolonial and South Asian Literature because of some fantasy it had rooted in an invested identification it made in relation to that very same pigment, when it was clear that my interests lay in the realm of Marxist and Eastern European Literature; Philosophy, History, and Sociology rarely seemed to be able to risk imagination beyond white masculine hetero-normativity, in general, to theory and, in particular, to classroom configurations; Jewish Studies did not recognize the brown *on* me; South Asian Studies did not recognize the Jew *in* me; Anti-racist Studies seemed too narrow to take up the nuances of this thematic construct we call “race” – it could not imagine a “brown Jew” or a “queer Jew” or a “queer brown Jew”, let alone even carry out productive conversations about white others such as the Russians or the Polish; Women Studies spoke of patriarchy but did not seem able to imagine how a queer man could take account of his masculinity or address the violence of patriarchy; Disability Studies spoke far too often of “transgression of the body through being disabled”, but never accounted for the exhaustion this injunction to “transgress though the body” might cause – I could never hear myself say there, or anywhere else, ‘I am tired of being a transgressive body (not that there is anything wrong with that), I just want *to be* my “I” and take account of my “I”, thus allowing me the possibility, the tenuous possibility of ‘learning to live finally’, as Derrida (2007) would hope for us.

Fundamentally, my experiences in the above instances were marked by an impossibility, perhaps an aporetic impossibility to move/be moved toward imagination, toward imagining the subject, the being of the “I” differently, from a pedagogical standpoint. While I can appreciate Indian writer Arundhati Roy’s

invective that it might not be the case that ‘we all live together inside a John Lennon song’ (2002), my push, here (if it is a “push”, at all) is for an opportunity to begin imagination when either, none existed to begin with, or when imagination is becoming more and more manufactured, regulated, and manipulated in the creative moment that could be pedagogical as well. This is the problematic I am confronted with in the space of what is becoming more and more a highly specialized space of knowledge. The open end is closing in on the subject of the “I” and the subject of the “other” far too quickly, it would seem. The natural run-on sentence that is “being” and “subjectivity” is being forced to end with a period, a period that is mired by a desire and an anxiety for ends. Why does the politics of subjectivity require such an end in the pedagogical space of a cultural studies that is becoming more and more canonized? Is the subject that easy to come to terms with or even comprehend? What is lost of the subject when a period is found at the end of a sentence that utters her/him into being? How will we mourn this loss, this interminable period that ends what is supposed to be an interminable sentence?

It was with these struggles in mind – struggles about becoming aware of and thus mourning the loss of the lyrical possibility to imagine my self and an other beyond just “self” and “other, or as one “self” and one “other” – that I turned my attention toward cultural studies, because in my fantasies – as Freud or Klein or Lacan or Žižek might have me believe – cultural studies represented to me the open end, the open end that urged imagination, that allowed for a lyrical understanding of a “being in movement”, like a moving Bach fugue. Cultural studies represented to me, in my fantasies, the “home” away from the construction of a “home” that deemed the self or the other as stable entities and objects of empirical analysis, but rather thought of them as subjects in the process of being made, always and already in the process of being made. In my fantasies, I felt I could experience cultural studies as an amalgamating universe of discourses ranging from Postcolonial Theory to Feminist Studies, from Critical Race Studies to Philosophy, from History to many other destinations thus allowing for an exploration that affirmed being, as opposed to either regulating or

negating it. If fundamentally, education is about some sort of life-affirming politic of/for the other, then the desire was that cultural studies would allow for that to happen, because here was the realm of the possible, the realm of the open end, the realm of the broken aporia, the breaking of the impassable boundedness of disciplinary existence.

What I found instead was anxiety – an anxiety toward the breaking, toward the movement, toward the lyrical. Cultural studies, in an age of empiricism and of the empirical university space, is becoming regulated, a place of specialized knowledge, a space where what and how you read and write allows you to enter the auspicious space of a set brand of knowledge that is already pre-determined by a nascent set of terms by which the study of subjectivity might be engaged with. Students and teachers are becoming resistant in reading across their own projects, dissertations, and self-assigned disciplinary and research boundaries. I suppose, bodies need homes and the warmth and closure that they receive from them. While I can appreciate this impetus, I am bequeathed to understand why we do not allow knowledge to annihilate us in our processes of inquiry? Is not knowledge meant to annihilate the subject, de-center being, re-think the relationship between selves and others? Cultural studies, in the university space, was supposed to allow for this annihilation of the self, I would imagine – not as an end to the self, or a putting to death of the self or the other, but to allow for an open end to be made possible, so that the understanding of the self and the other could find new ground. Increasingly, what I find are students who want to be grounded, left alone in their world of stationary knowledge, who find it impossible to do interdisciplinary work because of how it is becoming seriously undermined and left out of the possible realm of thought. Why would we, for instance, not read queer theory and critical race theory, side by side – beyond the easy conversations of intersectionality, and into the realm of a bleeding of thought that acknowledges how one set of knowledges may be translated (being aware of the losses that are incurred in the translatory moment) into another space? The question of the lyrical approach to the broad space of cultural studies that is becoming narrowed in the age of empiricism becomes a question of

translation, of annihilation, and of movement – how much are we able to move from the center of our being, our subjectivity, such that a necessary translation of ourselves is made possible and even favored, such that we can annihilate ourselves, Phoenix-like, to be reborn anew every time, every moment, we come to face ourselves in light of new knowledge, new ways of seeing ourselves and the world we live in and encounter?

It is with this mournful, but what I feel is an important question, that I turn to conclude by reading Derrida. On my way to Paris, I was reading his final interview, *Learning to Live Finally*. I knew as soon as I completed reading it, I would be immured by a melancholy – because something – a trace of the possible open end? A responsibility to an other and myself? – ended there, as the last, his last, sentence (in a public place) closed with an interminable period. Before, I tend toward contemplating the melancholy located in the focal point of a mere period (Is it that “mere”?), I want to quote him, to think back to a dying cultural studies, and how it may learn to live finally:

Apprendre a vivre means to mature, but also to educate: to teach someone else and especially oneself. When you address someone and say “je vais t’apprendre a vivre,” it sometimes has a threatening tone, meaning not only “I am going to teach you how to live” but “I’m going to teach you a lesson,” “I’m going to get you to shape up or whip you into shape.” From there – and the ambiguity of this play is even more important to me – this leads to a more difficult question: is learning to live something that can be learned? Or taught? Can one learn, through discipline or apprenticeship through experience or experimentation, to accept or, better, to affirm life?...when will [one] become responsible? How will [one] answer or finally take responsibility for [one’s] life and for [one’s] name?...Each [book] is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader...At the moment I leave “my” [book], I become appearing-disappearing, like that uneducable specter who will never have learned to live. The trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come, or already come upon on me, and the hope that this trace survives me....I live my death in writing. It’s the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs? (Derrida 2007)

Who will be the heirs of yesterday’s cultural studies? How will they be formed? What are their responsibilities? What are ours, in their formation? If a pedagogy of the open end is to be possible, then, perhaps, the “subject” needs to be re-thought yet again (and always over and over again) as to how s/he is being constituted under the sign of a change, a transformation (an exhaustive transgression?) marked by movement? While, there is a tendency toward the interminable period that is forced upon the sentence of “being”, in assuming that

we have exhausted avenues of thought regarding being, in assuming that thought regarding the being of the self or the other can even be assumed to reach a point of exhaustion, one has to reconfigure how “living finally”, in light of a trace and in light of what might be inherited, might occur in the space of an imminent death that the “discipline” (in its re-imagined unbounded form) might be afflicted by. If cultural studies is to survive and preserve its broad space of interdisciplinarity, we must, at once, deconstruct what it is that such a vital area of inquiry of the subject might attempt to do in the public sphere, acknowledge the theoretical ambiguities that it is susceptible to offer, and speculate on the essential and invaluable merit of these important ambiguities as only offering productive and generative avenues of thought in the contemporary conjecture. It is important to acknowledge the melancholia that is incurred by loss – for as Žižek (2001a) would have it one has to ‘enjoy [one’s] symptoms’ and one has to realize ‘melancholy is the beginning of philosophy [or anything other object of pedagogy]’ (2001b) – and never stop wondering at why sentences are annihilated by periods, that in turn serve to annihilate the being of the self and the “discipline of the being of the self”.

Bibliography

AK Press., 2003. *Come September*. [CD]. Oakland: AK Press. (Narrated by A. Roy).

Derrida, J., 2007. *Aporias*. (T. Dutoit, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Harasym, S., 1987. Practical politics of the open end. In S. Harasym, ed. *The Post-colonial critic: Interview, strategies, dialogues*. New York: Routledge. Ch. 8.

Spivak, G., 2003. *Death of a discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Žižek, S., 2001a. *Enjoy your symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*. New York, Routledge.

Žižek, S., 2001b. *Did someone say totalitarianism? Five interventions in the (mis)use of a notion*. London, Verso.

Biography

Ricky Varghese is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto, working in the areas of Sociology, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, and Comparative Literature. He is currently completing a multidisciplinary dissertation at the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies there, entitled *A Critique of Phallic Reason: On Shame, Exile, Ethics, and Erotic Subjectivity in Uncanny Textual Encounters with the Abject Feminine*. This dissertation endeavors to incorporate his various areas of interest and training.