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María José Chivite de León

Echoes of History, Shadowed Identities

Rewriting Alterity in
J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and
Marina Warner's *Indigo*

Spanish Perspectives on English and American Literature,
Communication and Culture

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Introduction

The first intertextual manifestations of alterity come along with the earliest endeavours to map out the nature of the intertextual phenomena, which Julia Kristeva first brought to public attention in 1966.¹ Firmly based on the irreducible yet interactive intersection of semiotic others, her theoretical insights were at that time refuting what current theories of literary influence (and their acolyte literary historiographies) would proclaim until the mid-twentieth century, the hermeneutic self-sufficiency of the word and the text, and, consequently, of the formal and semantic procedures in use that attempted to discriminate the original and genuine from literary imitations to the second degree. The word starts broadening its textual boundaries, and acknowledging its dialogical potentials, which readerly activity cross-fertilises by multiplying – by amplifying, disputing, problematising, enriching or illuminating – its discursive overdetermination in new contextual apprehensions of the text (no longer a packaged textual whole) and textual criticism (now conceived of in a wider, less “parochial” sense).

Similarly, the coming of intertextuality into the 1960s critical scene leaves aside those issues concerning originality, the influencing canon or innate geniuses which lay at the core of *author-centrism* and its postulates of authorial agency. The focus of attention moves, instead, toward the earliest concerns of post-structuralist theories at that time, namely the analysis of the principles of composition and interpretation of texts and/in discourses, now disclosing less compact, more dynamic and instable relationships. Textual negotiations work like intertextual polyphonies, and meaning production cannot but refer to its own inter-discursive nature, and to a new approach to referentiality whereby the word and its meaning prove necessarily mediated by *other* voices, many of them anonymous, or by textual traces resisting any quantifying or qualifying in the intersemiotic space they operate. Modern semiotics must come to terms with alterity, which inheres in any representational

1 Julia Kristeva was the first to coin the term *intertextualité* in “Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” which would be compiled three years afterwards in *Sémiotiké : recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969).

gesture and category – whether *author*, *reader*, *fiction*, *past*, *text*, *tradition*, *history*, *subject*, or *Other* – we live and write by. And, thus, Kristeva opts for replacing logocentric binarism with an “other logic” (Kristeva 1989b: 89), that Roland Barthes endorses and identifies as “cryptographic” or “volumenic” (Barthes 1982: 37): in all senses, a logic of otherness which can, nonetheless, safeguard its own alterity principles by trailing the unchaining of textual contingencies, contradictions and interrelatedness without either reifying nor subsuming the intrinsic otherness of its meaning potentials.

The analysis of these questions, which chapters one and two cover in more detail, does not only lead to the reformulation of Western representation politics and the textual categories whereby phenomenal reality is translated into language. It especially involves perceiving the exercise of representation and rewriting in a new light: as more polymorphic, complex and paradoxical exercises which, ultimately, interrogate the structures of binary exclusion at the heart of our identity politics to render them less excluding, and more reciprocal one another. Accordingly, any view of it, or any mimetic gesture, turns out to be an act of discursive alienation releasing or empowering what social-symbolic representation used to assimilate to reductionist and homogeneous identity. In conformity with this, the theoretical reflections in chapter two present new ways to approach the othered historical memory, while reconsidering at the same time new identity models and new forms of subjectivity that are ready to lodge many of the diverse manifestations of identitarian alterity – the monstrous and the abject, the silenced, the lost feminine story. In addition, especial attention will be paid to *how* and *what* in the process of representing, namely to the “subject” category (and its fictional counterparts, author, reader and character) and to “history,” so far the custodian of authorised truths, which so much determines the spectrum of either legitimate or debased realities and their discursive appropriations. Subject and history are therefore refashioned as rewritable sites and products of textual-historical overdetermination, since *other* discursive elements – gender, class or ethnical variants, or empowered citational circuits, for instance – act on them during the process of meaning production. Thus situated as performative entities in discourse, subject and history witness the unceasing remaking of their customary boundaries and scopes, and the tense negotiation with otherness simultaneously escaping and constituting their forms and meanings. Hence the theoretical approaches selected,

which deal with alterity from intertextuality in the attempt to inscribe it socially and historically in legitimate representation: othered subjectivities and histories are therefore rendered visible and viable in the system of social-cultural verities. In this sense, the echoes of Kristeva's social subject (whose textual permutations will only occur within specific social frameworks), or Foucault's analysis of empowering and disempowering strategies, and Bakhtin's dialogism, can still be heard today in contemporary reflections that delve into Western identity and languages from the margin, and eventually reach its most alienated substrata, the sounds of silenced voices, of shadowed stories.

The porous transversality characterising intertextual codes and participants in the act of representing any reality, whether natural or artistic, testifies to the importance of alterity. This assumption is significantly evident in the case of literary texts or spaces that are self-avowedly palimpsestic, and deliberately built on the rewriting of history and canon; thus, the system of consecrated authors and works where these literary negotiations are situated now reveals the liminality of both system and literary texts, and their being impregnated with preceding or virtual others, with fragments, peripheries, *sottovoci*, and historicised particularities which keep on expanding and recasting the signifying processes therein inscribed. After all, literary works become so when establishing their connectedness with *other* texts, that is, with a sanctioned body of authorial (and readerly) models, in turn informed by a given identity politics which regulates the legitimacy of artistic representations. Literature is always literature to the second degree.

Delimiting the space and definition of alterity in speculative terms proves much more difficult and riskier – chapter one will provide some tentative perspectives on it. Given its very irreducible and foreign nature, alterity resists any definite or solid definition; it rather presents a very heterogeneous and fractured reality (whether human or social-cultural), always in conflict with itself. The space of alterity is essentially a space of contact and interaction where to dramatise the semiotic transit – which always occurs in two directions – from one discourse or discursive position to others; whether these latter are central or ex-centric does not make much difference, since all of them constitute us and our spectrum of truths in terms of simultaneous contingency and reciprocity.

Alterity lies at the basis of Western identity politics, which erected itself into being at the cost of either silencing or stigmatising the Other, or anything that might surpass or menace the illusory unity

and coherence of our legitimate forms of language, self and truth. The novels that are to be subject to literary analysis in chapters three and four – J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and Marina Warner's *Indigo*, respectively – work on the basis of this assumption, and their formal strategies and structures are geared to expose those detrimental processes whereby the depreciating of otherness and differentiability actually uncovers the inner contradictions of a system like ours, which needs to erase what it cannot altogether assimilate to its “naturalised,” allegedly fissureless verities. Above all else, these novels rehearse new fictional forms which attempt to restore agential visibility – and legitimate figuration in representation – to alterity, whose elicited presence would anyway pervade any textual embodiment of truth or being. These novels are, moreover, especially concerned with dynamising the phobic valences implicit in the undesirable forms of alterity, which definitely arrested its interdiscursive potentials. By means of diverse formal manoeuvres, these narratives ultimately manage to dynamise the passive and silent role the Other was historically attributed. Instead, otherness mutates its fabricated marginality: the foreigner changes into familiar (or familiarly strange, “unheimlich”), monstrosity into desirable beauty. The margin is thus enabled to speak from a central, though narrative and provisional, position, yet marginality is not feigned, just empowered to figure among the spectrum of represented realities we live by.

Having then widely situated alterity in the intertextual phenomenon, the analysis of it now requires reviewing those conceptual frameworks built upon the theoretical acknowledgement of alterity in social-symbolic practices. The formulae that, especially, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin or Roland Barthes have put forward – and, to a lesser extent, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan – or the insights produced from postcolonial studies and feminist and gender theory in conjunction with post-structuralist postulates directly debate the question of alterity from a number of perspectives so far overlooked in logocentrism's representational strategies. And these novels traverse across all of them, while at the same time preserving a sort of formal-semantic autonomy which prevents their narratives from fully sharing or complying with any of their institutionalised discursive policies, which are thus simultaneously installed and questioned. However, the most valuable contribution of these critical perceptions highlights the ethical valences of acknowledging the discourse of the Other, of otherness: alterity is

no longer considered to be defective, or inexorably associated with marginality, silence and dispossession; instead, it becomes a valuable reality in representation, socioculturally visible and susceptible of having textual form and discursive agency.

Exposing the fabrication of alterity in the mimetic act does not suffice any more, for alterity demands being reassessed in semantic, discursive, functional and ethical terms. It ultimately requires the renewal of the languages of/for identity and alterity; in the long run, it is being required is that the literary and critical texts acknowledge political/discursive differentiability, and variegated heterogeneities in dialectical opposition and contiguity, for they all prove to be involved in meaning production. This is what has determined my choice of literary corpus, transversality and dense (inter)textual overdetermination picturing up new faces, and new forms of otherness, while probing into the symbiotic relationship among alterity, power discourses and official identity. Thus, both *Foe* and *Indigo* rewrite the authorised chronicle of the past yet, simultaneously, they empower marginal perspectives and historically de-authorised tellers to carry the rewriting out. Far from speaking in favour of margins and to the detriment of centres, these novels are deeply aporetic, so each position in discourse (or in the narrated account) betrays its counterpoint reality, its constitutive opposite, which had been historically ignored, elided or assimilated to dominant structures. For all of this, the novels do not only glimpse the dead angles of power games and empowered truths, and the darkest faces of man and history; they rather delve into the close interdependence between Subject and Other, and into the inexorable mutualism between history, intrahistory and silence. Intertextuality works in the interstices among contraries, in the silent gaps of political and discursive correctness; then, intertextual dynamics is necessarily dual, bifocal, and paradoxical, and it reunites while at the same time divorcing hypertexts from hypotexts, and traces from origins. Literature to the second degree does not only turn out repetitive or parodic, since it reproduces in the subsidiary other the matrix it seeks to supplement or subvert. In many senses, literary rewritings constitute transferential or, else, othering gestures which launch mirror images of our narrow-mindedness, and of the stifling blindness to difference that Western identity – and alterity – politics championed. A constant in both Coetzee and Warner, the rewriting of/from alterity is now invested with ethical values (above all, the value of denunciation) and therapeutic capacity, which are actualised whenever we take full responsibility for

the representations of otherness and marginality we make, whenever we perceive the stranger, the unknown or the different as unknown, stranger yet *inherent* to ourselves.

By means of their fictional embodiments of alterity, both *Foe* and *Indigo* respond to the questions and debates their authors raise elsewhere in criticism: the articulation of new paths towards authorised figurations of otherness. In this respect, chapter three sets out to show how Coetzee undertakes a revisionist rewriting of the literary canon (and its most ingrained ideological rooting) by having recourse to the explicit evocation of Defoe's narratives and their gaps and historical-discursive absences. The poetics of the *middle voice* assists Coetzee to fictionalise a representational space half-way between narrative self-reflexivity and historical engagement, between textual indeterminacy and ethical responsibility, between language and silence, or presence and absence. It is likewise a space of dialogical encounter for contrary and irreducible positions that simultaneously deny and presuppose one another in binary complicity. This is therefore an ironic space which instantiates in social discourses and via metaphoric figuration the submerged other; a middle-voice forum representing figuratively how intertextual transactions in meaning production play the game of mirroring themselves and their intrinsic others in the text, in history. Yet middle-voice representation also materialises in its textual forms the consciousness of being just a performative position in the text, and the awareness of being just inscribing signifiers and unfathomable signifieds which can never be altogether appropriated, nor made any transcendent beyond the limits of their semiotic materiality. It is exactly at this point that Coetzee situates the paradoxical dimension of the middle voice: it announces itself in history (it is rendered visible and effective in history and social discourses, to the point of compelling readers to take a stand or to reconsider, transgress or supplement them) while simultaneously cancelling the transcendence of these critical rewritings as it makes them aware of their insurmountable rhetoric nature and intertextual density.

On the other hand, chapter four calls attention to what Marina Warner addresses as historian, cultural critic and story-teller, that the Western imaginary and identitarian consciousness is nowadays in need of further and fresher perceptions or, else, in need of being supplemented after the positions and standards which Eurocentrism confined into marginal alterity – namely, the lost female voice, the bodily abject and monstrosity, the discourses of fantasy and myth, or the fluid language

of poetry, undecipherable sounds and chromatic diversity. Warner rehearses the fictionalising of new chronicles of the past, and new histories and subject models which she renders *subject* to language games and to the logics of alterity; yet she also advocates a renewed understanding of alterity in terms of inclusiveness and reciprocal integration of margin into centre, and centre into margin too. This is what Warner calls “elective affinity” (Warner 2004b: 265), whose structuring of reality and truth hinges on a type of sympathetic combination/relatedness among others which is not “naturally” nor socially given but, rather, a conscious and ethical choice one opts for when representing art and life. Warner aspires, therefore, to recover the erased other without forfeiting its marginal differentiability – without assimilating it to central standards and power discourses; her aspiration aims at the transformation of reality by transforming the languages of reality, which are now pictured more fluid and deliberately imaginative, poetic and dynamic, and more open to life’s metamorphic discontinuity.

Definitely, what Coetzee and Warner share is a common aim: the narrative instantiation of a type of language and representation which maps out while integrating dialogically the mutual yet ambivalent relationship between same and other. However, their fictional proposals differ substantially on formal strategies. *Foe* provides a story of textualised silences, dispossession and paradoxical though inherent alterities by means of narrative incarnations of absented characters, missing authors and slighted accounts of history: shipwrecked women writers, estranged 18th-century realist masters, tongueless black slaves or windy, floating islands, all of them hostile to Eurocentrism’s foundational gaze. Whereas *Indigo* extends that line of thought by reinventing in fiction what logocentric models of personal or collective/historical identity othered and displaced from public spheres. Yet it carries it out by means of self-avowed fictional strategies, which were historically disqualified for factual representation: mythical narratives and fairy tales, that now interact, and eventually compete, with the authorised patrimony of forms and transmitted legacies in the West. This dialogic exchange (re)composes a variegated tableaux – most transversal and rewritable, unmistakably intertextual and imbued with constitutive alterities – of what we think (and thought) of ourselves, of what we used to rate as alien and now we embrace within. For all of this, the specular logic Coetzee adheres to as he interrogates Western symbolic practices proves more intransitive – perhaps more theory-oriented and, certainly, more

attuned to deconstructivist stances – than the cartographic proposals *Indigo* puts forward. These latter testify to Warner's fictional wagers, which bid for reinventing the literary cartographies of our identity and our past without appropriating bastardised otherness and absence. Alterity is instead perceived sensitively, confidently, and meanings are made anew and generate *other* stories in the order of social-symbolic representation. *Foe* then incorporates into its narrative course discursive gaps and historical silences in the attempt to highlight their most internal, unspoken paradoxes; whereas *Indigo* confides in “mapping the waters” – so the novel's subtitles reads – that is, in making those contradictions and intractable otherness speak (themselves) through/in fiction, since it is only from literature and imagination that they can be articulated, and made visible in reality. For both novelists, and in both novels, art works as a most powerful therapeutic promoter of reconciliation and coexistence of rivals and conflicting sides: as it probes into the intertextual memory of Europe and the Caribbean, of the past and the subject, of language, art not only modifies and revitalises our reminiscent echoes or shadowed identities, but, most important, our politics of memory.

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1. Intertextuality and Alterity

The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*) [...]. To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another [...]. I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance). (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 287)

So did Mikhail Bakhtin establish the indissoluble, complicitous link which semiotic phenomena lay between subjectivity and otherness. In the process of subject-formation – and by and large in any process of meaning-making – the Other reflects and simultaneously incarnates the constitutive alterity of the human psyche, which can only be realised as the transversal, irreducible, paradoxical and yet intrinsic reciprocity among individuals in their social-semiotic exchanges, contrasts and contacts. Alterity mediates in such representational processes and their discursive practices, therefore deciding the word for both the identities of Self and (its diametrically opposite) Other. By virtue of such paradoxical reciprocity, the Other's language is therefore openly or covertly incorporated into the Self's language, which is in that way constantly informed and semantically fertilised, “evoking a responsive word from the other, whose utterance in turn necessarily bears the same potential for initiating further discourse” (Danow 1991: 64).

Bakhtinian philosophy of language and art thus reveals its profoundly ethical, spiritual roots: no individual can reach by and for himself the depths of subjectivity or the plenitude of the spiritual self without the awareness of the Other (Bakhtin 1984a: 177). Such mutual cross-impregnation and acceptance dynamise the otherwise binary frontiers of Western logocentrism, which have worked by dissolving and relocating the hierarchical structure of traditional semiotic models (*speaker-listener-meaning*) (Danow 1991: 62–63), identity models (*Subject-Other*) and, at large, the mutually excluding boundaries between margin and centre. Significantly, the echoes of Bakhtin's thought become now invested with revolutionary social-political and

aesthetic potentials; and contemporary debates on identity politics no longer ignore the presence of the stranger, the outlandish immigrant, the subaltern, or the active role of other terminological manifestations of alterity, whose detrimental erasure or marginal confinement served historically to empower (and to essentialise) logocentric subjectivity – and, by extension, the Absolute Subject's Word and historical record. Today's tentative reassessment of otherness runs parallel to other efforts at ridding some postmodernist trends of their cultural and moral relativity; instead, critical analysis sets out to highlight the ethical significance of – and responsibility for – any representational gesture whereby Self and Other become reciprocal constituents of the same dialogical act which rearticulates and transforms the two of them.

Present-day critical enunciations of alterity are manifold and diverse, as well as the variety of their scopes and theoretical elaborations. Quite interestingly, postcolonial feminism's analysis of the marginal status of the "woman" and "female" categories in the otherwise universal, transcendental and essentialist strategies of Europhallogocentric representation – particularly, Laura Donaldson's, Gayatri Spivak's, Trinh T. Minh-ha's or Sara Suleri's comments – brings to light the female native Other's double displacement from legitimised discourses, thus betraying critical blindness to race- and gender-marked strategies of alienation. In the wake of postcolonial considerations on alterity – Homi Bhabha's, Edward Said's or José Fernández-Retamar's, among others – Western representation has, likewise, rescued from oblivion the working of otherness in our representational categories and historiographic truths. As he critically disputed Octave Mannoni's "Prospero's complex" (*Prospero et Caliban. Psychologie de la colonisation*, 1950), Franz Fanon started an unprecedented cultural debate which for the first time situated in language and in representation the irreducible identities of both the coloniser and the colonised. Fanon borrows from Lacanian theory the "discourse of the Other;" the phrase does not only describe how discursive (white) masks work in terms of subjective and representational interdependence, or the ways through which Western colonial logos substantiated the Other's differential status in the symbolic order at the cost of sublimating the Self's repressed anxieties in the imaginary order. Above all else, the discourse of the Other throws light upon the darkest folds in the figures of both Prospero and Caliban, and operates bidirectionally by alienating both the identities of the colonised subject (whose vicarious identity is logos-made and appropriated

Eurocentrically) and the coloniser (who grows into subjectivity as he/she excludes from social spheres the figure of a fabricated passive, Calibanic Other). Embracing all kinds of cultural fields and expressions, the discourse of the Other thus screens the insurmountable impossibility of a reciprocated dialogue between Prospero and Caliban, for they both share a same colonial experience which precludes any collective social practice whatsoever or a way out of the colonial universe, language and chronicled truths that constitute the two of them. The discourse of the Other not only aims at a language which “could neither be Prospero’s master discourse of colonialism nor Caliban’s native speech, but a conversation arising out of their jointly recognizing the limitations of both of those language systems” (Pease 1991: 113); it rather presents realities and identity politics which, falling short of compact essentialism, are now figured (out) deeply ambivalent, transversal, intertextual, and othered one another.

Contemporary philosophy parallels the renewed interest in approaching alterity and the representation of the Other from perspectives endowed with epistemological and representational authority. The cognitive model Derrida and Foucault reformulate, which is redefined as a de-naturalised discursive function, is situated among power discourses, their “regimes of truth” and alterity politics. Barging into the contemporary theoretical scene, otherness and the Other break with Western illusory claims to unity and coherence, to absolute truth and totalising representation, which are now relativised, destabilised – as well as epistemologically emancipated and representationally enriched. In this light, Michel de Certeau’s inquiries into the *heterologic tradition* of knowledge (*Heterologies. Discourse on the Other*, 1986) focuses on the mutual relationship between knowledge and representation, whose most unarticulated, irreducible aspects (its own signifying alterity, “the discourse’s mode of relation to its own historicity in the moment of its utterance”) are in constant interaction with the privileged sites of monological, transcendental truths (Godzich 2000: xx). And Emmanuel Levinas, his influencing voice a cornerstone of postmodernist postulates, finds in the Other the pivotal axis of the cognitive subject of knowledge, whom he dynamises socially and ethically since the publication of *Totalité et infinité* (1961). Levinas’s return to ethics veers off any of postmodernism’s presumed inclination to textual nihilism and moral ennui, and instead puts forward an ethics of compassion toward the Other, which makes kindness and moral responsibility for alterity the basics of

philosophical reflection. The knowledge of the nature of reality can only come from moral awareness of the dispossessed, wretched, silenced Other, whose differential ontology has been rationally appropriated and subordinated to the same, the uniform, and the unitary. Ethics precedes ontology (Levinas 1969: 42), and Levinas only confides in the human Other to resist the tyrannies, epistemic violence and reductionist injustice of ontological thinking. Face to face with his/her exceptional asymmetry, the Other is *being another way of being*, thus figuring a way of absolute foreignness which, far from sheer comradeship between subject and alterity, can only derive in an ethical relationship. The encounter with the Other makes oneself infinitely responsible for one's neighbour, for the stranger and the other(ed) man, and constantly aware of one's close attachment to indiscernible alterity: "The ego is the very crisis of the being of a being in the human domain. [...] I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" (Levinas 2006: 85). The being self cannot be previous to, but conformed by the Other, who in turn demands infinite responsibility from the self. And this propitiates a new, non-totalising insight into the strange Other which, far from stigmatising, rather accounts respectfully for his strangeness. The discourse of the Other makes room for the logic of exception, the discourse of (a) being infinitely responsible for alterity. However, the Other's logic of exception and asymmetry, which so much sidesteps reductionist assimilation to the Same, does not by any means reward him with any identitarian sovereignty or privilege with respect to *another* Other, for whom he is likewise infinitely responsible. The responsibility for the Other does not deny knowledge its capacity to understand – neither rationally nor ontologically, but via ethical empathy – the Other's "semantic secret" (*ibid.*), whom I feel ethically close to me and whose indiscernible identity I make justice. In this way does Levinas challenge dictionary-made definitions of alterity, which hinge on the lack of identification with some othered aspects of the self or of the community of other selves the self – oneself – belongs to. Furthermore, this also accounts for the way Levinas oriented his postulates toward language, art and literature, "the locus of a face-to-face relation in which the Infinite reveals in its absolute difference" (Hand 2006: 6).

Alterity presents human, social and cultural realities which are deeply heterogeneous, fragmentary and self-conflicting, "unheimlich" realities, which in a Freudian sense are familiarly strange – uncanny.