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# From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism: The Challenges and Rewards of Teaching Foreign Literature

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## From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism: The Challenges and Rewards of Teaching Foreign Literature

Hello everyone. Thank you for coming! Before I start, let me say that this talk may be a little different from what you're used to. While in some ways it's a literary talk, it's also really a "shop talk" or a "teaching talk." Even for those of you who are not teachers, or don't plan to be future teachers, I hope you will find something useful in the question: are there right and wrong ways to study a foreign literature?

**TITLE SLIDES (3):** Let me begin by saying something about my title. My title is guilty of something I usually try to avoid: it's written from a distinctly western point of view in the voice of a scholar (that would be me!) who is working very hard to read "the East" without reinscribing the Us vs. Them (east versus west) binary logic of Orientalism.

### **Slide 4: COMPASS**

One of the chief sins of Orientalism as an ideology is that it treats the left to right quadrants of the compass as if they mapped a true opposition. My hope is that some of the ground rules I set for myself and my students for our reading practices will speak to you as you also work hard to read the West – the West made legible through British and American literature. During my talk, I'd like for you to think honestly about what draws you to read a foreign literature: is it the exotic nature of difference, or the reassuring recognition of similarity? Or, perhaps a bit of both?

Today's talk will have 3 parts. After introducing my thesis, I will define and analyze Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism, as two ideological lenses through which to read a foreign text: the first essentially pessimistic—focused on reading as an act of power, the second, markedly optimistic – focused on reading as act of connection, or what Kwame Appiah

provocatively calls: welcome “contamination.” Next, I’ll apply these theories to a test case: Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*....As a bit of a teaser (like a movie trailer), let me tell you something about why I chose this primary text.

**Nafisi SLIDE 5:**

Part of the lure of Nafisi’s text is that Nafisi is a teacher writing about teaching, specifically she is an Iranian Professor of English, formerly part of the faculty at the University of Tehran, writing about her experience teaching foreign texts, which were banned by the current regime. Subtitled “ a memoir in books,” this teaching memoir manages to capture the incredible power of giving the right student the right book at the right moment – an event all teachers relish! What the memoir chronicles is the reading experience of seven female Iranian students who meet once a week in Nafisi’s home in Tehran, for roughly two years, from 1995-1997, to read a series of *banned* western classics; they read *Lolita* in Tehran, but they also read *The Great Gatsby* in Tehran, *Madame Bovary* in Tehran, *Pride and Prejudice* in Tehran, and *Daisy Miller* in Tehran. On the face of it, Nafisi’s memoir simply allows us to eavesdrop on a group of readers interpreting foreign texts, with the added reminder that these women risked arrest in order to experience the kind of “border crossing” a foreign text, really ANY foreign text can sponsor. The book *itself* has crossed borders:

**Readers Unite! Slide 6:** As you can see here, the book spent over 117 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and has been translated, at last count, into 32 languages.

**Where Now? Slide 7:** Nafisi herself has crossed borders by emigrating to the United States, where she is now the executive director of the Dialogue Project at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and a professor of aesthetics, culture, and literature.

Before we bracket Nafisi's text for now, I want you to notice the verb tense in her title... *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

**Reading: Slide 8:** Reading - a Verb in the Progressive and Continuous Tense suggests a couple of things: For one, Reading is best understood, not as a gerund, or noun, but as a verb, as something we DO, and are always DOING.

We change the texts we read, by the *way* we read, and perhaps by *where* we read.

Indeed, reading also happens TO us –what we read changes us; we are co-authored in return – or at least that's how it *should* happen, which brings me to my problem...

Reading one another should change us, at least that is the premise behind every foreign literature course. To lend some context, in the U.S. most college and university English departments offer world literature courses, often times to help students meet a diversity requirement for graduation. Diversity requirements are understood as linked to the goal of giving every graduate a global outlook. On the face of it, this emphasis on diversity is an exciting development; personally, it has allowed me to read out beyond the American and British canons, to see a whole wide world of both Anglophone literature (literature written in English from former British colonies and current commonwealth nations) and literature in translation, including the chance to read Chinese literature in translation. But to be effective, diversity requirements require a *theory of diversity*. The central question in a world literature course is always methodological: "*how* should we read this particular sequence of foreign texts? If guided simply by a multicultural approach, namely a continent-hopping tour of different nations and their literatures, a world literature course can have the undesired effect of simply reinforcing an American student's worldview, according to the familiar stereotypes of the first world versus the third -- the normal versus the exotic, or at base: us versus them.

**SLIDE 9: COURSE NEEDS** As a result (and here comes my thesis!), I would argue that every foreign literature course **needs an articulated theory of difference**, because we have to know what to DO with differences when we spot them and name them. But that same foreign literature course also needs **a non-universalizing theory of similarities**, since it would be racist, xenophobic, not to mention counter-productive, not to have such a counter-theory in place.

**SLIDE 10:** This essay argues for the merits of a pedagogy that moves from the descriptive project of studying **the problem: specifically, past and present forms of Orientalism**, to the work of evaluating **possible solutions**, which, in our current academic climate, take the form of **competing versions of cosmopolitanism**. Put plainly, **students of foreign literatures need two things: 1) a theory about why misreading happens – namely one that foregrounds the historical and political forces that sponsor common misreadings, and 2) a radicalized theory of reading**, one that explores what, if any, causal link might exist between *identification* -- what readers DO -- and *identity* -- who readers are in the process of becoming. [ad lib – I love that in English these two words share a root...]

But why am I talking to YOU about the problem of Orientalism, which is a Western construction, and as such, presumably a western problem? Well, I have two reasons: 1) While Said's critique of Orientalism focuses mostly on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century western representations, not of the far east, not of China, but rather of the Near East, or Middle East, the problem is not gone and it extends to our contemporary effort to "read China." Orientalism may have played a key role in justifying the imperialist project, but it continues to play a role in neo-colonialist discourses, ones that include, for example, **SLIDE 11: FuManchu**

American representations of what Chinese-American author, Frank Chin, would call a “cartoonish” version of Chinese culture,/ **SLIDE 12: MULAN...** one that reveals American anxieties about our Cold War rivalry and more recently, our economic rivalry. So, I am here today, partly tell on my culture, and to report that my well-meaning students sometimes reveal orientalist assumptions in class that need to be tested and complicated, which is the real business of education.

My second reason is this: **SLIDE 13:** because Orientalism has historically been linked to **Islamophobia**, or promoting a fear of Islamic cultures, I suspect that while you are mostly an “oriental” audience, you too may harbor some orientalist assumptions about the middle east. Learning to read Nabokov’s *Lolita*, is one kind of interpretive challenge, learning to read the people of Tehran, and beyond, well, that may be a related challenge.

Okay, so let’s review our theories, by meeting our theorists:

**SLIDE 14: Said**

Born in Jerusalem, prior to the partitioning of Palestine and the formation of the state of Israel, Edward Said moved with his family at age 12 to Cairo, Egypt, where his father hoped they would avoid the tensions of 1947. Later he attended boarding school in Massachusetts, then earned degrees first at Princeton and then Harvard University. A resident of three nations, his life story exhibits the “hybrid conditions” of postcolonial identity that helped make Said such a schooled critic of colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

**SLIDE 15: Cover of Orientalism** (Jean-Leon Gerome, 19<sup>th</sup> century French painter)

To clarify, Said’s focus in the text is on British and French constructions of the Near-East – the Middle East, or the so called Arab World, alongside the Indian Subcontinent, while excluding China and the Far East. So, while the evidence of orientalism – defined as the

distorted knowledge of the east, invented by the west – excludes, for the most part, American or Chinese examples, I would submit that we can still apply Said’s theory to ANY encounter between a western SELF and Eastern OTHER, or as I’ve hinted, a Far eastern SELF and a middle-eastern OTHER.

**SLIDE 16: Definition of Orientalism, in Said’s words – AD lib**

**SLIDE 17: Guilty Binaries** – if time allows return and look at the cover art (slide 3)

To be certain this worldview is problematic, and it continues to circulate. Most westerners are guilty of continuing to hold some orientalist misconceptions about the exotic East. And, if I can talk to you directly, perhaps in our current global climate of increased contact, there might be stereotypes about the WEST, a kind of emerging Occidentalism, that Chinese individuals trade in that might be worth contesting or complicating. Having established the possibility that right now we are busy MIS-READING each other, let’s also ask: Is this the only way we know how to read each other? Theorist Kwame Appiah, says “No,” and so do historians, Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak. Let’s hear from the historians first.

In “Students, Teachers, and Edward Said: Taking Stock of Orientalism,” Joshua Teitelbaum and Meir Litvak argue that by functioning, for almost three decades now, as the hegemonic discourse in Middle Eastern Studies, Said’s critique has produced a self-censoring atmosphere in the academe concerning encounters with difference, and, perhaps worse, a “crippling timidity” in Non-Arab and Non-Muslim students interested in studying Islam, or Middle Eastern history and literature. As part of “taking stock” of Orientalism’s critical legacy, Teitelbaum and Litvak resist the way in which Said’s theory seems to imply the existence of cultural differences so illegible, and so intractable, that despite all academic engagement, people can ultimately only hope to “study themselves” (Litvak and Teitelbaum 16, 9). What interests

me, here, is Teitelbaum and Litvak's concern with how contemporary students and teachers have translated Said's theory into practice -- be it in their Middle-Eastern Studies classrooms, or in my own World Literature classroom in America, or a Comparative Literature classroom here, at CCNU.

To be certain, in terms of day in/day out pedagogy, I am deeply indebted to the way Said's theory of Orientalism urges students to distrust their own self-serving ideas of the foreign Other [To offer an example, **A classic assumption goes like this: I'm an individual, but people "over there" have to do what their culture tells them to do...**"]. Said's critique has also encouraged all of us who love literary studies to read texts by non-western authors that represent the voice of the Orientalized Other talking back. Perhaps, you've heard the popular tagline for postcolonial studies "The Empire Writes Back!" That said, I too have experienced, not a "crippling timidity," so much as a crippling fatigue with the rigidity of Said's geography, which seems to make a competitive Other or "alter ego" necessary to the construction of *any* cultural identity, no matter which direction the compass points (Litvak and Teitelbaum 2). Even if we accept psychoanalytic theories of subjectification, which posit the abject status of the "Other" as necessary to subject formation, [that every Self somehow requires an OTHER] the cultural means by which we compensate for this recognition of otherness, whether it's the mother as Other, or immigrant as Other, seems far more up for grabs than this ontology allows for.

#### **SLIDE 18: Said Quote from Culture and Imperialism**

Yet, in his 1993 volume, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said remains consistent with this ontological model, for, in his words, "no identity can ever exist by itself...without an array of opposites, negatives, and oppositions" (Culture 52).

However, is this dialectic way of reading the only way readers can find themselves identifying with a foreign Other? Again, Kwame Appiah says “No.” In his book, *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah resists Said’s epistemological claim that all identities – national, familial, religious – derive “their psychological energy from the fact that for every in-group there’s an out-group” (Ethics 98).

**SLIDE 19: Appiah/intro**

Appiah’s father is from Ghana, his mother from England. As a person with a bi-racial, hybrid national identity himself, Appiah has a stake in promoting his own particular version of cosmopolitanism.

**SLIDE 20: cover of *Cosmopolitanism***

It’s worth noting Appiah’s other works on RACE and CULTURE...Now let me offer you a working definition of this central concept: cosmopolitanism.

**SLIDE 21: 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Cynics**

As ancient a human response to cultural difference as the xenophobia that Orientalism would eventually codify, cosmopolitanism, Appiah reminds us, boasts its own deep history, worthy of study. In *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah traces cosmopolitanism back to the Greek Cynics of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., who coined the term “cosmopolitan,” to signify someone who identified himself as a “citizen of the cosmos,” or “citizen of the universe,” rather than of a particular polis, or city (Ethics xiv). Intended from the start as a political paradox, or oxymoron, wherein the notion of belonging to a universe – a cosmos – in effect, overpowers, or deconstructs, the sovereignty of “local” citizenship, “cosmopolitanism” has always represented “a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person [belongs] to a community among communities” (Ethics xiv).

More to the point, as an ancient corrective revisited, cosmopolitanism inverts some of Orientalism's core assumptions. **SLIDE 22: anticipating Similarities.** Rather than anticipating proof of the alien status of the "Other," cosmopolitanism predicts that in specific cross-cultural encounters, person to person, *similarities*, versus alien differences, are habitually, in play. Appiah insists that on an experiential level **"engagement with strangers is always...engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from shared identity will often be available"** (Ethics 98). Where genuine differences are experienced, here, too, the cosmopolitan differs from the orientalist in that, for the cosmopolitan, the purpose of cultural comparison, or exploring cultural contrasts, is to unseat the familiar with the foreign, rather than the reverse; in other words, the cosmopolitan thinker uses his or her knowledge of foreign alternatives to call into question the legitimacy of familiar local, or national, practices, rather than using "the inferior foreign" to prove the superiority of all things home grown, or "home schooled," so to speak. To sum up, a cosmopolitan might come along and bait you with the question: **SLIDE 23: Are you a local-yokel or a cosmopolitan? (read the slide)**

But before we all just become card-carrying cosmopolitans, it's worth reviewing some of the push-back Appiah's version of cosmopolitanism has received in the critical conversation. A key question: Does Appiah believe that globalization promotes cosmopolitanism, thus making globalization, by extension, always a good thing?

**SLIDE 24: BLOCK QUOTE.** One of the goals of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism* is to **"make it harder [for his readers] to think of the world as divided between the West and the Rest; between locals and moderns; between a bloodless ethic of profit and a bloody ethic of identity; between "us" and "them."**

With this list of suspect oppositions, Appiah takes aim at, among other things, the term “globalization” because it denotes an economic theory that often fails to describe economies of culture, which for their part do not always follow the trade routes of privilege and power. And even where they do, where “trade imbalances” exist and, for example, Hollywood blockbusters out race French state-subsidized films -- the result, Appiah asserts, is not, as one might imagine, homogenized consumers, acting as the blank slate “on which global capitalism’s moving finger writes its message,” but rather, individuated consumers can, and often do, resist what is broadly called “cultural imperialism” (Appiah 111).

**SLIDE 25:** In contrast to Appiah’s measured optimism that cosmopolitanism represents a viable and timely ethic for the way in which strangers will encounter strangers in the twenty-first century, in *Cosmopolitics, Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Pheng Cheah warns that **the existing economic conditions we term “globalization” “ought not to be mistaken for an existing mass-based feeling of belonging to a world community because the globality of the everyday does not necessarily engender an existing popular global political consciousness” (31).** In order to arrive at what it would look like to both “think” and “feel” “beyond the nation,” **we might be tempted to trade in the concept of “globalization” in favor of the more pedagogical vision of “multiculturalism.”** **SLIDE 26: Problem with Synonyms.**

So is cosmopolitanism just a synonym for multiculturalism? Let’s ask Appiah.

Appiah takes issue with “multiculturalism” as an approach to studying cultural difference, precisely because it seems to tokenize, or nativize the “locals” from the “moderns,” ghettoizing the former in both time and space. As a case in point, I have witnessed well-intentioned students approach the cultural Other in the pages of a book, much like an early twentieth century primitivist might. In the course of praising the integrity or “beauty” of a given people or cultural

practice (“They’re so natural!” “Their life is so simple (!), and so inter-generational!”), they construct a myth of cultural isolation, a space-time bubble, if you will, that helps explain the persistence of diverse cultural practices in the context of the totalizing logic of modernity. Why else, for example, would Muslim women continue to want to veil, if they were not isolated from other options? In one of many pedagogically useful reversals, Appiah counters my students’ working assumptions about the isolation of non-western cultures by arguing that historically speaking “thoroughgoing ignorance about the ways of others is largely a privilege of the powerful” (Appiah xviii). Besides complicating cosmopolitanism’s “snob appeal,” resting it away for a moment from the rich and returning it to those Silk Road merchants who first brought Chinese pottery as customary burial gifts for fifteenth century Swahili graves, or to those Roman infantry men who first brought that well known Egyptian instrument – that’s right, the bagpipe -- to Scotland (Appiah 112-113), cosmopolitanism offers a corrective to the “curator’s” impulse of multi-culturalism, because it insists that to theorize difference is also to theorize change, the kind of change that comes from contact, cross-**contamination**, and un-named, or under-read similarities between peoples, and individuals. **SLIDE 27: Chinese pottery x bagpipe.**

If cosmopolitanism can be understood as an aesthetic, one that values both similarity (those traits that in the end make us legible to one another) and variety (the value implicit in the particularity of person and place), then certainly it can also be defended as an ethic: a way of intending towards the world and its peoples, or in more specialized terms, an ethical way of intending towards the world and its literatures, in other words: a pedagogy.

**SLIDE 28: INNER TENSIONS.**

Appiah reminds his readers that inevitably there are times when the two main ideals associated with cosmopolitanism – “**universal concern and respect for legitimate difference – clash**”

(Appiah xv). Yet in literary texts these opposing ideals often produce a harmonious tension: **identification between reader and character presumes some universal grounds first for concern**, and then for sympathetic comparison, while the particularity of lives re-presented in fiction -- from proper names that are “legitimately” difficult to pronounce to the specificity lent by imagery, wherein all five senses are entrusted with the perception of Other bodies, and Other landscapes – represents, on the other hand, an implicit narrative commitment to the cosmopolitan’s pledge to **“take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives”** (Appiah 112).

One of the central sins of Orientalism is its consistent pessimism about the possibility of this kind of cosmopolitan reading for students, for teachers, for researchers – for cross-cultural readers of all stripes. In an earlier essay, titled “Cosmopolitan Reading,” Appiah argues that in contrast to other genres, the novel proves an ideal test case for “the possibilities of cosmopolitan reading” because it exposes “a distinction between cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on dialogue among differences, and a different more monological form of humanism” (Reading 207). “What we find in the novel,” he argues, “is always a message in a bottle from some other position, even if it were written and published last week in your hometown” (Appiah 223). So who besides Appiah, we might ask, qualifies as a cosmopolitan reader? One possible answer:

**Azar Nafisi.**

To review, what I have been recommending to all teachers of foreign literature is a good news/bad news pedagogical approach that invites both pessimists and optimists into the classroom. What I learned in the course of teaching Nafisi’s memoir is that it requires **both a Said-inspired skepticism about the prescribed liberatory powers of western literature (with all of its imperialist baggage), as well as an Appiah-inspired appreciation for**

**cosmopolitanism’s observation that culture is always, by definition, admirably porous, fluid, and portable – the way a foreign book is portable.**

As I stressed previously, in terms of day in/day out pedagogy, I am deeply indebted to the way Said’s theory of Orientalism urges my students to distrust their own self-serving ideas of the foreign Other. **SLIDE 29: Feminist Orientalism.** In my opinion, the most prevalent ideological obstacle students face in our current academic climate in America is feminist orientalism, or the urge to read sexist traditions as an inevitable part of the Other’s otherness, and liberated femininity as a cultural and political fait accompli in the West (CHECK, we’ve done that – or have we?). Alongside feminist orientalism, Islamophobia may be the second biggest ideological impediment for non-Muslim, western students hoping to achieve some kind of global literacy (and of course, they overlap). In practice, orientalist critique represents a corrective each generation has to perform for themselves, since orientalist discourses are forever morphing and changing targets.

At least on the face of it, Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, inverts the power relations of Orientalist discourse by chronicling the responses of eastern readers reading western canonical texts, rather than the reverse. Nafisi’s “memoir in books” offers a useful case study for asking whether a cosmopolitan pedagogy can work to undermine a climate of exaggerated cultural differences between Iran and the U.S. Indeed, when it comes to U.S./Iranian relations, we’ve experienced thirty plus years of “us versus them,” with both governments guilty of “Othering” the Other.

On the occasions I’ve had to teach Nafisi’s memoir, each time, the **first day** was spent trying to complicate my students’ urge to orientalize Nafisi as an author from “over there,” whose geography was rigidly fixed for them. What they consistently denied her was the

possibility of motion, or migration. Even though they had read a brief biographical sketch of her life, the facts concerning her education in England, then in Switzerland, and finally the U.S., where she earned a PhD. in English from the University of Oklahoma, were essentially eclipsed in their memories by her choice to return to Iran in 1979, and their own orientalist geography, which found it just easier to root her there. Consistently, it proved to be the case that it was my female students who were the most eager to earn their own status as liberated western women by voicing feminist concerns for the well-being of their middle-eastern sisters, who had been victimized by forms of sexism which, in their initial reading, had no analogues in the West. This is, of course, a self-serving and naïve reading, since if anything is reproduced with an eerie similarity across the global, it is sexism. For their part, my students expressed this dialectical east/west, passive/active, me/not me-world view in sentences that routinely began: “Since women over there can’t...” -- fill in the blank. These Orientalist habits initially impeded their efforts at interpretation in several ways; perhaps most poignantly, they failed to lend Nafisi’s students the kind of individual agency or thought, so prized by the typical American college student, and by the would-be cosmopolitan. To be fair, ...real impediments...yet students couldn’t read because of...To be clear...my students are not alone in their desire to use the text to support a residual orientalism..

With over a hundred weeks and counting on *The New York Times* best seller list for paperback nonfiction,<sup>4</sup> the popularity of Nafisi’s memoir merits a moment’s pause for analysis. A predominance of American readers may have purchased the text, as critic Rokhsana Bahramitash claims in “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism,” in order to find additional justification for their “Islamophobia,” coupled with a more specific, “Iranophobia” 5. In keeping with Bahramitash’s portrait of the memoir’s reception, the

respective titles of reviews by Nan Levinson, Julian Pilon, and Fergus Bordewich – “Literature as Survival,” “Survival Literature” and “Veiled Threat”<sup>6</sup> -- do reveal the ways in which the memoir was received: 1) as a feminist call to action (one clearly rooted in first wave liberal feminism, focused on saving one woman, or in this case, one woman reader at a time), and 2), as “a stirring testament to the power of western literature to cultivate democratic change”<sup>7</sup>.

This notion of “western literature to the rescue!” is, of course, quite problematic within the context of postcolonial studies, which acknowledges the western canon’s complicity in writing, or inscribing, the cultural logic of empire. However, I would second Christopher Byrd’s observation that “[what] could have devolved into a misty-eyed hymn to literature is saved by its singular locale,” or put differently, what animates both the memoir and the subsequent study of the memoir is its context, and by that I mean not just Tehran proper, but the social “space” a given reader occupies. What were these readers DOING with the foreign literature they were reading, and in turn, what did my western students DO with their stories?

The good news is that, by day two, the cosmopolitanism implicit in Nafisi’s project, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (reading *Gatsby* in Tehran and so on), ultimately seemed to defeat my students’ Orientalist assumptions about the isolation, passivity, and uniformity of their contemporaries in Tehran, because each of Nafisi’s seven students exhibit different strategies of interpretation and identification. In a word, they became INDIVIDUALS to my students, and with that other stereotypes began to loosen their hold. **SLIDE 30: This is where my students STARTED (literally with the front cover)...but that’s not where they landed!**

What Appiah’s version of cosmopolitanism insists is that while most values are not universally held, what ought to be universal is **our ability to experience the appeal of a given value to an individual**, such that American college students reading about Nafisi’s own student days during

the revolution can come to appreciate the dream of an Iran, free of a decadent Shah, built on what Chinua Achebe desired for his native Nigeria: its own “usable past” (Achebe qtd. in Ethics 205). So, while in hindsight, my students don’t need to agree with the goals of the Iranian Revolution, but they can come to see why Nafisi’s generation desired it and supported it.

**SLIDE 31: Gatsby** Fast forward nearly twenty years and Nafisi’s students were able to look past Gatsby’s materialism, which they *did* feel duly obligated to judge, long enough to ultimately identify with the idealism in Gatsby’s dream, the same idealism, Nafisi argues, held by “hundreds and thousands of immigrants” and expatriates everywhere (Nafisi 142).

To insist that the appeal of the Other’s values is, indeed, something readers can experience requires a model of identification which, for its part, does not insist on a 1:1 substitution (“She’s just like me!”), but rather allows for the recognition of available structures of identity, those economies of desire and reward that come with belonging to a culture, or sub-culture, a nation or a gender, **that need not be identical to be *identifiable***, or to use a term I use above: legible. To be clear, the identification I am seeking to foster is not about empathy, or sympathy (with all of the sentimental risks that presupposes); instead, the aim is to reveal shared epistemological states – categories of belonging, knowing and being known.

What makes cosmopolitanism attractive as a pedagogy is the skepticism it brings to bear against “feeling at home” in our own local variety of “reality,” custom and “common sense.” Echoing a similar argument made by Adorno, Nafisi warns her students that **SLIDE 32: “most great works of the imagination were meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home” (94)**. Thus, if Orientalism predicts that a reader from the Occident will read the East in such a way that inevitably reinforces the perceived superiority of the West, or “home sweet home,” cosmopolitanism urges the reader, from Boston or Tehran or Wuhan, to use

representations from Other places to unseat their relationship to home, thus making the Other a partner in critique. In other words, **the foreign Other becomes a necessary partner in helping us re-read our own traditions, or the local status quo.**

Debates about the viability of cosmopolitanism -- as an ideology, as an ethic, as a pedagogy -- are related to a timely reappraisal of the notion of the post-modern “human,” necessary, for example, to human rights discourse, but suspect to camps worried about the essentializing revival of universalism -- of humanism re-warmed. Cosmopolitanism also forces us to revisit the postmodern critique of “the individual,” the Enlightenment’s golden child and postmodernism’s whipping boy, because (and stop me if I’m wrong) it seems that in contrast to the continent-straddling Occident writing the continent-straddling Orient, **cosmopolitanism urges us to look at the influence of encounters with difference on a much more individuated scale, thus revitalizing our sense of agency as individual students, teachers, readers of culture. – one reader at a time?** Let’s think about the significance of this shift in scale.

### **SLIDE 33: collective and individuated reading**

Before my students could make cosmopolitanism’s second discursive turn, and pit their skepticism against their own local customs and literary canon, they had to learn to lend the same agency to Nafisi’s students, their Iranian peers, who prove to be good role models, in this regard. Besides arriving at interesting moments of consensus, Nafisi and her students *do* also individuate themselves as readers, each capable of eschewing the clarity, or comfort, of consensus in favor of pursuing interpretations that seem to isolate them, as every cosmopolitan risks, even from each other. Put simply, they disagree with each other! For instance, when Azin, nicknamed “the wild one,” asserts, in the middle of a discussion of *Madame Bovary* “that an adulterous woman is much better than a hypocritical one,” we see a fault line open up in the class between “the wild

one,” and her critics, the most severe of whom remain silent. One reading of *Madame Bovary*, I’ve entertained over the years, is that Emma Bovary is simply a *bad* reader – that’s Flaubert’s point. Put differently, she is an impressionable girl, granted one with some imagination, who nonetheless becomes a martyr to mediocrity due to the inadequate bourgeois fantasies served up by the local literature of the day, not to mention the limiting life choices of rural France, suggested by the false “either/or binary”: of adultery or hypocrisy. What’s of interest here is that Nafisi’s student, Nassrin, deconstructs this same binary when she confesses to both Mashid, nick-named, “my lady” and Azin, “the wild one”: **SLIDE 34: “ I know what it means to be caught between tradition and change” (53)**. What’s moving here is that Nafisi’s students are actively using the text to read and re-read their own lives – and they are crossing borders of time and space to do so!

It seems to me that since the average western reader has no problem imagining a room full of veiled Iranian women, expressionless, without a smile in sight, that to err on the side of being curious about the individuality of each of Nafisi’s students, remembering the lingering grins of Yassi, or Nassrin, or Manna and her husband Nima, is to correct one of the chief sins of Orientalism, namely, the problem of reading the Muslim world as a monolithic entity. Besides indirectly confronting the argument that individualism is the West’s most guilty export, Nafisi’s memoir goes as far as to assert that the imagination is a political space, where, by encountering our own subjectivity, we become morally obligated to imagine the equally “spacious” and individuated subjectivity of others. Indeed, Nafisi’s memoir *has* a politics, and it takes the form of the following imperative. “To steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of *Lolita*,” writes Nafisi: “I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won’t really exist if you don’t.

Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes don't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments." 32

Consistent throughout her memoir is the utopian claim that by reading fiction each of her female students will begin to experience her own unique, "inimitable self" as a site of resistance against the homogenizing forces of the current regime. As a measure of the individuality they wish to trade in, Nafisi and her students christen one another with defining monikers: Mashid becomes "my lady," Nassrin "the Cheshire Cat" – suggesting that each student's way of reading be interpreted as a constitutive process of self-authorship, or what Manna, nick-named, "the poet," calls "another I," discovered "naked on the pages of a book" 2.

**Now let me offer some closing remarks:**

The pedagogical outcome I desire most for my students is that they adopt their own self-conscious approach to the on-going puzzle of how selfhood and global citizenship fit together. And as it turns out, by the conclusion of *Cultural Imperialism*, Said wishes the same intellectual work upon *his* readers. In other words, Said himself became more optimistic!

In his final chapter on the possibility of "Freedom from Domination in the Future," Said cites Hugo of St. Victor, the 12<sup>th</sup> century monk from Saxony as the anti-thesis of an orientalist reader, a paragon of cosmopolitan thinking. "I find myself returning again and again," Said confesses, "to a hauntingly beautiful passage by Hugo of St. Victor," which reads **SLIDE 35:** "the person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign place" (Culture 335). What interests me about Hugo's three persons, or three readers, if you will, is that each one seems to embody a stage my students went through (maybe not to the person, but considered holistically as a group), when moving away from orientalist assumptions towards a

more cosmopolitan approach to reading foreign texts. These also appear to be the stages Nafisi's students went through, in the course of imagining themselves on various other soils. Reading with this lens, the "tender" beginner, dedicated, as a nationalist would be, to the sweetness of his, or her, home soil, represents the predisposition of the orientalist reader, for whom tenderness for the motherland translates into the "us versus them," "here versus there" logic of Orientalism's East/West compass. In contrast, "he to whom every soil is as his native one" suggests a reader, who, in contrast to the "tender beginner," draws strength from his, or her, ability to identify with the elements that make home "home" for citizens of foreign nations and transnational spaces. Finally, if Said and St. Hugo's third person "to whom the entire world is a foreign place" is to be deemed "perfect," it is not because he has accomplished some idealized form of homelessness (which may just be a pet abstraction of cosmopolitanism), but rather, because he has become a cosmopolitan reader for whom the entire world is a foreign text, worth the effort to read.

Indeed, Nafisi's epilogue ends with the individuated, cosmopolitan voice of her student, Manna, nick-named "the poet," who writes: **SLIDES (36-38)**

**Five years have passed since the time when the story began in a cloud-lit room where we read *Madame Bovary* and had chocolate from a wine-red dish on Thursday mornings. Hardly anything has changed in the nonstop sameness of our everyday life. But somewhere else I have changed. Each morning with the rising of the routine sun as I wake up and put on my veil before the mirror to go out and become a part of what is called reality, I also know of another "I" that has become naked on the pages of a book: in a fictional world, I have become fixed like a Rodin statue. And so I will remain as long as you keep me in your eyes, dear readers (343).**

By insisting on the value of “somewhere else,” even if that somewhere else is supplied between the covers of a book, Manna defends a naked “I,” which seems to resist being delimited by the costume of a specific culture, or perhaps more to the point, a “self” that resists the interpretative gaze of a repressive regime, asking instead to be read, on occasion, by strangers.

YOU and ME, we’re those strangers! As I stop here to open the floor for questions, I want to end by asking you two questions and by paying you a compliment...

Occidentalism? SLIDE: Ugly American?

Are you cosmopolitans in training?

I see you studying x in a way you can use to see Chinese identity through a cosmopolitan lens (vs. a racially fixed position)

**BIO:**

Dr. Lisa Eck is an Associate Professor of Contemporary World Literature at Framingham State University in Framingham, Massachusetts, just west of Boston. Based on the work of authors from nations as diverse as Zimbabwe and Denmark, Iran and England, India and Canada, Dr. Eck's scholarship represents a unified body of work on cross-cultural literacy. Representative titles include "Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally: the Nervous Conditions of Cross-Cultural Literacy," published in *College English* and archived at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, South Africa, "The Individual as Cheshire Cat in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*," published in the collected volume *Individualism: The Cultural Logic of Modernity*, and "Reading Culture, Writing Rights," forthcoming in *Teaching Literature and Human Rights*, as part of the MLA series, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*.

Dr. Eck's love story with CCNU began on a rainy November day in 1986, as a student on a study abroad tour. She promised herself on that day, that she would try to come back and teach in Teaching Building #3, which she managed to do in 1988, again in 2011, and now in 2013, on a grant from the Fulbright Specialists Program. She is so happy to be back!