“Decolonizing” Spenser and Milton through Diasporic Interpreters

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[SLIDE: The Baldwin Hall Controversy]

My paper considers the very live issue of what many have called “decolonizing” our curricula and our readings for our diversifying student audiences. Students increasingly want to hear from under-represented voices in literature and to have a sense of Europe as a much smaller part of the early modern world than how we’ve traditionally presented it. Given the historical turf wars among English, Modern Language, and the Comparative Literature departments at my home institution, and my own reluctance to cite or teach literature in languages I don’t myself understand, I have chosen a trans-temporal or transhistorical approach to put Spenser and Milton in context for my students. Please be patient for the “Ireland” part – I get to it towards the end.

The overall format of my approaches to both authors is similar and will be very familiar to you all: students read a traditional account of the poets’ lives (usually from the Poetry Foundation website and from the headnotes in their reader), read and write journal entries on books of *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* and, with me, work line by line through short sections of the verse in detail before writing their own formal poetic responses to each poet. Where my modules are less traditional, however, are the ways I’ve framed and scaffolded these assignments.

I started with Milton, as after several years of denial I realized my department was not going to hire a Miltonist to replace the several who have retired or passed away, and that if anyone were going to teach Milton, it would have to be me. But the trouble was – and true confessions time (sorry, Milton Society): Stanley Fish murdered *Paradise Lost* for me back in
college when I first read *Surprised by Sin*. I was always a Blakean adherent of the “Devil’s Party,” but Fish told me that my sympathies were postlapsarian and all part of the great trick, and even Christopher Hill argued in *Milton and the English Revolution* that the devil had all the best arguments because Milton was so deeply disillusioned by the rank failure of the Parliamentary experiment. A late colleague of mine had a “formula” for refreshing old knowledge prior to teaching in a field you haven’t followed since graduate school or before: “You read three recent books and ten articles!” she said, confidently. Luckily for me, one of my “three books” was Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (I realize that’s cheating) and another was Reginald Wilburn’s *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt*, both demonic takes on *Paradise Lost* that let me enjoy Satan once more.

This audience will recall that Wilburn uncovers in his book a tradition among enslaved and free early African American writers of appropriating aspects of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and of Satan – in particular, the Latinate, polysyllabic vocabulary; the use of epic catalog and epic simile; the imagery of rising and falling, freedom and captivity – in order to argue implicitly against pro-slavery advocates who used their version of “Christianity” to justify enslaving other human beings.

I had been collaborating with colleagues in the History Department at the University of Georgia to publicize the university’s shameful history of using forced labor, desecrating the remains of enslaved people, demolishing middle-class Black neighborhoods to build dormitories, and many other racial inequities since 1785. Our historians have been working with their classes to name and memorialize the people forced to labor on campus or enslaved by faculty members. [SLIDE]
One such person was the Reverend Lucius Henry Holsey, who taught himself to read from a copy of *Paradise Lost* and who, post-emancipation, became a bishop in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church and a founder of Paine College in Augusta. The *New Georgia Encyclopedia* claims that he could already read by the time he came to Athens as a boy, but Holsey himself wrote:

> As soon as I arrived in Athens, I felt an insatiable craving for some knowledge of books….What must I do? I was a slave and could not attend school, and it was considered unwise, if not dangerous for slaves to read and write. But my owners, although strict, were very kind, especially my master. So I determined to learn to read at all hazards, and take whatever risks there might be connected with it.

> There was a junk house in the city where rags were sold. I gathered and saved all the rags that I could, and sold them that I might get some money with which to buy books…. With this money I bought books. I purchased at one time, two “Webster blue back spellers,” a common school dictionary, Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” and a Bible. These then constituted my full stock of literary possessions, a library more precious than gold to me. There were several colored people in town that could “spell to baker,” in the old speller, while others could go to “the a, b, ab’s” or to “the b, a, ba’s.” The white children and an old colored man taught me the alphabet, after which I fought my way unaided through the depths of my ponderous library.

I decided to arrange my sophomore literature class around issues of captivity, freedom, and diaspora, beginning with discussions of unfree labor during the medieval period in Northern Europe and with the complex history of migration to and around the North Atlantic archipelago and including, for the first time, poems in translation from the *Broadview* in languages other than English from the isles of Britain – Gaelic, Scots, Middle French, Anglo-Saxon, even German – and encouraging students to write their own poetry in response that did either of both of these things:

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1. Go to OED and investigate the roots of words and write your poem as much as possible using only words derived from one of these languages (this is an emulation of what Thomas Hardy did with Anglo-Saxon in the late 19thc.)

2. Using English, imitate the verse form – rhythm, metre, scansion, rhyme, repetition, assonance – whatever is characteristic of the traditional form in the language you’ve chosen.

Students did a lot of independent research on this – which I wasn’t expecting, since it was a low-stakes weekly assignment – but they loved it.

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Discussions of unfree labor included this work in progress monster of a chart – I spent more time than usual watching webinars by medievalists, and it felt good to learn – showing them visually the complex history of unfree labor and the huge range of natural rights -- beyond the right to be
paid for one’s labor, of which they were all aware -- that chattel slavery, and certain forms of serfdom, abrogated.

They were also amazed and interested to learn about the history of whiteness and unfree labor within the Northern Atlantic archipelago, and intuitively put it together with our discussions of diaspora and migration. One young man has written almost every week in his journal how much it shook his world (that’s his phrase) to learn that one of the words for Welshman, wealth, was an Anglo-Saxon word for slave.

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So by the time we got to Holsey, they were ready both to contextualize his literacy and to seek out and identify the effect of liberation and captivity figures in snippets of Paradise Lost and then to look for Miltonic elements in Holsey’s own writing and in any other epic adaptations they could find from their own experience (students wrote about Malcolm X, Game of Thrones, His Dark Materials, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and many other texts). I didn’t survey them, but I think it’s a testament to the course’s effectiveness that selections from the course’s final essays were published on the English Department’s website and are forthcoming in the Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen 2020 in a special issue on pandemic pedagogies.

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I teach Milton in a sophomore class, but I teach Spenser in a luxurious 16-week upper-division Elizabethan Poetry course (it’s really a 1590s course). We typically read across as many ranges, forms, and genres of poetry as possible and do lots of really old-fashioned stuff like prosody; imitating Mary Sidney’s hexameters and idiosyncratic, imaginative metrical psalmody, Marlowe’s wry or Marston’s cynical epyllia; all manner of sonnets, including a group-authored “Exquisite Corpse”; making “how-to” videos in emulation of Elizabethan georgics; documenting places we love in topographical or country-house poems, and – we set off each semester with the goal of reading all 6 books of *The Faerie Queene* (we’ve managed it only once in the twenty years I’ve been teaching this course; they get to vote on which book they kick off the island, although it’s always Book 6).
We did less Spenser than usual this Fall (we skipped books 4 and 6 altogether, although I gave them summaries and snippets of Book 4) in part because I added modules on the Global Renaissance and, for reasons of equity and inclusion, created self-directed independent learning modules on Bible stories and stories from classical mythology, to accommodate the growing number of my students who have not been introduced to these foundational stories of Western Europe and world folklore.

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I had long included with our discussion about Book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*, the book of Justice, discussion of Spenser in Ireland and have them illustrate maps, create timelines, and investigate Thomas Herron’s wonderful material culture site for Spenser’s Kilcolman Castle, [Centering Spenser](#). This year I also wanted to see, given the success of the module on Milton in
my sophomore class, whether I could find a similar tradition surrounding Spenser. I had no idea, so I left it up to my students.

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I gave them Albery Alston Whitman’s “Twasinta’s Seminoles,” Yeats’s “Isle of Statues” (thanks to Kim Coles and Reginald Wilburn for identifying these texts in a syllabus Kim shared with me), Marianne Moore’s “Spenser’s Ireland,” and – the one they liked best – a spoken-word poem and associated video-essay by the young Nigerian-Irish poet Chiamaka Enyi-Adabi, “The Sun Rises and Shines.” Then I asked them:

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Do Irish poets, and other Diasporic poets, appropriate Spenserian features in order to demonstrate the falsity of arguments made by the English about their supposed
superiority and colonial power? (I don’t know; let’s see what we find!) Spenserian features you might look for include the use of dense and often opaque political allegory; the Spenserian stanza; elaborately allegorical houses and gardens; archaic orthography and diction; archaic medievalism; periphrasis; the combination of ethics and visual allegory.

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Students mostly “called out” Spenser for sexism and a double standard for sexual pleasure, for his silencing of Irish, Catholic, pagan, and Muslim voices and for the violence meted out in the name of justice by his knights and heroes. Many women in my class were disappointed that Britomart lived “only for a man.” They enjoyed and “took back” the Spenserian stanza, admiring its intricacy; the ethical allegory; and deliberately archaic language (pseudo-Medievalism or speculative history).

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Survey results indicated I should keep doing this, though they were split on whether I should move the module earlier in the course or keep it where it is, so I’ll keep experimenting.

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Next steps: time to bring in work-in-progress by scholars such as Lisandra Estevez about early modern contact zones in the New World and how Native artists deploy European artistic traditions (referenced with permission)

[Slide 14]
Thanks and references.
Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin (Harvard UP, 1967),
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Christopher Hill, Milton and the English Revolution (Faber, 1977; Verso, 2020),

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Albery Allson Whitman, Twasinta's Seminoles; Or, Rape of Florida (Nixon-Jones [St. Louis], 1884-5; HathiTrust [unstable link]).

Marianne Moore, “Spenser’s Ireland,” Academy of American Poets,
https://poets.org/poem/spensers-ireland

W. B. Yeats, The Island of Statues (1885; link not available)

Chiamaka Enyi-Adabi, “The Sun Rises and Shines,”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLLao6TwU0E

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If we have time, I’ll show you a little of their favorite response, “The Sun Rises and Shines,” in which they identified themes of conquest, ruins, female leadership and the importance of place.