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Ian Barnard

Chapman University, barnard@chapman.edu

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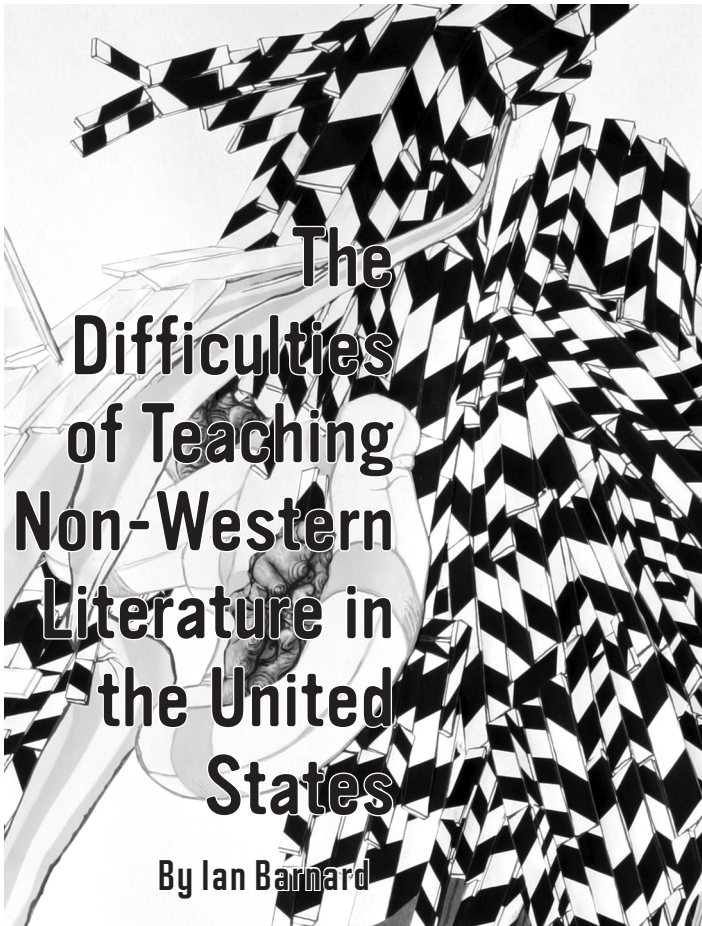
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The Difficulties of Teaching Non-Western Literature in the United States

By Ian Barnard

In my experience, when confronted with difference, students often adopt one of two approaches to make that difference seem less threatening. Either they try to reduce difference to sameness by immediately focusing on possible points of commonality to their own experience or they treat difference as fundamentally disconnected from their own experience.

(Kandaswamy 9)

My goal in this article is to build on Priya Kandaswamy's discussion of students' response to difference in *Radical Teacher* #80 by unfolding the pitfalls of teaching and responding to

studying of literature, she does point to the difficulties that teachers and students face when confronted with difference in the context of neo-liberal educational institutions in the United States. These educational institutions are bound to the history of U.S. imperialism by cherished ideological imperatives that include binary constructions of politics, morality, and culture; humanism; and individualism. Humanist values embody liberal platitudes about how everyone is really the same, a flattening out of difference that evacuates history and power in order to assure the humanist that his subjectivity is universal. (As feminism has demonstrated, humanism is invariably

"non-Western" literature¹ in the United States as embodied in my own experience teaching non-Western literature to a group of racially and ethnically diverse, mainly working-class students at a large urban comprehensive public university.² Given that my students are themselves by and large future secondary school English teachers, the dilemma Kandaswamy articulates takes on particular urgency, since they will soon be passing on their knowledge and learning strategies to their own students. Although Kandaswamy is not specifically addressing the teaching and

gendered as male, despite its pretensions to universality.) U.S. mythology about individualism includes an implicit belief in the effectiveness and unlimited potential of individual agency and an understanding of conflict as struggle between individuals, rather than as a product of history and material power relations. Frequently, it is the most well-meaning of teachers and students who collude in the imperialist enterprise through their unconscious adherence to these values. And often the personal is heavily invested in the political, so the kinds of responses to difference identified by Kandaswamy arise where multiple axes of subjectivity intersect, including not only ideological conditioning and ignorance, but also simple developmental immaturity, and anxiety around one's own sense of self. As Masood Ashraf Raja points out, the "mere act of entering a postcolonial literature class can be quite a challenging event, especially because of the international, anti-foundational, and anti-imperial nature of the postcolonial texts. Under such circumstances, where students are likely to perceive the class as a threat to their own personal identity, learning can be seriously hampered" (33).

The two dichotomous responses to difference chronicled by Kandaswamy are equally troubling because, although different from one another, they carry with them the same racist/colonialist undertones. In the elision of difference, the Western subject becomes the universal subject and Otherness is contained through assimilation to that supposedly universal Western subject. When difference is treated as absolute, the fetishized Other becomes exotic and unknowable, and could never be like "us"—a logic that, however inadvertently, reinscribes colonialist stereotypes and paternalistically

masks critical, political, and moral relativism as respect for difference.

These responses were enacted in complex and telling forms in the particular class I am discussing here, an undergraduate senior seminar designed for English majors and future secondary school English teachers as a capstone college experience. The course requires the study of "world short fiction," and the texts I chose to fulfill this component of the requirements included Taiwanese-born author Chen Jo-Hsi's short story "Chairman Mao is a Rotten Egg," set in China during the Cultural Revolution, Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo's postcolonial narrative "No Sweetness Here," and an excerpt from Tirdad Zolghadr's contemporary Iranian memoir/novel, *A Little Less Conversation*. My observations are based on students' informal and formal written analyses (in some cases, first drafts, in other cases, revised essays) of these texts following our class discussion of them during my first experience teaching this particular configuration of the course. I framed the oral discussions in the contexts of postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. In my facilitation of the class discussions, I attempted to encourage students to question stereotypes. However, despite these efforts, and despite the great diversity in terms of ethnicity, race, age, and educational background amongst the 20 students in the class, in their own writing the students tended to read the texts in the same problematic ways, for reasons I will attempt to articulate in due course.

In the first response to difference noted by Kandaswamy, students "reduce difference to sameness by immediately focusing on possible points of commonality to their own experience" (9). Students may make

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a story familiar in order to understand it. So, for instance, they might show how the characters and situations are just like those in the United States. They usually feel that they are contesting racism and colonialism by showing that "everyone is the same." However, as feminist critics, postcolonial theorists, poststructuralists, and others have argued, this is a false universalism, since it merely validates the identities of dominant groups by positing their experience as universal, while continuing to erase the specificity of the experiences and subjectivities of marginalized subjects. It also encourages ethnocentric engagements with the Other, where students impose their own values onto the texts/worlds they are reading and writing about, since these values are "universal" and "everyone is really the same." Thus, for example, in writing about "Chairman Mao is a Rotten Egg," several of my students assumed that a character's loss of individual identity in the story was a terrible thing, imposing their own socially constructed hopes and desires onto the characters, seemingly oblivious to the ways in which other cultures may, for instance, privilege community over individuality. This common reading and response strategy of diffusing difference by stressing commonality stems partly from teachers' pedagogical imperative (that students now buy into) that students should be able to "relate to" something in order for learning to take place. As I have suggested, this epistemological and pedagogical axiom often encourages personal and political self-centeredness. Why can't we learn about

and value something we do not relate to? My students are wont to use the phrase "I can't relate to it" as reason for disliking a particular

text, whereas "I can relate," whether in reference to a published literary text or a fellow student's piece of writing, is automatically assumed to be a compliment. While I recognize that we may inevitably experience texts in relation to the self, I also believe that we can learn and teach students that experiencing something as alien to the self should not necessarily be grounds for denigration or dismissal.

But the construction of alienness is itself another trap. In the second problematic response to difference, according to Kandaswamy, students "treat difference as fundamentally disconnected from their own experience" (9). They frequently enact this type of response by treating a story or the characters in it as totally alien. The most obvious pitfall of this construction of non-Western literature, in particular, is that students create an us-them dichotomy. Because of their own often unconscious beliefs and dispositions about the United States, they often end up positioning the United States as more advanced, enlightened, democratic, etc. than non-Western countries. So, for instance, some students in my class saw Ama Ata Aidoo's story about a Ghanaian teacher's alienation in the rural community where she taught as an illustration of how sexist and homophobic Africa is compared to the United States. My point is not to deny the prevalence of African sexism and homophobia, or to silence students' critiques of this sexism and

homophobia, but rather to gesture to the ways in which such binary constructions reproduce colonialist understandings and attitudes, an argument that Chandra Mohanty has made at some length in relation to Western feminism's representations of the Third World.

The overt demonization of the non-West, however, is a less common response amongst my students, many of whom are fairly politically sophisticated and quite critical of U.S. state policies and ideologies. More often the disconnection they see between the literary texts and their own experience leads them to patronize the Other. So, for example, students may romanticize the "rustic" way of life presented in Aidoo's "No Sweetness Here," reading any intrusion into or change to it as lamentable. My students do not think this romanticization is racist, since they believe that by steering clear of passing ethnocentric judgments on other cultures they are celebrating and honoring cultures and characters that are different from themselves. They think these types of readings are flattering to the characters and cultures represented in the literature. However, although these responses seem less pejorative than demonization, they are equally as problematic. Johannes Fabian has written about the ways in which the West constructs the non-West as always the same, as never changing, and how this static view colludes with colonialist binaries that equate the West with progress and modernization, while the noble savages of the Third World are eternally closer to nature.

My students' repeated demands of "authenticity" from the Other illustrate Fabian's argument. While they want to enjoy the benefits of political, social, cultural, and identificatory hybridity in the

United States, they simultaneously police other individuals' and cultures' "authenticity." So, for example, when we read Tirdad Zolghadr's evocation of middle-class life in contemporary Tehran, students were quick to determine what was "authentically" Iranian in the story and to usually read the story as condemning what was not "authentic," or to desire that the story make such a condemnation. The excerpt we read from *A Little Less Conversation* revolves around a cosmopolitan protagonist who has recently moved back to Tehran, the city of his birth, and offers a mix of scathing and fond observations of the deposed Shah's regime, of the Iranian revolution, of the cultural hybridity of contemporary Tehran, of the West, of the pretensions of the contemporary Iranian bourgeoisie, and of himself, as he travels around the city during the course of a day. Not only does the text lampoon essentialist constructions of identity, but it directly mocks those who revere and mystify such appeals to originality and authenticity. The narrator notes of the protagonist, "When asked about motives for returning to Tehran, he refers to childhood memories, to family, to his mother tongue. 'Something about the light, the landscape. Roots.' The more he makes himself sound like a palm tree, the more people are touched" (Zolghadr 40). Clichés about light, landscape, and roots are self-consciously invoked by the protagonist in order to play to the comfort zones of other characters—and of readers—allowing the narrator to mock their simple-minded sentimentality. And although the protagonist is aware of the crassness and commercialization of Tehran's cosmopolitan postmodernity, he also does not romanticize tradition or the past: "Personally, he'd take Tehran

over Isfahan flower gardens and donkey bridges any day, and finds a smug sense of satisfaction in the fact that there are many who would beg to differ" (40).

A Little Less Conversation embodies the "international, anti-foundational" characteristics enumerated by Raja above, yet my students were determined to separate out the different traits of the characters and the Tehran of the narrative along national and hemispheric lines. One student constructed the characters' activities of "relaxing, drinking, and reading poetry" as Western. What then would be "authentically Iranian"? And even though the story blatantly satirizes quests for "roots," many students ignored this aspect of the text because they so desperately wanted it to be about the celebration of roots. One wrote of the Tehran of the story, "It has been assimilated into the western collective, if you will, laying down its identity to pick up corporate sponsorship. Thus what is left is the empty shell of a unique city that was once rich with culture. It is as if the Arab [sic] culture is dead, having been murdered by the influx of a western consumer based culture." Another argued that Zolghadr "points out that many of the people of Iran are, in fact, ignorantly blind to the negative effects of westernization on their country" and that the story's protagonist "wants to be in a Tehran that is truly Iranian." Even students in the class whose culturally hybrid histories and experiences were similar to those of the story's characters read the excerpt in this problematic way, categorizing attitudes and experiences in the text along national lines, criticizing "Westernized" Iranian characters, policing cultural "authenticity," and expecting the characters to be culturally unitary and consistent. All the students in the class

except one were convinced that the story was attacking "Westernization," even though the cultural hybridity depicted in the story is celebrated as much as it is satirized—what Peter Jackson refers to as "hybridizations in which local agency is as important as subordination to foreign influences" (387). The only student in the class who did not see the story as attacking Westernization argued that the story showed how Iranians have seen the benefits of Westernization: "It is evident . . . that a large portion of Middle Easterners do in fact desire to partake in the success of globalization found in the economy of the Western world." Here the West is imagined as further along a developmental trajectory than Iran; the West is a space that people in other countries aspire to. In addition, the West/non-West binary is again enforced: the West must be either good or bad, and Iran must either hate or become/emulate the West. No allowance is made for more complex and conflicted relationships, and for the multi-layered identifications that mark the story's characters (and that mark many of my students!).

This policing of authenticity is politically fraught because students' ideas of other (and their own) cultures' "authenticity" often reveal more about their own projections/fantasies than about the cultures they are studying. This irony was famously elaborated in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and is pointedly and poignantly illustrated in multiple ways in David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*, where a French diplomat's downfall turns on a Chinese man's abilities to predict and perform the diplomat's Orientalist and sexist constructions of East Asian women. The desire for "authenticity" in the Other is a way for students to stabilize

their difference from the Other, but also to control the Other by making the Other knowable, manageable, and quantifiable. This policing of identity ensures the policers that they derive all the expected touristic benefits from their encounter with the exotic: to get the “benefits” of tourism—to feel that one has gotten one’s money’s worth—one must feel that one has seen something different from “home.” Hybridity dilutes that differentness. In addition, differentness must be sufficiently contained and distanced so as not to draw attention to the tourist’s own relationship of power vis-à-vis that difference. As Terri Hasseler notes, tourism “is a transitory moment, and the vacation must not radically alter one’s life, only to the extent that it offers the rest, relaxation, and exotic experiences so often desired” (19).³ Kandaswamy explicitly makes the connection to students’ relationship to difference:

students often express a deep desire to learn about people who they see as different from themselves . . . white students frequently say that they see the course as an opportunity to enrich themselves by learning about different cultures, as a vehicle toward their own personal growth. Statements like these indicate that white students often view classes about the experience of people of color as a kind of tourist experience rather than as a place for serious critical inquiry. (7)

I would add that the problems multiply in the context of studying non-Western literature in the United States, since their U.S. allegiances often incline U.S. students of color to participate in this metaphorical tourism, too, and even international students collude as they construct

nostalgic and/or ideologically charged representations of their “homelands.”

While it is true that any encounter with difference (e.g., U.S. students studying French literature) could produce similar results to those I have described, the historical and material contexts of colonialism and imperialism, including the U.S.’s current “war against terror,” exacerbate the ramifications of these encounters in the case of representations of and responses to non-Western cultures and cultural productions. As Said has powerfully argued, Western cultural productions are not benign or trivial, but can be primary forces in shaping hegemonic values and in normalizing imperialism (*Culture*). A parallel case could be made for the processes of “interpreting” the non-West: “readings” of the non-West may participate in the circulation of understandings, attitudes, and desires that are consciously and unconsciously used to justify and/or continue the violences, inequalities, and economic dependencies that structure global power relations between the West and non-West.

A few students in my class were able to successfully navigate the inter-dependent hazards of erasing and exoticizing difference by carefully exploring the literary texts in both national and international contexts, feeling confident enough to critique oppression in both domains, albeit with qualifications. One student’s exemplary reading of “No Sweetness Here,” for instance, began by asking readers, “Imagine a life in which you must care for your children without the help of your own family. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many all around the world, in different cultures, in different societies.” The student author immediately disabused her readers of the stereotype that

the problems discussed are a peculiarly African phenomenon, thus cautioning them against the inclination to imagine African societies as “more backward” than any others. However, she quickly qualified this universalism by hinting at cultural specificity, arguing that Aidoo’s story demonstrates that the “carelessness” that characterizes the treatment of the protagonist “is not only a cultural reality but an injustice against women.” Here the student does not shy away from mounting a feminist critique of the social relations presented in the story (such a shying away could itself represent a kind of paternalism), articulating this critique in both its culturally specific and cross-cultural contexts. Later in the paper, discussing the short story collection as a whole of which “No Sweetness Here” is a part, the student writer suggests, “It is a possibility that Aidoo writes the short stories in an effort to voice her public opinion about the oppression of women in African countries, and even countries around the world.” But she goes on to argue that while the author “clearly expresses bitterness at women’s marginalization in post-independence Ghana, Aidoo also argues that this is connected to larger problems that affect Ghanaian society, such as colonialism and capitalism.” Here the student recognizes the global power relations that formatively impact the gender inequities represented in the story, thereby further qualifying her essay’s opening universalism. She blames neither the West alone nor Ghanaian society alone for the effects of that sexism. Neither is romanticized, Africa is not demonized, and the West and non-West are situated in dynamic interchange with one another in the context of the multi-national capitalisms that enable neo-liberalism in the first place.

The above student essay could provide a model for future students of how to think about non-Western literature in more complex ways. Given the difficulty of presenting the issues around representations of non-Western literature abstractly to students, and students’ potential difficulty in translating such abstractions into concrete terms to address in their own writing projects about non-Western literature, I plan to discuss these matters in the contexts of specific examples from student writing next time I teach this course. I hope that by frontloading the course with sample student writing from previous courses, I can illustrate some of the challenges of working with non-Western literature, as well as show how more accomplished student writers go about discussing these texts. This strategy will provide students with relevant, accessible, and engaging models of what to avoid and emulate in their own writing. However, the problem with sharing a model paper with students is that it might lead them to think that there is one “correct” reading of the text under discussion or that their papers should closely imitate the model paper. Ideally, then, I would find multiple models to show students, preferably models that make conflicting arguments amongst themselves about a particular literary text.

I am not naïve enough to expect that one course alone can change values and assumptions whose resilience is often testament to a lifetime of exposure to the cultural, political, educational, and social discourses in which they are embedded. I also recognize that learning and writing is recursive, that sometimes the lag time between understanding concepts and internalizing and applying that understanding exceeds the span of one

particular teacher or course, and that developmental progressions from ego-centrism to engagement with the world and from simple to complex thinking take on diverse trajectories in individual students. Significantly, students seemed to make more nuanced comments about the characters in our class discussions of the readings than they did subsequently in their written responses. This disjunction between communal oral discourse and individual writing suggests the developmental and recursive nature of the learning situation, not only in terms of students' understandings of the literature but also in terms of their learning and unlearning of certain dispositions, political positions, and habits of mind. It may take a while for their writing to catch up to their thinking/speaking. While the collaborative nature of the class discussions allowed the students to build on and complicate each others' ideas (and perhaps silenced some voices, too), the relatively solitary writing processes that followed not only forced each individual student to

articulate a reading of a literary text, but also more easily enabled the student writers to slip back into old habits of mind.

Given the above qualifications, I am not under the illusion that exposing the pitfalls of writing about non-Western literature before students write about these texts will magically transform their work, but I am curious to see how such a shift might or might not exacerbate the fissures in their writing, inform our class discussions about their writing, and jump start at least some of their thinking and writing to a new level of sophistication. And I will need to rethink my pedagogy in other ways, too. To what extent were my students' problematic responses to the literary texts enabled by the ways in which I presented the texts and facilitated the discussions about them? Should my students and I spend even more time researching and discussing the cultural and historical contexts of the literary texts? Would students work better with a series of texts by one author or from one geographic region rather than with a hodge-podge of texts that have little in common other than being marked as "non-Western"? Should fewer texts be discussed in greater detail rather than more texts discussed more superficially? How should I participate in and intervene into the discussions, especially when I feel that students are reading the texts in politically problematic ways? And what strategies beyond my usual use of peer response groups and emphasis on the writing process could I use to enable the kinds of collaborations that characterized the class discussions to permeate the writing assignments?

The problems I saw in my students' responses to the non-Western literary texts we studied also have larger insti-



WESTON TERUYA

tutional and political ramifications beyond the students' control and outside the scope of my own pedagogical resources/resourcefulness.

For instance, it would be easier to excuse or explain my students' problematic readings of these texts if this were a first year college class, with the expectation that the students would develop more sophisticated reading and analytic skills over the course of their careers as English majors. But these were graduating seniors, and the course is intended as a culminating experience that allows students to hone and showcase their understandings and practices as experienced English majors. This alarming reality points to the institutional culpability of English Departments and English curricula such as those at my school that offer little or no instruction in non-Western literature. Little wonder, then, that the token inclusion of such texts in one or two courses finds students unprepared and unaccustomed to the difficult and complex work of thoughtful engagement with them.

The response patterns I have analyzed illustrate the ways in which the Other is commodified and contained in neo-liberal states like the United States (which is not to say that careful teaching of non-Western literature cannot be one powerful means to begin to undo the mind-sets that promote such commodification and containment). Kandaswamy notes that the liberal desire for multicultural capital fails to understand and challenge the institutional manifestations of power and privilege. Multiculturalism becomes a commodity used to sell the institution,

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but the institution itself remains unchanged.⁴ The liberal appropriation of non-Western literary texts thus attests to the failure of

genuine multiculturalism in U.S. educational institutions. Most of my students' responses to non-Western literature seem to emanate from a desire not to offend, from an intent to honor other cultures, from a genuine desire to learn about others. These impetuses have largely been born and shaped in the crucible of the fairly recent emergence of multiculturalism as a philosophy and practice in K-16 educational institutions and in U.S. society, and in the context of critiques of and the opening up of the canon of Western literature in school curricula across all grade levels. My students told me that they were eager to study literature from other countries, recognizing that their education as English majors was impoverished by its focus on U.S. and British literatures, and no doubt also influenced by my own status as a "foreign"-born faculty member with expertise in African literatures. However, apolitical and essentialist readings of non-Western cultures and artistic production, and of global power relations, make a mockery of multiculturalism's commitment to exposing and redressing social inequities. They show, instead, how multiculturalism has been co-opted by liberal politicians and educators who want to represent themselves as doing the right thing, who want to feel good about themselves while business proceeds as usual. So my students' responses to the literature also evidences the inscription of the U.S. academy in hegemonic U.S. values, and

the difficulty of changing the one without changing the other.

In *A Little Less Conversation*, Zolghadr's narrator makes fun of the ignorance that passes for multicultural tolerance when his narrator notes how one of the characters in the narrative was able to fool a British policeman: "When a bobby politely demanded his license, Yashar showed his Iranian birth certificate, apologizing for everything being written in Farsi. In the symmetric center of the document, there is now a stamp saying, 'This driver's license is hereby endorsed for six months'" (42). In his polite respect for difference, the British policeman neither advances understanding nor challenges institutional power inequities, but uses his power to remain ignorant and keep Otherness alien. Is it an improvement over the literal violence of colonial relations or a more effective and amenable mechanism of exercising control? Learning requires more work and more self-reflection than the bobby's "politeness" entails, and a complex recognition of interdependency and inter-relationship between people and between nations⁵ that does not reduce multiple identifications to either irreducible difference or universal commonality.⁶

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Notes

1 I intend the quotation marks around the term "non-Western" to be understood as operating throughout this essay, qualifying the convenience of the easy descriptor "non-Western" with a perpetual reminder of the increasingly unstable nature of this category in a global cultural economy of human and ideological migration, and of the problematic Western centrality suggested by the term. The quotation marks also serve as a caution against geographic and aesthetic homogenizations.

2 For other articulations of the problems with these kinds of polarized responses to "foreign" texts, see Aubry and Damrosch.

3 For further discussion of the politics and aesthetics of tourism, see Alexander.

4 For more detailed discussions of the ways in which the academy co-opts the Other, and of the ways in which faddish multicultural imperatives depoliticize power relations, see Aneja, Buras, Dev, Gómez-Peña, Lee, Nguyen.

5 For further elaborations of these connections, see Butler and Said (*Culture*).

6 I thank Robin Lilly, Nancy McMillan, Aneil Rallin, Chae Yu, Linda Dittmar, Frinde Maher, and the anonymous *Radical Teacher* reviewers for their important and generous feedback on earlier incarnations of this article.



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