

# Trilogies as Cultural Analysis



# Trilogies as Cultural Analysis:

*Literary Re-imaginings  
of Sea Crossings, Animals,  
and Fathering*

By

Gregory Stephens

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## INTRODUCTION

### *TRILOGIES:* A BIG CANVAS VIEW OF CULTURAL PATTERNS

Passing between worlds and across cultures has become the normative human condition, and this is rehearsed endlessly in literature, film, and popular culture. The stories we tell about our formative and often perpetual in-between-ness provide a means to come to terms with ongoing instability, long-term liminality, or perpetual change. This phenomenon is examined in this book through the structure of trilogies: returning to the same theme or a similar story three times, in order to develop it on a larger canvas.

The book consists of three trilogies: three essays each about sea crossing stories, human-animal relations, and father-son relationships in literature. Furthermore, the stories I examine have a three-part structure, consisting of a place of origin, the destination or arrival point, and a third dimension which is the journey from one place or state of being to another. It is literary representations of the transitional phase which are my primary concern. I will return to the organizing concept of trilogies momentarily.

What is on offer here is literary studies and cultural analysis *as I would like to read it*. Like many readers, I want writers to acknowledge that analysis develops in a context. Most of us have an intense relationship with the stories we consume in literature, film, and culture. Our affects vary, falling on a spectrum between emotional and intellectual responses. But beyond mere theory, there is a *structure of feeling* that guides my own stance and engagement.<sup>1</sup> What goes into this sort of structure includes personal experience, disciplinary training, and institutional or cultural context. I do not come to literature in a vacuum. So I try to bring all three dimensions into the mix: the personal, the disciplinary, and the institutional or cultural matrix.

My own disciplinary formation is originally in Communication Studies—but of a historicized, interdisciplinary sort. The Communication Department at the University of California-San Diego gave equal weight

to cultural psychology (often through the lens of “Activity Theory”), “materiality,” and literary/cultural analysis. The first two parts of the department’s triadic structure often used ethnographic methods. My distillation of these traditions, through a concept of *communicative cultures*, eventually brought me into Writing studies as a “disciplined interdisciplinarity.”<sup>2</sup> However, I bring an engagement with literature which long precedes academic training. As a university professor, I have taught literature in several contexts, including intercultural communication, literature surveys, and General Education writing courses. I will provide section introductions in which I discuss the literary theories I most rely on in each trilogy. However, I want to begin with the issue of personal voice.

I write against the current of what I have heard from academic editors many times over the years: that in literary criticism, one should not include a discussion of classroom dynamics, or employ much of a personal voice. The “higher-level” or more prestigious literary journals tend to discourage pedagogical considerations, or personal reflections. Theory is the prestige register, in its God-like “view from nowhere.”<sup>3</sup> Literary criticism, in its professional persona, has become highly specialized and theoretically abstracted. But I want to strip back the curtain and show the wizard at the levers, giving personal, institutional, and classroom context.

There are many ways of reading literature, and writing about it, outside of academic institutions. Models that spring to mind for me are learned, and comparative, but easy on (or even free from) citations. I think of D.H. Lawrence’s work in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, or J.M. Coetzee’s review essays for the *New York Review of Books*, or in a younger generation, the cultural analysis done by Zadie Smith on both sides of the Atlantic. All of those literary critics are also novelists. I bring a different sensibility: as a former songwriter and journalist, in disciplinary terms within a structure whose roots are in Communication rather than English, and in current practice under the broad umbrella of Writing Studies, but with an ethnographic cornerstone.

Sometimes outsiders can see things whole. Literature is for readers, and not primarily for theorists and their priestly language, just as the Bible is not just for Christians, or theologians. Both literature and scripture provide a vocabulary, a treasure trove of stories, which as an educator and as a public sphere writer I know are especially valuable for cross-cultural communication—i.e. engaging audiences outside our bubble. As a senior scholar I claim the right to think outside of disciplinary boundaries and theoretical traffic jams. The way I write about the case studies in this book is informed by two decades of teaching this material, mostly to non-literature students, often in General Education classes.



General Education courses provide perhaps the best opportunity to “see things whole” in higher ed. In GE courses success is more likely if instructors resist the temptations of ideological agendas and disciplinary specializations. Beyond resisting the urges to indoctrinate, and/or to over-theorize, GE courses provide an opportunity to utilize integrative versions of research—whether these originate in the humanities, social studies, or the sciences. Such institutionally required courses might be a “last best chance” to leave a good impression on students from other disciplines. They are in fact often the last chance to give science or business students some exposure to the arts, in a broad sense, and to help them acquire elements of cultural and even metaphorical language that will help them communicate outside their bubble. Some literature faculty still treat GE courses as beneath their higher calling, but I am proud to go “back to base” as a teacher, and as a scholar. These entry-level survey courses require self-discipline, not unlike the kind needed when my daughter reminds me to “speak in eight-year-old words.” Working “down in the trenches,” and translating literature and culture for a range of GE writing courses, has structured my efforts in this book to sketch “big picture” themes in a non-specialist language.

Within GE courses, I must make literature immediately intelligible to students who often do not read literature, who are more often science than humanities students, and who usually speak a language other than English as their first tongue. But still, students are moving between worlds, like everyone else. They are keenly interested in stories about transitions, with characters who, like them, are having to learn new languages, and move into new social environments in which they must learn new social roles. Such movements that students participate in, and see all around them, are a rite of passage that calls out for transferable skills, in my theory and practice.<sup>4</sup> What can be transferred from our readings of literature about transitions between worlds, where one’s old way of seeing things and doing things no longer provides a fully useful compass? What happens when the way we speak, or act isolates us, in fact, and even prepares us for failure, rather than success? What lessons can be learned from the ways that literature and other creative acts map or script more successful ways of communicating in new contexts?

I will have more to say about that later, because all the case studies in this book are stories about what happens after a failure, or a catastrophe. But for the moment, I want to provide an orienting horizon. In *The Good Story*, which is a dialogue about the ways in which fiction and psychotherapy both try to revise scripts, Arabella Kurtz remarks that “the urge to fix the story of our lives” is an “adaptive drive.”<sup>5</sup> When our lives

include increasing amounts of precarity, disruption, and relocation, then the stories we tell have to adapt.

Let me provide one other angle on this, which comes from material in my first chapter, about *Life of Pi*. The shipping boat which sinks near the beginning of that epic story is named the *Tsimtsum*. Tsimtsum (or zimzum) is a Hebrew word which means how the Deity contracted to make room for the physical universe. Once the Creator had withdrawn in order to leave space for the material world, s/he tried to fill the created world with divine energy. But the material containers of the world shattered, unable to contain the divine creative force. According to Isaac Luria, as explained by Florence Stratton, “the major task of humanity from the time of creation has been to work to repair the broken vessels and overcome the separation between divinity and materiality.”<sup>6</sup> The stories I examine in *Trilogies* are all, in one way or another, about trying to “repair the broken vessels” that occur when people break out of their bubble, their cocoon, and cross the waters to a new world, or have to learn to communicate in a strange new context, or simply find that the old rules of family, culture, and community have not sufficiently prepared them for the life they live where they have arrived, *on the other side* of their transition.

Now about the title....

The Greek *tri-logia* means a three-part discourse. Trilogies afford the opportunity to paint on a larger canvas...and point to the “repeating patterns” of culture.<sup>7</sup> With trilogies, we can envision an overview of a larger cultural trajectory. For such a purpose, presumably, the Greeks organized their self-dramatizing into trilogies like the *Oresteia*. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Steven Spielberg’s “Running Man” trilogy, seen as a unity, brings into focus the director’s preoccupation with individuals and societies “trapped in a fantasy they can’t escape.”<sup>8</sup> Seeing variations on a theme allows viewers to make the leap from an individual tragedy or journey, to the ways in which a culture or society is hard-wired to a script.

In each story I examine, characters passing between worlds need a focal point, or a guide, to help them maintain their focus, direction, and purpose. I think about the function of these guides or focal points, through the lens of my training in Communication, as “mediating tools.” Each character uses a tool to negotiate the passage from one world to another. Feeding a tiger enables a young man to survive a shipwreck and trans-Pacific passage on a lifeboat in *Life of Pi*. Wrestling with *the big one* while “out too far” at sea gives an old fisherman the means to re-imagine his place in nature, and to rescript the meaning of success or failure. In *The Road*, a myth of carrying the light helps the father and son negotiate a post-apocalyptic landscape. On a larger canvas, I use my grouping of three

thematically-linked essays to re-imagine how liminality or perpetual in-between-ness has become so dominant in our expressive life.

Trilogies are, in addition, a way to “measure twice, cut once.” Third time’s a charm, we say. First impressions are often correct, but seldom complete. Second thoughts may be a corrective, but they may also reinforce a binary conception. The third version is a way to avoid a binary approach, and to achieve a more well-rounded point of view. The three trilogies of this book offer a chance to re-imagine three dominant themes in our era, on a “big canvas” triptych: crossing the waters to a new life, new dynamics of human-animal relations, and re-imagining fatherhood, especially “late fathering.”

I am interested in the middle of the trilogy structure—the movement between worlds—and how tools are used during the passage to acclimate oneself or one’s culture to permanent instability or change. In that sense, the title “trilogies” also refers to my three primary frames of reference: Communication Studies, Literature as a pedagogical tool, and Creative Writing Studies. My analysis of texts in their social context is shaped by a communicative version of rhetorical theory, such as Rhetorical Genre Studies. Creative Writing pedagogy has given me a broader understanding of how literary texts can function in an educational context.

In the end, although I bring a range of experiences and disciplines to my analysis of literature and other forms of creative expression, my “disciplinary” home is located primarily within Writing Studies. Under that broad umbrella of “disciplined interdisciplinarity,” Charles Bazerman’s notion of “lifespan writing” guides my use of literature.<sup>9</sup> I recognize that people bring different literacies into their academic careers. They will continue writing across their lifetime. My own understanding of a Writing Studies approach, influenced by research in Academic Literacies which integrates ethnographic methods, seeks to integrate pre-existing literacies, and to help develop new literacies which will serve people long after they leave the university—in their professions and personal lives, and hopefully, as engaged citizens. Literature can play a valuable role in helping develop such transferable skills.

My model of literary studies draws on Kenneth Burke’s notion, adapted by Raymond Williams and others, that literature offers us “equipment for living.”<sup>10</sup> As an educator, I use these literary and cultural texts as part of “transformative design” for classes in which learners engage in a rite of passage.<sup>11</sup> Such rites of passage are repeated at numerous moments in life. Within a lifespan approach, I focus on giving students and other learners the tools for re-examining and sometimes re-

writing their own scripts—whether personal or socio-cultural—as they move towards their lives as professionals, consumers, and citizens.

## **Organization of the Book**

Now for a few words about choice. My rationale for the texts included in this study was as follows. First, I primarily used texts I have taught, since their pedagogical value is of foremost concern for me. Second, since I aspired to a “global view” in the sense of examining key themes about in-between-ness on a large canvas, I wanted to primarily focus on well-known writers, directors, and artists. On the menu are Nobel Prize laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners, critically acclaimed film directors, classics of Western literature and mythology (such as the *Odyssey*, Aesop’s fables, etc.). Third, in the case of “Human-Animal Relations,” I wanted texts that showed humans going away from “civilization,” and into close encounters with animals in their own habitats. In addition, I was particularly keen to examine stories that used visual narrative and embodied language, rather than didactic means, to re-examine “animal matters.” Fourth, the choice for inclusion in “late fathering” is intensely personal. Nobel-prize winners such as Hemingway and Coetzee provided a way for me to re-vision my own “failures” and second chances at fathering, mapping what I now see as an emergent genre.

The first trilogy, about “Sea Crossings,” was shaped by institutional contexts, in Jamaica and then Puerto Rico for Chapter Three. Teaching in an English department for the first time from 2004-2008, I was reprimanded for including too much “Latino/a” literature in my multi-ethnic American literature courses. Charged with insufficient familiarity with literary theory, I was required to submit “proofs” of my engagement with formal literary studies. As I will narrate in more detail in the “Sea Crossings” Introduction, this was the impetus for the original versions of the first two chapters here. Section One begins with “Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion & ‘the better story’ in *Life of Pi*.” Yann Martel is a Canadian author, but *Life of Pi* begins in India, is mostly set on the Pacific Ocean, and ends with Japanese man interviewing the title character in Mexico. This novel introduces a theme to which I will return at the end of my book: the necessity for a comparative understanding of religious traditions during times of crisis.

Chapter Two is a reconsideration of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, whose author, Esmeralda Santiago was born and bred in Puerto Rico, but as an adult has lived in the United States. My return to Santiago’s first memoir provides an opportunity to think about Puerto Rico not just as “The Last

Colony,” but as in some ways, a pioneer in the development of “nonnational” cultural rather than political identity.”<sup>12</sup>

Chapter Three, “Tied to the Mast: Connecting the Dots of Transfigurative Sea Crossings,” is experimental in form, adapting something of the voice of literary nonfiction (which I teach) in order to reimagine Homer’s tale about Siren Songs, and to sketch how sea-crossings continue to form our political, artistic and religious imaginings in countless ways. “Tied to the Mast” points the book in the direction of transnational literature and culture. My organizational intent throughout this section is to contribute to the re-imagining of what constitutes “American literature.” The section is grounded in the theories of “transnational American literature” and hemispheric literature and culture.

In the second trilogy, about revisioning human-animal relations, rhetorical analysis is a primary theoretical orientation. I ground these readings within the genre of environmental literature, and I am especially attentive to visual narrative. The rhetorical framework is most explicitly evident in “Out too Far: Half-Fish, Beaten Men, and the Tenor of Masculine Grace in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway is generally classified as an American author, but as a growing body of scholarship makes ever clearer, he spent most of his adult life in the Caribbean. In fact, he might more accurately be seen as an American-Cuban author. The novella for which he won the Nobel Prize certainly belongs to the realm of transnational literature, with a sort of quasi-Cuban anchor. I intend for this text to serve as a departure point for a move into transnational literature. “Out Too Far” was originally co-authored by Janice Cools, St. Lucian by origin, and as of 2018, a naturalized U.S. citizen. Janice and I met in Jamaica; our view of literature is inevitably shaped by the many years we have spent in the “greater Caribbean” world, the last four in Puerto Rico. This “American yet also Caribbean/Latin American” context also shaped our approach to Chapter Five, “Living with Coyotes: Rethinking Human-Animal Relations, from Aesop to *Prodigal Summer*.” The end point of this chapter is a close reading of a scene from Barbara Kingsolver’s novel. But we wanted to show that this novel has deep roots in a history of representation of human-animal relations. The rhetorical intent, in this middle section of the trilogy, is to show how the transitions in human attitudes towards animals develop over a very long period of time, the *longue durée* as Fernand Braudel called it.<sup>13</sup> We are still in this epoch, although current debates treat the need for change in human-animal relations in a quasi-millennial, “right time” mode.

Another unifying theme of this section is the ancient literary and scriptural story of going into the wilderness to receive new vision. This is

the template for *Old Man and the Sea*, and several stories discussed in “Living with Coyotes,” from St. Francis of Assisi, to John Muir, to Kingsolver. The wilderness quest is even more explicit in Chapter Six, “Confining Nature: Rites of Passage, Eco-Indigenes, and the Uses of Meat in *Walkabout*.” My reliance on a rites-of-passage framework illustrates the importance I attach to social theory, especially ethnography, in several forms of teaching and scholarship. This discussion of an ostensibly “Australian” film by the British director Nicolas Roeg was published by an expatriate United States author (Stephens) in a Southeast Asian film journal. The film concerns two Anglo-Australian children who are left alone in the outback after their father commits suicide, and then are rescued by an aboriginal Australian teen-aged boy who is in the midst of his rite-of-passage, or “walkabout.” This film was a pioneer in revising human-animal relations through visual narrative.

As the sea crossing stories in Part One prefigure an extension of sea-crossing themes in my study of *Old Man and the Sea* in Part Two, so the failed father at the beginning of *Walkabout* anticipates my focus on father-son relations in literature in the last trilogy. Father-son relationships in literature, and scripture, have a long history, and so this section, “Late Fathering in Literature,” is necessarily concerned with genre. This trilogy focuses on a recent development in this genre, stories about fathers who raise sons late in life, often after they have experienced failures as a father. J.M. Coetzee, Ernest Hemingway, and Cormac McCarthy reimagined father-son relationships during times of crisis. Coetzee and McCarthy were in their sixties while they wrote *The Childhood of Jesus*, and *The Road*. Hemingway was in his early fifties when he finished writing about his sons in *Islands in the Stream*. Through the father-son relationship these authors examined “big picture” themes—the end of civilization as we know it, in the case of Coetzee or McCarthy, or with Hemingway, the loss of meaning and faith that often occurs when fathers are set adrift from family and can no longer “tie themselves to the mast” of fatherly obligations. On the triptych, I am using these stories as a way to reflect on the absence of fathers as a root cause of many psychological and socio-cultural wounds. This inevitably means, since I am writing literary analysis as I would like to read it, that I write in this section in a voice at times as close to literary nonfiction, as to literary criticism.

“Fathering Rescripted: The shadow of the son in Coetzee’s late fiction,” was first published in the Dutch journal *Frame*, another indication of the transnational nature of the literary subjects in this book. I focus on Coetzee’s allegorical treatment of fractured father-son relationships in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Working with the theory

of “side-shadows,” and my own experience of “senior fathering,” I critique the dystopian outcomes of the father-figure’s (Simón’s) compulsive self-erasure.

Chapter Eight (“Fathering Under the Influence: Hemingway’s Representation of his sons in ‘Bimini’”) is another example of how failure led to a second look at/attempt at fathering in later life. This chapter again utilizes elements of literary nonfiction, along with close readings of the sort advocated by “New Formalists.” I ask: what was the connection between Hemingway’s lifestyle in the 1930-60 Caribbean period, and the author’s troubled relationships with his last three wives, and his sons? Did Hemingway try to come to terms with the damage that his drinking had done to his family life, especially to his relationship with his sons? Hemingway’s lightly fictionalized account of his relationship with his visiting sons in the first section of *Islands in the Stream* is revisited in this essay, to gain insight.

Chapter Nine, “Reading Scripture with Father and Son,” is an autobiographical version of literary analysis, using scriptures as my text. As a prefatory frame I briefly discuss father-son dialogues in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. The organizing myth in that post-apocalyptic is of “keeping the light alive” in a dying world. I then narrate, and analyze, how on a visit to Texas in 2017, my relationships with my elderly father, and my college-age son, were mediated through scriptures. My father played a reading of a chapter from the Old Testament (Judges), and my son played, while driving to Dallas, recitations from the *Qu’ran*. Both ends of this three-generation triad were trying, in their respective ways, to “keep the light alive,” I know. In keeping with my life-long identity of living “in the middle,” I attempt to find meaning in, and common ground with, two scriptural traditions which seem both familiar, and alien in their representation of violence. This chapter comes full-circle to similar themes discussed in Chapter One, about *Life of Pi*. Through personal narrative, I model forms of literary and cultural analysis in which personal experience, disciplinary training, and cultural context are all foregrounded.

## Notes

1. Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford UP, 1977): 128-35; *The Long Revolution* (London, Chatto & Windus), 1961. Williams describes inter-generational structures of feeling: “One generation may train its successor [in a] general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come ‘from’ anywhere...The new generation feel[s] its whole life in certain ways differently, and shap[es] its creative response into a new structure of feeling” (*Long Revolution*, 65).

My discussions of using “structure of feeling” in cultural analysis, and in writing instruction: Gregory Stephens, “Three Birds Sing a New Song: A Puerto Rican trilogy about Dystopia, Precarity, & Resistance” (*Intermezzo*, 2018), and “Beyond the Romance of Resistance: Translating Stuart Hall, and Re-imagining Cultural Analysis,” *Culture in Focus* (Spring 2018).

The stances writers take to engage particular audiences: Ken Hyland, “Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse,” *Discourse Studies* 7.2 (2005): 173–191.

2. Charles Bazerman, “The Disciplined Interdisciplinarity of Writing Studies,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 46.1 (August 2011): 8-21.

3. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford UP, 1986); Anita Avramides, “Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*,” *Central Works of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, ed. J. Shand (Acumen, 2006): 227-245.

4. Gregory Stephens, “Transferable Skills and Traveling Theory in Creative Writing Pedagogy,” *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (Fall 2017): 1-17.

5. J.M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (Penguin, 2005): 23.

6. Florence Stratton. “‘Hollow at the core’: Deconstructing Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29.2 (2004): 14-15.

7. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973): pp. 4, 10, 17, 37. The view of culture as being constituted by repeating patterns is widespread in social science research, as I discuss in “Beyond the Romance of Resistance: Translating Stuart Hall, and Re-imagining Cultural Analysis,” *Culture in Focus* (Spring 2018).

8. Paul Bullock, “Everybody Runs: Spielberg’s Running Man Trilogy,” *From Director Steven Spielberg* (March 2, 2017).

9. Bazerman, “The Disciplined Interdisciplinarity of Writing Studies,” op cit. Mary Juzwik and Ellen Cushman, “Editor’s Introduction: Translating, Developing, & Sponsoring Literacies across the Lifespan,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 48.2 (2013): 141–147.

10. Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: U California P, 1973): 293-304.



11. Gregory Stephens, "Rites of Passage in an English Class: Auto-ethnography & Coming of Age stories in Cross-Cultural Contexts," *Arab World English Journal* 5.4 (Dec. 2014): 353-64.
12. Ramón Soto-Crespo, "An Intractable Foundation: Luis Muñoz Marín and the Borderland State in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature." *American Literary History* 18.4 (2006): 712-38. Soto-Crespo's argument about the "nonnationalist logic" (9) of Puerto Rico's birth document, the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA) of 1952 (Commonwealth status, in English), is developed fully in *Mainland Passage: The Cultural Anomaly of Puerto Rico* (U Minnesota P, 2009).
13. Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*," trans. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 32.2 (2009): 171-203; Dale Tomich, "The Order of Historical Time: The *Longue Durée* and Micro-History," *Almanack* 2 (2011): 38-52.



**SECTION 1:**  
**SEA CROSSINGS**

# SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

## INSTITUTIONAL, PERSONAL, AND DISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS

Back in 2006-07, some faculty in the Literatures in English department at the University of the West Indies-Mona charged that I was subpar in *literary studies*. They did not want to renew my three-year tenure-track contract, so UWI-Mona's labour union took my defence. At a hearing, both sides presented their case. The UWI administration ruled that my contract would be renewed for a provisional year, with some conditions. One stipulation was I had to "prove" that I could write publication-worthy literary criticism. That was the origin of my first analysis of Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, published in *Confluencia* in 2009.

Under the terms of this reprieve (or *stay*), I also had to fulfil some teaching duties as a sort of "apprentice" to Professor Carolyn Cooper. I was twice a tutor for Cooper's large Introduction to Literature courses 2007-08. Cooper used Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* in both classes. Martel's novel is a great story, but it's a book that, like Santiago's memoir, is not easy to classify. Martel is a Canadian author, but *Pi* is Anglophone and transnational literature. With a story that begins in India, crosses the Pacific, and ends in Toronto, it could also be filed under a genre of literature about the migration of South Asians to the West.

Out of the experience of explaining *Life of Pi* to West Indian students, in small tutorials, I developed a framework that *Intertexts* would publish in 2010. I choose to begin *Trilogies* with a return to these two texts, followed by "Tied to the Mast"--a postnational form of creative cultural criticism--because I want to start "close to home." Home for me (and countless others) is more of a trajectory than a singular place, an arc shaped by *transnational American culture*. These texts, and indeed my hybrid form of cultural analysis, illustrate why national borders are increasingly seen as artificial categories—or a failed concept--when it comes to cultural analysis.

The process of writing an alternative script out of real or perceived failure is a key theme for *Trilogies*. My interest in post-failure narratives has personal and institutional contexts, and is concerned with disciplinary borders. It is worth telling this story in more detail, in my view, to

illustrate one path towards a view of Writing Studies as a “disciplined interdisciplinarity.” For now, I will define *disciplined interdisciplinarity* narrowly as being *disciplined in avoiding narrow disciplinary blinders*. As Rein Raud argues, effective cultural analysis “cannot commit itself to one single disciplinary mindframe.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I want to show that there are multiple paths into reading, writing about, and teaching literature. The versions taught in English or comparative literature departments are not universal, or necessarily authoritative, for readers who do not speak theory as a first language.

The three Sea Crossings chapters show a non-traditional path. They demonstrate some of the pre-academic literacies which, Academic Literacies scholars argue, educators should aspire to integrate and build on.<sup>2</sup> My multi-literacies approach has proven effective in Writing Studies, but may be seen as unorthodox within academic literary criticism. But my experience of trying to *prove myself* within a “new discipline” (I began teaching in English departments in 2004) is more than a personal story. It is also the story of those who bring other voices, and sets of experiences, into an academic context, and encounter demands that they strip themselves of precisely that which has nourished them, culturally.<sup>3</sup> I brought a different set of reading and teaching practices (as a parent, as a bilingual school teacher, etc.), which were prequel to my work in English departments. These contexts are a necessary matrix for my current revisions, in what I have described as *cultural analysis as I would like to read it*.

My present re-examination of *When I Was Puerto Rican* comes after having taught parts of Santiago’s text over four years in Puerto Rico. The way that I teach Santiago now, in writing courses (composition, creative writing, and creative nonfiction) is distinct from how I taught her in multi-ethnic literature courses over a decade ago, or from how she is generally taught where identity politics prevail. I am not making any claims to a *better way*. However, the way I teach this text is arguably closer to literary analysis, in the tradition of close readings, than the stance of analysts who treat Santiago through an ideological lens.

My approach to *Life of Pi* is shaped by having been raised in a family of Bible readers. An understanding of scriptural traditions as literature, and as a matrix for intercultural and inter-species relations, is seldom a part of the core of literature departments. English departments may offer “The Bible as Literature” as an elective, but secular academics tend to find religious topics suspect. It is likely to remain over in a corner, and treated as something rather tainted, without however having the mass appeal of other semi-marginalized classes like creative writing.

A knowledge of the influence of scripture on literature, and on socio-cultural traditions, is one of my own strengths. It was, in fact, on the strength of my study of the use of scripture in the music of Bob Marley and in the speeches and writings Frederick Douglass that I was hired by Jamaicans, for a new position as “Lecturer of Cultural Studies and Film.”<sup>4</sup> But the resources I brought to Jamaica had been gathered outside of English departments, and often, outside of academic contexts altogether. That is part of the story of how I brought what was perceived, in Jamaica, as an insufficiently *disciplined* approach to the study of literature, film, and culture.

I want to focus here primarily on my two-decades long engagement with Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*. I had a pre-history of reading and teaching this text, in both Spanish and English, before I crossed the waters to the Anglo-Caribbean, where I taught this book to West Indians, and then used this experience as a resource when I was mandated to produce (as a condition for continued employment) ready-for-publication literary criticism.

I can no longer remember when I first read *When I Was Puerto Rican*, but it probably was in California, where I lived 1989-2000, while doing graduate degrees in the California State and University of California systems. I remember using a heavy dosage of Latino literary and cultural criticism when I taught Intercultural Communication at Contra Costa College 1998-99. Voices such as Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco brought refreshing perspectives based on their careers as performing artists. I used to play a videotaped phone conversation between Gomez-Peña, who was sitting outside the UCSD Communication Department, my academic home from about 1992-97, and Fusco in New York City. Their critique of the “multicultural” model drew on real-world, largely non-academic experience: Gomez-Peña with his background as a Mexican borderland artist, and Fusco as a daughter of Cuban immigrants in New York whose communicative view of language and culture was evident in her book *English is Broken Here*. Both artists understood that “breaking” static models of language, knowledge, and identity was a good thing. Their careers were by-products of the multicultural boom, but they retained a clear vision of a path beyond the bean-counting tendencies of American multiculturalism.

After moving to Oklahoma in 2000, I remember reading *Cuando Era Puertorriqueña* with my children Sela and Samuel in my house in south Oklahoma City. After doing a Rockefeller fellowship at North Carolina, I got certified as a bilingual teacher, and taught two years in Oklahoma City Public Schools. I used bilingual books as a tool for teaching English to my

Mexican American students. My daughter Sela, in third grade at Shidler Elementary--then a dual immersion program--tested out of the “Accelerated Reader” English and Spanish quizzes for *When I Was Puerto Rican*. So long before I re-entered academic teaching in 2004, Santiago’s memoir was a beloved text for me, my children, and some of my students.

Jamaica was a culture shock, for me and my children. The intense racialism in Jamaica, structured around a black vs. white binary, was alien to me, after having lived a decade in California, and speaking Spanish with my children and community.<sup>5</sup> This context shaped how I taught literature within a Jamaican institution. My conception of teaching literatures in English *as a discipline* evolved through the process of trying to gain critical distance from what looked like a normative (but to my eyes dysfunctional) black-and-white myopia.

When I began preparing, in early 2018, to revise my original study of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, I found in an old flash drive the manuscript of a public lecture given at UWI-Mona in November 2007. This was the “prove that you are competent” lecture mandated by the contested contract extension of the prior spring. The first paragraph makes explicit the problematics of trying to teach a Hispanic-Caribbean / U.S. Latino/a text in a racialized context:

Teaching *When I Was Puerto Rican* to West Indian students in a Modern American Fiction class in Jamaica has produced a certain amount of cognitive dissonance, because in the Anglo-Caribbean, U.S. Latinos are still largely invisible (though at 45 million they are the largest minority) [58 million as of 2017, and 18% of U.S. population].<sup>6</sup> Teaching a text by a Caribbean-born author like Santiago, who writes in English and is a U.S. citizen, also sometimes presents challenges for readers who carry certain residues of a tendency to think of U.S. and Caribbean literatures as being distinct categories.

I want to backtrack to February 2005, the first semester I taught Santiago in Jamaica. What transpired then, in my clash with an institutional context, demonstrates that the charge that I was not up to snuff in literary studies, as a *discipline*, was more about racialized thinking, and a blindness about the extent to which Spanish-speaking peoples were eroding black-white binaries.

When I was asked to give a public lecture on Marley’s 60<sup>th</sup> earthday during my first year, I felt some trepidation. But on February 6, 2005, I gave a talk titled “A ‘Second Emancipation’ Transfigured? Reflections on Bob Marley at 60.”<sup>7</sup> My message was that Garvey’s “second emancipation” from mental slavery was a timeless idea, but that Garvey’s own

pronounced racialism had been a stumbling block. It was Marley and the Rastas who had pointed the way past or around this stumbling block, the mental slavery of racialism. They charted this emancipatory path via a concept of transracialism rooted in a Biblical philosophy of One Blood.

To make visible the permeable boundaries of the international communities that listen to, have been influenced by, and often now are co-creators of Jamaican-inspired music, I made two main points. First, most Jamaican-inspired music is not made in Jamaica. The vast majority is made in Miami, Los Angeles, New York, Toronto, London, Paris, Germany, and Japan, just to name a few thriving centers of production and consumption.<sup>8</sup> My second argument was to challenge views of this culture as a racial property. I focused on Bob Marley's de-centering of race. He did this in personal terms ("I'm not on the black man or the white man's side"), through his references to Biblical notions of non-racial community ("One Blood" / "we are neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, for we are all one...") [Acts 17:26; Galations 3:28], and by grounding his fusion of African pride and trans-racialism in Haile Selassie's own words:

Until the color of a man's skin is of no more importance than the color of his eyes, and until equal rights are guaranteed to all without regard to race, there will always be war.

To further my point about the illogic of making "race" the primary marker of culture of community, I noted that my own children were the same skin color as Bob Marley. By calling attention to the biraciality of my own children, I infuriated some colleagues. How dare I insinuate some sort of commonality between my family, and Bob Marley? The strength of their reactions proved to me the root psycho-social issue: kinship. If they were to concede that there was no "racial" difference between my children and Bob Marley, then that meant, on some level, that they would also have to recognize some form of kinship with the father of my mixed children. And that was impossible for people who are heavily invested in a definition of themselves as having been victimized by, and permanently scarred by, "the white man."

The blind spots into which racialized definitions of community can lead were evident in Carolyn Cooper's comments after my speech. "I've always had problems with that part of Selassie's speech in 'War'," Cooper said. Many Jamaicans had been holding up "War" as an example of Bob's radical side that the global community had whitewashed by celebrating "One Love." But when it became clear that "War" itself led to a non-



racialism that Bob Marley himself had endorsed, well then, Selassie's words themselves had to be repudiated.

That racialized institutional context "infected" views of how I taught literature. That same Spring of 2005, I taught a first version of "Modern American Literary Prose." The master syllabus envisioned only black and white U.S. writers. In an "intervention," I designed the 2006 iteration as a special topic on "U.S. Caribbean & Latin American Immigrant Literature." I ran this proposal by the chair, who approved it. The syllabus included the following explanation:

as of 2000, Latinos are the largest "minority" in the USA; they challenge us to develop a world-view beyond a black-and-white binary... Bilingualism and multi-centeredness (allegiance to more than one nation, language, and ethnic group) will be a recurring theme of this class; these texts will be read as windows on social, cultural, and political changes in the U.S. which are often not visible in English-language media.

The texts were, in the order discussed in class:

Carlos Fuentes, *Old Gringo*

Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*

Cristina García, *Dreaming in Cuban*

Julia Alvarez, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

Some colleagues read this syllabus through the racialized lens they had applied to my speech about Marley. At a departmental meeting I was grilled about this "Hispanic emphasis." I read the language quoted above, about Latinos presenting a non-binary model of multiple allegiances. Dr. Cooper said flatly: "I don't care what Latinos say. I want to hear what *white people* think."

I was told to revise my syllabus using departmental models. I only did so in part, since I understood *Modern American Literature* to be, inescapably, multi-ethnic literature. The texts I chose, in addition to Santiago, described passages between worlds: *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko; Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*; Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*. Johnson challenged white-black racial binaries, and the way I taught it was a successor to my analysis of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.<sup>9</sup> As for an Anglo author, I chose T.C. Boyle, who in *Tortilla Curtain* focuses on the conflicted attitudes of some white liberals towards Mexican immigrants.

I see this mutual incomprehension about American literature between myself and Afro-Caribbean colleagues through an ethnographic lens, now. Literature is a contested “community.” Cultural communities do not necessarily consist of “strongly cohesive groups of like-minded people who all share the same values, cultural habits and attitude,” observes Rein Raud. “What they do share, however, is texts and practices.”<sup>10</sup> But as Raud notes, practices and texts can divide as much as unite. A teacher may love a text which students find boring. Colleagues may not feel the text fits within their definitions of disciplinary/generic boundaries. As for practices, wardens and inmates share a set of practices in a prison, but have different ideas about the meaning of this practice. Our reactions to texts and practices are pre-structured by “communities of meaning,” or interpretive communities, which exist independently of the text, or practice.

The framework I have brought to teaching literature, rooted in lived experience and in my own disciplinary formation, is of *communicative cultures*. I have observed the communicative patterns characteristic of multiracial audiences, in everything from rap music to the abolitionist movement.<sup>11</sup> Communicative cultures challenge the logic of racial community, I argued. Purely racial affiliations were counter-intuitive for me, given my cultural tastes, the bilingualism of my family and community, and the biracialism of my children. So I taught texts representing such in-between-ness. Yet my Jamaican colleagues seemed committed to texts that reaffirmed racial binaries: the existential victimization of black people, and the inherent racism of white people. But in the cultural communities I had lived in, Asians and Latinos were by far my largest groups of students. “White” and “black” people were over in a corner, still arguing with each other. Most people I knew were weary of that spectacle, and were hungry for true diversity.

As this sketch indicates, I had begun to teach *When I Was Puerto Rican* as a window on the contemporary United States, as a nation in which most people in urban areas seem to have come from “across the waters.” With the passage of time, and in other international contexts, I came to teach Santiago primarily as a model of embodied writing, as well as a cautionary tale about exoticizing “ethnic” cultures or subjecting them to the burden of representation.

Eventually I came to a rapprochement with English departments. As George Stocking remarked playfully about his relationship with anthropology, I have remained “an outsider with no present commitment”<sup>12</sup> to any particular faction within the fractious tribe of English Studies.<sup>13</sup> Thoreau’s “voice on the edge of town” is close to my natural affinity, along with a lineage of autodidacts, from Nobel laureates such as José Saramago and

Herman Hesse, to Kenneth Burke who never took a degree but pioneered a *new rhetorical* analysis of literature, and social action.<sup>14</sup> My roots in communicative cultures (pre-academic practice as well as disciplinary training) now shape my use of literature within Writing Studies, as a map for moving between worlds. I have also folded Creative Writing Studies into this transferable mix. As Stocking remained an outsider to retain an overview of anthropology, so my grounding in communicative cultures, and my use of a Writing Studies framework, means that I remain a semi-outsider in English Studies. That is a positionality with which I am comfortable, because it affords an overview of the wider purposes of literature, especially for providing intercultural or transnational “maps.”

The more I acquired (or submitted to) academic discipline, the more I felt compelled to maintain something of my own writerly voice—and to defend the right to do so, and then to theorize that right. A certain storytelling mode was not a problem while I was writing book chapters. An editor who commissioned my Afterword to a Signet reissue of Douglass’ *Narrative*, for example, did not seem troubled by my evolving disciplinary location. But journal editors in literature and later in rhetoric and composition were often prescriptive, and even invasive.

From 2014 I emigrated to Creative Writing Studies, and found inspiration in writers such as Wendy Bishop who argued that one could do both—rigorous academic scholarship, but also a narrative style that could at moments sing. While doing battle with academic editors over my writerly voice, and engaging critiques of constipated writing by Michael Billig and others, I came to understand that Bishop’s sense of the “miseducational parts” of her academic training had roots in a history of creative artists who considered school useless, or imprisoning.<sup>15</sup> Twenty-two years after finishing my doctorate, I still sometimes quote Bob Marley’s line: “I don’t have education, I have inspiration. If I had [only] education I would be a damn fool.”

I have taken my cue from Anna Leahy, who asked those seeking theoretical rigor: “How can creative writing studies affect creative writing if the scholars do not retain credibility with the creative writers?”<sup>16</sup> I ask a similar question to literary studies. Speaking some of the language of our subjects, to return to models cited earlier, could include D.H. Lawrence’s lyrical criticism, the cerebral pleasure of Coetzee connecting dots on an international canvas in his public sphere literary criticism, or Zadie Smith’s knowing inter-weaving of literature and popular culture. Lately I have found encouragement from editors who know that “there is more than one way to skin a cat,” as my father used to say. A National Endowment for the Humanities reader, for instance, wrote that I was “a

creative scholar who thinks in terms of networks or constellations of ideas, rather than linear arguments.” Editors in journals such as *Writing on the Edge* and *Intermezzo* have encouraged me to narrate my precarious crossings in more experimental form.

Now to return to the matrix of that culture clash in Jamaica. Why did I continue to teach *When I Was Puerto Rican*? I also taught *Old Gingo* for several years and developed an analysis of that novel published in *Latin American Literary Review*. But Fuentes required translation outside the Southwestern borderland. The other works from the 2006 class came to seem more like period pieces. But Santiago had staying power; her literary style was transferable. “How to Eat a Guava” in particular has served me well in many educational contexts.

Much of my current approach to “Guava” was forged in a STEM university in Saudi Arabia, that included no literature in their curriculum. That institutional and cultural context shaped my sense of GE courses as an opportunity to develop some cultural literacy, as a part of a package of transferable skills. I saw that coming of age stories travel well, as a form of literature which is immediately intelligible to non-literature students, especially when such stories focus on movement between linguistic, cultural, or national worlds.

Now for a few words about the wider purposes of writing about Santiago, and *Life of Pi*, as part of the “Sea Crossings” triptych. I hope to help illuminate three broad contexts. First, the texts studied in this section, and the critical reception of which I am a part, reveal dissatisfaction with national frameworks for literature and culture. There is a growing “recognition of the artificiality of assuming a purely national approach.”<sup>17</sup>

Second, borderland studies is not just a U.S.-Mexican phenomenon. Santiago’s memoir embodies the emergence of Puerto Rico as a “borderland anomalous state.” Drawing on Jorge Mañach’s view of Puerto Rico as “effectively a borderland” and “a space of experimentation for a new trans-America order,” and on Kristen Silva Gruesz’s notion of residents of a larger Caribbean being *Ambassadors of Culture*, Ramón Soto-Crespo argues that Puerto Ricans (including Santiago) “embod[y] the non-nationalist logic of the borderlands.”<sup>18</sup>

Third, including Canada in comparative American studies helps provide a further corrective in which a hemispheric framework “supplant[s] national dividing lines,” and is more attentive to “contact zones across the Americas.”<sup>19</sup>

Teaching and writing about these books has also helped me understand that the notion of a writerly voice is something like a faith. One carries that faith into various experiences, and encounters with texts, as in “Sitting

in Limbo”: “I know that my faith will lead me on.” *When I Was Puerto Rican*, and *Life of Pi*, have provided reference points in my own crossings. Like Pi, I had to call on various belief systems to survive “disasters at sea”—like my academic shipwrecks. Like Santiago and Pi, I had to learn or re-learn new languages to cross over. In my case, there was English-to-Spanish, but also a hybrid scholarly form—Communication, literature, and the raft of Creative Writing functioning something like Pi’s three faiths.

The following analyses of *Life of Pi*, and *When I Was Puerto Rican* map new forms of sea crossings. They also illustrate my emergent “disciplined interdisciplinarity” in literary analysis. “Feeding Tiger, Finding God” was a gateway to transnational literature, while re-engaging Santiago allows me to demonstrate why a Writing Studies umbrella “strikes the right note,” by allowing a combination of literary analysis, composition, and creative writing studies. In the third part of the trilogy, “Tied to the Mast,” I adapt a more fully literary voice and attempt an overview of sea crossing stories, on a historical and transnational canvas.

## Notes

1. Rein Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016): 31.
2. Academic Literacies argues for the importance of building on pre-academic literacies. See *Working with Academic Literacies: Case Studies Towards Transformative Practice*, ed. Theresa Lillis, et al. (WAC Clearinghouse/Parlor Press, 2015), especially Brian Street in conversation with Mary R. Lea and Theresa Lillis, "Revisiting the Question of Transformation in Academic Literacies: The Ethnographic Imperative," pp. 383-390.
3. On how demand for objectivity strips writers of their culture, see Phyllis Mentzell Ryder, "Multicultural Public Spheres and the Rhetorics of Democracy," *JAC* 27.3-4 (2007): 505-538, esp. p. 524. My discussion of this issue: Gregory Stephens, "Transferable Skills and Traveling Theory in Creative Writing Pedagogy," *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (Fall 2017), pp. 6-7.
4. I have told some of this story in "Brown Boy Blues...inna Jamaica," in *Authentic Blackness / "Real" Blackness: Essays on the Meaning of Blackness in Culture and Literature*, ed. Martin Japtok (Peter Lang, 2011). My work on in influence of the Bible on Douglass and Marley can be found in *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (Cambridge UP, 1999). See the chapter "Frederick Douglass as integrative ancestor: the consequences of interracial co-creation," and in the Marley chapter, the section "Fruits," which analyses the use of the Bible in Marley's masterpiece *Survival*, as well as "sidebar," "Personal Note on the Study of Religious Expression," 153-54.
5. My takes on racialism in Jamaica includes on-line writing, radio "edutainment" specials, and mainstream journalism. Gregory Stephens, "The Fire Burn Controversy: On the Uses of Fire in a Culture of Love and Rebellion," *JahWorks* (Jan 1, 2001); "The Potent Legacy of One Love," *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 6, 2000); in scholarship, "Brown Boy Blues."
6. Antonio Flores, "How the U.S. Hispanic population is changing." *Pew Research Center* (Sept. 18, 2017); <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/18/how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing/>
7. The "Marley at 60" speech was posted as "A Second Emancipation Transfigured? Rethinking Mental Slavery, Racialism, and Bob Marley's legacy," *Jahworks* (Feb. 6, 2005); revised with observations on the debate in Jamaican media: "Warring Against One Love," *JahWorks* (Feb 6, 2007). This speech drew on my "A 'Second Emancipation': The Transfiguration of Garvey's 'Racial Empire' in Rastafarian Thought," in *Reevaluating the Pan-africanism of W.E.B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey: Escapist Fantasy or Relevant Reality*, ed. James Conyers (Edwin Mellen, 2006).
8. Gregory Stephens, "I 'n' I in Vienna: Double Vision and Interpenetration in European Dub Reggae," Presented at Global Reggae Studies Conference, University of the West Indies-Mona (May 2008); "Dub Revolution: Finding a Music Home Through the German-UK Looking Glass," *Reggae Vibes* (May 2004).