

# The Literary Practice of Complexity<sup>1</sup>

---

J. NEIL C. GARCIA

I'd like to speak about criticism and poetry—activities I routinely engage in, premised on the idea of complexity, which they both demonstrate and critique, by turns.

Complexity in literary criticism is a consequence of the “interplay” of elements in the production of meaning. Because literature is communication, it is necessarily comprised of the following: a message (which is called the text); a sender (called the author); a receiver (reader); a code (the language, in which the text is couched); and finally, a reality, world or context, within which this signifying activity is taking place.

Meaning in literature is a function of the set of assumptions—which is to say, the “theory”—that one brings to bear on it. Roughly, we can classify literary theories into the following: mimetic theories emphasize literature’s link to “reality”; expressive theories emphasize literature’s link to its author (for instance, it “mirrors” her inner world, class or gender position, etc.); pragmatic theories stress literature’s relationship with its audience (for example, it offers a source of knowledge or wisdom); and formalist theories stress literature’s uniqueness as a distinct object of study.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, most contemporary literary theories demonstrate the limitations of this model, by raising mimetic, pragmatic, formalist and expressive questions about literature all together, and all at once. These theories also view language not as a transparent and referential medium, but rather as an interested mediation and a cultural force, that in fact constitutes all the individual components of this “grid.”

*As such, language constitutes all thought, even as it cannot directly reflect the world (or experience), for it is merely a system of unmotivated signs, which produce meaning by virtue of these signs' differential relations with one another.*

Obviously, literary complexity arises from there being many factors—all of them multifaceted, in their own right—that come into play every time meaning is intended, expressed, “shaped,” disseminated, interpreted, and situated. What makes literature complex is the multiplicity of possible readings, premised on varying degrees of emphases on literature’s different structural elements, that these different approaches to the text occasion. I’d like now to speak about one particular theory—post-structuralism—and the interpretive procedure that it purveys.

Post-structuralism emerged among the French intelligentsia as a reaction against the mechanistic tendency and “systems-focused” approach of structuralism.<sup>3</sup> Structuralism’s central intuition—that there are implicit patterns of organization that underlie things, and that these “structures” are not objectively present in reality, but are rather the imputations of human ways of perceiving, thinking and “making sense” of experience—can be traced to the “linguistic turn,” as it was effected by the work of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure.

In a series of lectures, Saussure argued that instead of merely recording or naming, language actually constitutes our world (for example, the words for colors make them real, rather than merely label them). As such, language constitutes all thought, even as it cannot directly reflect the world (or experience), for it is merely a system of unmotivated signs, which produce meaning by virtue of these signs’ differential relations with one another. Because this system is closed, the links between signs and their referents in the outside world are arbitrary and entirely conventional.

The Saussurean idea that language is arbitrary, relational, and constitutive, is central to the project of structuralist critics, who regard human phenomena in terms of systems that are self-contained, in which individual elements are relational and thus interconnected in structures of

increasing complexity. Post-structuralism pursues the structuralist insight on the constitutive role that language plays in creating reality, and takes it to its utmost logical implication: since everything is mediated linguistically, then there exists no objectively real, self-evident, fixed, or certain entity upon which to anchor meaning. There's no certainty—no truth or “center”—that is not already constructed by language, which is nothing if not an unstable and “deconstructible” system of relational and differential signs. Hence, unlike structuralism, which seeks to arrive at a scientific knowledge of language and signification—through intensive data-gathering, comparisons, and inference, that should supposedly reveal, at higher and higher levels of abstraction, deep and underlying structures of meaning—post-structuralism eschews all kinds of “systems analysis,” arguing that there are only interpretations, and that there are no unmediated “facts.”

Since language is a hermetic system of unmotivated signs, words float free from the ideas they name, as well as from the realities they reference. Meaning exists as a plural, slippery, and fluid “trace,” that is disseminated unpredictably. And because meaning is relational, words are always already contaminated by their opposites, that constitute or define them. Finally, while the structuralist project seeks to explain and rationalize reality by uncovering the covert structures that govern it (as well as our perception of it), post-structuralism distrusts precisely this kind of rational undertaking, for it regards the human subject to be nothing if not a construction of social and/or “linguistic” forces.

Deconstruction, a key interpretive procedure employed by post-structuralists, derives from the notion of “slipping” or indeterminacy which underlies language and certainly all linguistic phenomena, like literature. As Saussurean linguistics first clarified, the elements of signification—namely, the concrete signifier, the abstract signified, and the referent which the sign serves to indicate—are related to each other only arbitrarily and therefore unstably. Signifiers refer only to other signifiers, in a chain of slippery associations in which no final and positive term—a “transcendental signified”—ever appears

to stabilize the indeterminacy of the signification process. Being textuality, language slips in relation to itself, as well as to the world.

Meaning in literature is even more complex and “slippery” because literature’s necessary rhetoricity compounds the inherent instability of meaning in language with the layerings, associations, and “replacements” of its figures of speech. And then, literature’s textual and rhetorical indeterminacy is confounded by the intertextual traces of words, ideas, conventions, and other texts that precede it and that together comprise the master archive of meaning from which all literary texts ultimately derive, which is none other than culture itself.

And so, we might say that the key marker for complexity in post-structuralist theory is the notion of “difference.” As a critical term, difference denotes not only the differential play of meaning inherent in language, but also the situation and the very being of bodies and entities that exist in space and time. It is for these two reasons that the deconstructivist emphasis on difference has lent itself well to a variety of sociopolitical advocacies—in terms of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and others.

The deconstructionist identifies a text’s key opposition, and where it proves most unstable, she reverses the binary. This form of “close reading” demonstrates how the binary’s subordinate or inferior term is actually indispensable, and prior, to the first or privileged term. An example of this is culture, which is typically devalued in relation to nature. Deconstruction argues that culture is actually what defines and names nature, and thus cannot be simply inferior or subordinate to it. In like manner, we may argue that the reviled idea of “contamination” is what makes the idea of purity possible, that homosexuality is the ground upon which heterosexuality rests, that femininity constitutively haunts the masculinity that repudiates it, etc. To reinscribe the terms of these oppositions, the reader must therefore transvaluate and transform the common understanding and hierarchy of these concepts.

It is important to remember that the notion of deconstruction doesn't deny the possibility of meaning. As a method of interpretation it merely denies the dominance of any one interpretation, of any one mode of signifying, and shifts things away from the question of whether the reading is correct, definitive, or true, toward the question of whether the reading is convincing, useful, productive, etc. This makes the deconstructive procedure, far from being hermetic and obscure, quite immediate and pragmatic.

Post-structuralist readings that attend exclusively to questions of textuality, rhetoricity, and intertextuality come across as being admittedly pointless, apolitical, formalistic, self-indulgent and nihilistic, in comparison to those strands of post-structuralism that deconstruct traditional binaries governing discussions of the body, desire, power, and subjectivity. Thus, beyond the philosophical premises upon which it rests, as a method of textual analysis deconstruction is being deployed most excitingly and most usefully in conjunction with feminism, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, in order to address the questions of oppressive difference in terms of gender, culture, sexuality, race, etc. By stressing the undecidability of textual meaning and the instability of such important categories as the self, the center, etc., post-structuralism undermines any and all totalitarian theoretical systems that claim to be universal. By emphasizing the indeterminacy of texts, deconstruction dismantles the binary oppositions of formal and/or structuralist thought, and institutes in their place nonhierarchical plurality or the free play of meanings.

It needs to be said that the reading of literature didn't always appear so complicated. Time was when one could supposedly read literature simply, atheoretically, *commonsensically*. Of course we now know that this "commonsense" proceeded precisely from a theory. Following the lead of Western critics, we can call this theory the "liberal humanist consensus," which was the norm in literary studies until the 1970s. Its implicit (meaning, rarely confessed), mostly "formalist" tenets were, among others, the following: good

literature is timeless; the literary text is meaningful in and of itself; the text's verbal reality must be studied closely, and in isolation; continuity in literature is more important than innovation; literature's ulterior purpose is the promotion of humane values; literature shows rather than tells; etc.

The transition to more self-reflexive and complicated forms of "critical theory" in literary studies in the West took place when the "linguistic turn"—sourced, as I have just sketched out here, from structuralist and post-structuralist discourses—raised questions relating to language and philosophy. In the 1980s, energized by this encounter, literary studies in Europe and America saw the "return to history"—meaning, the reinstating of the question of context and politics to the literary critical agenda. In the early 80s, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism arose in the US and England respectively, and both approaches aimed to integrate literary and historical study while also using some of the key insights of structuralism and post-structuralism. The 1990s generally saw the debunking of all grand narratives, embracing instead dispersal, eclecticism, and "special interest" forms of criticism and/or theory.

As partially "evoked" by my foregoing summary of deconstruction, the common themes in contemporary critical theory may be summarized into the following general statements: there are no essences, only constructions; ideology is inescapable; language constitutes and constructs both consciousness and the world it perceives; there is no essential difference between creative and literary texts, since both are simply instances of signification; literary meaning in itself is never absolute or definite; and totalizing and universal concepts are forms of dangerous fiction.

Turning, now, to my other practice... Let me begin by saying that in the history of modern poetry, complexity has long been considered a "virtue"—since the time of the Romantics, to be precise. The ideal of uniformity or standardization, derived from Enlightenment science, gave way to the ideal of diversity, that was much prized in Romanticism.<sup>4</sup>

In the twentieth century, complexity became a desirable quality in literary compositions, functioning, in the lyric form, as the norm. The poem itself was, at this time, understood to be a composite of different and interrelated parts: syntax, diction, style, imagery, rhythm, argument, narrative, etc. In the present scheme of literary things, poetry's complexity has been understood as a matter of semantic richness—the multiplicity of its meanings, deriving largely from the ability of its figurative language and the complexity of its form to *hypersemanticize* themselves, and generate ambiguity—which is to say, a wealth of interpretations. Across the centuries, poetic critics have identified the poetic devices that most commonly bring this density of meaning about: irony, allusion, symbol, repetition, fragmentation, and of course, paradox.

*The instructive function has been argued in terms of the valorizing of poetry's Reason, Wisdom, Truth, Statement, and Content, while its delightfulness may be seen in the valorizing, across centuries of poetic theorizing, of poetry's Imagination, Pleasure, Beauty, Image, and Form.*

In poetry, in fact, complexity is primarily an offshoot of the semantic operations of paradox, which is the complex unity, the reconciliation of irreducible differences that the poem, being metaphorical, routinely performs.<sup>5</sup> The effect of poetry itself demonstrates paradox—at once *dulce et utile*, which is to say at once instructive and delightful, which represent the polar “concerns” of virtually all poetic theories across the centuries. The instructive function has been argued in terms of the valorizing of poetry's Reason, Wisdom, Truth, Statement, and Content, while its delightfulness may be seen in the valorizing, across centuries of poetic theorizing, of poetry's Imagination, Pleasure, Beauty, Image, and Form. Despite the fact that these “elements” can be provisionally and analytically identified in the course of one's reading, as anybody here who has ever read and enjoyed poetry can confirm, a poem as “gestalt” is finally an experience that is all and yet none of these things, all at once.

The form of poetry can be explained in terms of a poem's story, sound, and image, and the content of insight of poetry is its “significance”—originating from the poem's objective situation, which is particular, but which metaphorically evokes

a general or more universal intuition. Thus, the paradox of poetic insight is that it is necessarily embodied: the “poetic image” itself contains or is the statement. The poetic image in fact isn’t just itself: it stands—it is a metaphor—for something else. In poetry, a metaphor posits a resemblance between two unlike things, establishing their literal difference while at the same time transforming them figuratively into each other. Thus, the image-turned-metaphor reveals the paradox that in poetry, the literal can become the figurative, and form is nothing if not (realized) content.

It is important to pause and remember that paradox in poetry is a compositional procedure, while in deconstruction it is an analytical concern. In poetry, the appreciation of paradox lies in its being “reconciled” or unified by and in the poem’s language, while in deconstruction it is recognized and understood as an indication of the text’s “undecidable” meaning. A paradox is a statement that is self-contradictory, containing two claims that are equally true, and yet cannot both be true at the same time. Can a person be both body and spirit, can love be both liberating and constraining, can poetry be both form and content? It might help to recall that oxymorons are in fact paradoxes in shorthand form. As a unifying of difference—as a “harmonizing” of incongruity—a paradox, like an oxymoron, generates unexpected significance and offhand truth, which is irreducible to either of its original terms.

Paradox has been called a fundamental form of human experience, and it is essential in poetry, whose “task” is to represent the “simultaneous” nature of the world: at once beautiful and ugly, happy and sad, fleeting and enduring, light and dark... The paradoxical is, in fact, the “disruptive” function of poetic expression, for it indirectly or ironically enlarges and modifies conventional understandings. The intensity of its paradox is therefore a very good indicator of a poem’s “poeticity,” and a number of poetic critics have been wrong in emphasizing only the harmonizing and “unifying” effect of a poem’s use of analogical knowledge—for poetry’s generative meanings equally stem from the disruptive, ambiguous, and ironic effects of its paradoxical character.



Poetry has been defined as “the completest mode of utterance” (I. A. Richards), and it is able to be this through the ironies and displacements of its semantic units—words, lines, stanzas—that together produce the “textual” effect of paradox. Of course, aside from being the consequence of these formal features, meaning in poetry is finally a matter of interpretation, an activity that, by necessity, implicates considerations of the poet’s possible intention, as well as the “situation” that frames both its writing and its reading—including the ideologies that may have shaped its composition and that can shape its reception. Recalling my previous statement, the question of literary interpretation is nothing if not the complexity of literature itself, which as a communicative activity, is necessarily composed of text, author, reader, language and context.

The “intensive manifold” that reality is said to be is uniquely approachable through poetry which, like the world itself, is an ambiguous “flux of interpenetrated elements unseizable by the intellect” (T. E. Hulme, channeling the work of Henri-Louise Bergson). The textual demonstration of this complexity is nothing if not difference—or in poetry’s paradoxical case, “self-difference”—and flagging it is what, among other things, the interpretive procedure of deconstruction seeks to accomplish.

Allow me now to “moot” my short presentation on complexity, by reading four poems, whose nature as a paradoxical experience means that they cannot really be represented—least of all, replaced—by even the most careful, scholarly, and critically astute analytic attempts to “decompose” them.

The first is a poem by my beloved mentor and friend, the late Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta. In it we are presented the idea of love as a paradox that unites the realities of distance and proximity, difference and sameness—dualities that the experience of her poem (and indeed, of love itself) both recognizes and dissolves. The second is by the American poet, Lisel Mueller. In this dramatic monologue, the poet blurs the

distinction between sight and blindness, by bringing this contradiction to the point of beautiful ‘crisis,’ that hums at the very heart of her poem’s singular vision. The third is my own poem, the first in a seven-poem sequence titled “Gift.” Proffered by the same lyric speaker, who sees in the ocean a figure for the boundlessness of desire—herein bound by little else than language—this poem’s utterance is being spurred by the sea’s own oscillating gestures of tenderness and cruelty, and by the lyric self’s realization of its “permeability” to the other (and therefore, of its own impossibility). Finally, another personal piece, this time reflecting on the prospect of resolving the human paradox—of breaking down human complexity—all because someone once said (the great thinker, Roland Barthes, a lifelong favorite) that the Beloved is made of body on one side, and the voice (which is to say, volition) on the other. Of course, this meditation ends, as it must, with the speaker becoming rudely disabused of his initial illusion, courtesy of a vision of beautifully self-possessed and desirously well-hewn bodies on a sunlit beach one lazy summer afternoon: our human truth as persons is, precisely, nothing if not an irreducible unity. Which is to say, “a flux... unseizable by the intellect.”

I hope to make it clear, with these poems, that the value of poetry—of art—in a “complicated” university like ours, is precisely in its being able to create and provide knowledge of human complexity experienced not merely as “the real,” but rather as “the true.”

Which is to say: as art’s precious and transfigured vision, also called *illumination*.

**a kind of burning<sup>6</sup>**

Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta

it is perhaps because  
 one way or the other  
 we keep this distance  
 closeness will tug us apart  
 in many directions  
 in absolute din

how we love the same  
 trivial pursuits and  
 insignificant gewgaws  
 spoken or inert  
 claw at the same straws  
 pore over the same jigsaws  
 trying to make heads or tails  
 you take the edges  
 i take the center  
 keeping fancy guard  
 loving beyond what is there  
 you sling at stars  
 i bedeck the weeds  
 straining in song or  
 profanities toward some  
 fabled meeting apart  
 from what dreams read  
 and suns dismantle  
 we have been all the hapless  
 lovers in this wayward world  
 in almost all kinds of ways  
 except we never really meet  
 but for this kind of burning

### **Monet Refuses the Operation<sup>7</sup>**

Lisel Mueller

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
 around the streetlights in Paris  
 and what I see is an aberration  
 caused by old age, an affliction.  
 I tell you it has taken me all my life  
 to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
 to soften and blur and finally banish  
 the edges you regret I don't see,  
 to learn that the line I called the horizon  
 does not exist and sky and water,  
 so long apart, are the same state of being.  
 Fifty-four years before I could see  
 Rouen cathedral is built

of parallel shafts of sun,  
 and now you want to restore  
 my youthful errors: fixed  
 notions of top and bottom,  
 the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
 wisteria separate  
 from the bridge it covers.  
 What can I say to convince you  
 the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
 night after night to become  
 the fluid dream of the Thames?  
 I will not return to a universe  
 of objects that don't know each other,  
 as if islands were not the lost children  
 of one great continent. The world  
 is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
 becomes water, lilies on water,  
 above and below water,  
 becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
 and white and cerulean lamps,  
 small fists passing sunlight  
 so quickly to one another  
 that it would take long, streaming hair  
 inside my brush to catch it.  
 To paint the speed of light!  
 Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
 burn to mix with air  
 and change our bones, skin, clothes  
 to gases. Doctor,  
 if only you could see  
 how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
 and how infinitely the heart expands  
 to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

### Gift<sup>8</sup>

The rhythm that hears me  
 this day is the sea's:  
 salt-borne, choking with weed  
 and oysters, the movement

of piscean shapes weaving water  
far as the eye can see.  
And I am back  
amid the repeating waves off Pamilacan:  
the vessel bearing me  
is little else but desire,  
a density much heavier  
than our earth's liquid nature—  
its only choice is to float.  
It is not stillness  
I am seeking from this ocean,  
but its pain:  
a violence of forms  
in this sweep of appearances—  
flashes of fish flying,  
herons and somersaulting terns,  
the handsome heads of cetaceans rising  
from abyssal depths, even  
the glint of shark-fins,  
slicing the horizon like quick  
knives. Life caught  
in the maw  
of its own consumption:  
permeable, as though we all  
are designed to pass through  
each other like food—  
plankton sifting  
into the fine-tooth-comb  
of baleen, sunlight  
rippling past riptides  
to reach the sightless bottom  
of rock.  
And you are everywhere  
even as you are nowhere  
in touch, for here is the place  
things cherished are laid bare in—  
the edge of body's knowing,  
the edge of the world.  
And I know my task  
for the day

is no different from the tide's:  
 to take in and let go,  
 to push against land and  
 pull away, to love you without claims.  
 For nothing given  
 is ever owned, and ghosts  
 we already are  
 of fickle matter's imaginings.  
 I told you I am yours for the kill—  
 I can never take it back.  
 Let this gift pass through  
 the self's fictive openings,  
 allow it brief residence someplace  
 in the soul.  
 True: not even the sea can hold us.  
 But listen:  
 its real bequest is not loss,  
 it is transformation—  
 glass fished out  
 from among a shore's brittle ruins  
 is never quite glass  
 but a muted shard of water,  
 all the ocean pressed against the palm.  
 An empty shell, a grainy piece of coral.  
 The gift is yours  
 to keep or not to.  
 I can no more reclaim it  
 than the sea disown its salt—  
 for, love, how do you  
 unbreath  
 a breath?

### Loving the Body<sup>9</sup>

....on one side, the soft, warm, downy  
 adorable body, and on the other, the  
 singing, well-formed, worldly voice—always  
 the voice.

Roland Barthes

The Other's body,  
if Barthes is to be believed,  
is a horizon cleft between  
what gives love  
and what may begrudge it:  
here the skin and bone and hair  
that we can hold or even hold us,  
there the voice that purrs its faith  
or chooses not to.  
That rain-lulled night,  
before we could turn in dead  
to dark and salt-edged Dumaguete,  
you and I found ourselves  
tossed among the waves  
of a sea that rhymed, a deep-blue riddle  
from which no answer could be fished  
without, as an old man learned too late,  
a struggle:  
when we are grey and doddering,  
our whole life gossamery and lived,  
which of the two  
will likely haunt us more—  
memory or the body? It is easy  
to see how it might be both,  
but impelled to further thought  
we took, expectedly, a side:  
you, memory,  
I, the body.  
Out on El Dorado's golden sands  
the morning next,  
we came to see how foolish we had been,  
for there resplendent before our gaze  
were bodies woven into speaking souls—  
human will fused with seamless matter  
in which it felt  
undoubtedly at home:  
the hirsute white man's torso  
already an intention meaning to be seen,  
his stubbly, blue-eyed face  
clearly an accomplishment of choice,

the brown and sculptured body  
 of an Oriental diving coach  
 a handiwork of self-regard,  
 a kind of beastly labor  
 inseparable  
 from its cultivated taste—  
 a package-deal that would not,  
 but would not split  
 in two.  
 Thus there is no option,  
 in truth, for anyone unprepossessing  
 or misshapen:  
 denied the body's wondrous gift,  
 no memory can come to sit  
 beside his dimming brain  
 to comfort him in death.  
 Barthes may well be wrong:  
 horizon is but a ruse  
 the eye supplies  
 for its requirement of redeeming depth,  
 and no lustrous line  
 necessarily  
 divides the world.  
 Sing-song voice and its box of flesh  
 are in all respects the same, and one—  
 the body speaks, its speech embodies.  
 Denied its memory's soul, the body  
 cannot love, or give.  
 Simply put: there is no Other  
 holding us or that we may hold,  
 if it cannot, or will not,  
 remember how it is to whisper  
*Yes or No.*

By way of a conclusion, allow me to summarize some well-known criticisms<sup>10</sup>—mostly post/structuralist and Marxist—against positivism, which arguably underwrites “complexity theory” as it has been described, thus far.



Positivism is the philosophical position that takes empirical (which is to say, “sense-derived”) evidence to be the only valid source of reliable or “authoritative” knowledge. Applied to social studies, this view holds that human phenomena—for example, social forms—are generalizable according to certain scientific principles and/or “natural laws” (an oxymoron, since laws are man-made, by definition). Of course, sociology has itself criticized this view, arguing that not all human affairs—or social acts—can be causally explained (no matter how complexly).

*...the idea of praxis effectively blurs the distinction between value and fact, turning the very practice of sociology into an ethical project (it is, in other words, an acknowledgment of the truth that knowledge production is always fraught with political implications).*

In particular, Marxist sociology, invoking Hegelian dialectics, insists that sociological analysis is true only to the degree that it helps transform the world into a more livable place. As such, it must inquire into facticity itself—examining its assumptions, and critically situating things within the larger whole, which is history. Within the Marxist frame of analysis, the taken-for-granted assumptions of the status quo are to be interrogated, as well as “transcended”—which is to say, contextualized within bigger structures of “unactualized potentials.” For Marxist social theory, “conscious practical action” or praxis is a valid and necessary criterion for judging truth, and it prevents the sociologist from becoming a mere gatherer of mathematical abstractions. Hence, the idea of praxis effectively blurs the distinction between value and fact, turning the very practice of sociology into an ethical project (it is, in other words, an acknowledgment of the truth that knowledge production is always fraught with political implications). To be more specific, from the perspective of praxis, the positivist privileging of “instrumental rationality” is simply an endorsement of the alienation of labor that capitalism, by its very nature, requires.

Needless to say, positivism’s privileging of science as the only true source of knowledge reduces the entirety of the human question to discrete and measurable quantities (for example, social activities are nothing but neural events, life itself is reducible to physical systems, etc.), forgetting that

whatever “patterns” or “facts” science may discover about the social world these are far from objective, and are ultimately “interested” categories that derive from the workings of subjective consciousness, which is always already culturally constructed and historically mediated. In other words, positivism fails to account for the role the observer plays in “constructing” the reality he or she supposedly simply records. In equating social reality with the scientific explanation of natural reality, positivism also reifies—*thingifies*—by turning abstract and static the lives of human beings. By assuming that facts exist *a priori* to any subjective “conceptualizing” of them, positive thoughts fail to understand how the very formation of those “facts” is an act of consciousness. Hence, positivism makes a ruinous assumption that the world is objectively knowable. As a conceptual move this serves to eradicate subjectivity, even as in most cases the object being positivistically studied pertains precisely to various “subjective states” that exist within persons.

We must remember that the very act of equating social reality with numbers is itself a form of value judgment, and that even as positivists appear to set out to explain the social world, most of the time what they are really doing is merely accepting—endorsing, even—the existing social relations of production. It is ever the case that facts emerge out of a theory, and because positivists are not interested in examining their own *scientific* assumptions—for this kind of “theoretical” interest would obviously confound the very thing they are trying to perform—they cannot even see that the distinction they make between “value” and “fact” is itself already a value-laden act, and that the social world is not a given fact of nature, but rather a historical construction, or a product of historical labor by historically situated individuals. Needless to say, the history that positivist accounts exclude is so pervasive as a constitutive force that it constructs even the very ways we perceive the world and its state of “factual” things.

And so, we may conclude that positivism merely describes facts, in order to ultimately maintain them, while a more critical form of sociology views facts and reality itself as

historical constructions. Implicit in this “theoretical” understanding is the anticipatory hope that the forces governing these facts can be willfully wielded, in order to change the world for the better. In this sense, “critical sociology” studies human society in order to examine and take to task the forces of oppression and imperialism, and become an ethico-political practice that will fight for the dignity of human beings all over the world. Social scientists cannot just stand idly by, and allow their discipline to become an academic extension of repressive state apparatuses. The very claim that society can be objectively represented at all clearly runs the risk of endorsing it as it currently exists, which basically means foregoing critique in favor of maintaining the status quo. Simply put: because positivism’s interest is merely to arrive at a description of reality, it lacks the “radical edge” that contemporary theory—represented, for example, by Marxism and post-structuralism—frankly professes and deploys.

Finally, I just wish to say that at the heart of complexity theory, as it has been “imagined” and practiced thus far, is the paradox of a determined but unknowable “reality” or “universe.” This paradox is arguably what propels the postpositivist<sup>11</sup> recognition of the inescapability of theory in all “realist” accounts, which do not so much represent as construct the reality to which they painstakingly attend (implying that whatever reality actually is, it is a mystery that by definition must exceed such descriptions). Moreover, the ruminations of the Nobelist and physical chemist Ilya Prigogine, invoking the relativistic measurements of nuclear and quantum physics (that practically dissolve the subject/object binary upon which the hard sciences rest) conclude precisely with the idea that it is philosophical and creative perspectives that can best approach this paradox.<sup>12</sup> As Prigogine has himself eloquently conceded, without an epistemology of certainty, complexity theorists have no choice but to embrace the paradoxical and the uncertain, which to Prigogine’s mind is what the various people in the humanities are already, in fact, admirably doing.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I presented this paper at “Understanding Complex Dynamical Systems: A Forum on Social and Institutional Change,” 20 September 2013, National Institute of Physics Auditorium, National Science Complex, University of the Philippines, Diliman.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the “communication model” in order to understand literary relations was first proposed by M. H. Abrams, in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> I source this discussion of post-structuralism and deconstruction from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2001) and Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Garber, “Simplicity and Complexity,” *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton University Press, 1993), 1151-53.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst H. Beller, “Paradox,” *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton University Press, 1993), 876-77.

<sup>6</sup> Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta, *The Ophelia A. Dimalanta Reader, Vol. 1* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Lisel Mueller, *Second Language* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> J. Neil C. Garcia, *The Sorrows of Water* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998), 36-39.

<sup>9</sup> Garcia, *The Sorrows of Water*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> These “criticisms” are, of course, the Frankfurt School’s (particularly Horkheimer’s). For an elaboration, see Andrew Fagan, “Theodor Adorno (1903-1969),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/adorno/> (accessed 12 August 2013), and George R. Kirkpatrick, George N. Katsiaficas and Mary Lou Emery, *Introduction to Critical Sociology* (New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc., 1987).

<sup>11</sup> A good summary of the postpositivist position may be found in John H. Zammuto, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes. Post-positivism in the study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Walby, “Complexity Theory, Globalisation, and Diversity,” Paper presented to conference of the British Sociological Association, University of York, April 2003, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/people/swdocs/Complexity%20Theory%20realism%20and%20path%20dependency.pdf> (accessed 12 August 2013).