

Return to New York

Robert J.C. Young

Return to New York from a brief Christmas trip to England, via Washington. I dropped off my bags in New York and took the train to the capital. The train was delayed two hours—good to know that Amtrak and Virgin trains in England have something in common. I passed some of the desultory time taking photographs—look out for them on the photograph pages. Why is it, I wondered as I sat there, that advanced capitalist countries can't run train systems? If only they ran like the Indian railways! The essential factor in Indian railways, apart from their incredible technical efficiency, however, is the work force: Indian railways are the second largest employer in the world. The largest employer in the world is the Chinese army. The third largest employer in the world is the British National Health system. Well, that gives as good a sense as any of national priorities.

I was trying to get to Washington because the Modern Language Association of America was holding its annual meeting there. This is an occasion, unparalleled in terms of scope and numbers, when the complete profession of teachers of language and literature in the U.S. come together for lectures, panels, meetings and social get-togethers with old friends and colleagues. The MLA is held every year right after Christmas in the only week apart from the summer in which US universities and US schools have a week of holiday in common. No doubt the assumption is that proper academics don't have families, or at least if they have them they don't want to be with them, but this may also explain why attendance was, reputedly, down 3,000 this year. The reason for holding it at this time that is always given is that hotels are cheap. However, many an other conference is held at other times, and there did not seem to be a noticeable air of poverty surrounding the delegates. Security was very tight. Getting in to the book display if you didn't have a name badge was almost as tough as getting in to the Queen's annual garden party without an invitation.

The main practical point of the MLA seems to be to provide a common location for interviewing candidates for assistant professorships, that is, the more junior academic posts. Given the geographical spread of the US, it's a convenient system. It does mean, though, that the candidates in effect have to pay their own expenses to be interviewed. From a postcolonial or global perspective, this makes it a game that is particularly expensive for anyone outside the country to play (if they are aware of the rules, that is, since no where in the job advertisements is the role that the MLA plays in the selection

process actually stated explicitly). As a result, people from outside the US tend to come in at different entry points, either via a funded Ph.D programme, or for a position later on at a more senior level when they have already made their name in their field. Not always though: I bumped into a few of my former graduate students at Oxford who had bravely come all the way for interviews, paying for the trip out of their own pockets. After the compactness and informality of Oxford, we all seemed somewhat lost in the vast windy spaces of Washington amidst the strange system whose rites were being performed there.

When my train finally arrived, I took a cab to the hotel. The driver was talking away into an earphone attached to his cell phone—a distinctive feature of all US taxi experiences. He wasn't speaking English, and something about the sound of the language he was talking intrigued me. At times, it sounded a little similar to Arabic, but it wasn't Arabic of any form, so far as I could tell. So, during a break in his conversations, I asked him what language he was talking in. 'Guess!' he said. I got it on the third go—it was Somali. He had come about eighteen years ago, he told me, in the first wave of Somalian emigrants at the beginning of the Civil War, long before the many more recent refugees from the war. He asked me what languages I spoke, and when I mentioned Italian, he immediately broke into perfect Italian. 'So have you ever been to Italy?', I asked him. 'No, never', he replied. I thought of my comments on *postcolonialismo* in Italy in my November 'Poqo Reflections', and the general absence of awareness in English-speaking countries of Italian colonialism. Somalia is a former British and Italian colony with an unusual history—the British occupied the North, and resistance was so strong that in 1935 they abandoned it to the Italians, who had occupied the South. In 1941, during the Second World War, the British reconquered it, but found themselves as unwelcome as ever. The Italians, who were much more popular with the Somalians, were allowed to stay, and in 1949 the British gave up the country a second time, an event which must be unique in British colonial history, handing it over to Italy once more for a ten-year trusteeship. The history of Somalia since independence in 1959 is probably as complicated and troubled as any postcolonial country on earth, and I will not try to rehearse it here. One result has been that Somalia now has probably the largest diasporic population of any country in Africa. What fascinated me though in my conversation with my Somalian taxi driver was how he showed the enduring power of the colonial effect: by the time that he was born, the Italians had left, but the ghosts of their continuing presence could still be heard almost fifty years later in the language of our conversation that took place in a taxi in Washington D.C. in December 2005.

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