

Deconstructive Strategies on Illustrating the Oriental Philosophy in Ted Chiang's *The Story of Your Life*

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Abstract

In the past decades, the rise of Chinese-American Sci-Fi writers injected new vitality into the development of science fiction literature. Among them, Ted Chiang's works often construct an imagined world and life state with their unique ethnic perspective, aiming to provide an alternative "other reality" for "this reality", which reflects the author' thinking under the collision of Oriental philosophy and contemporary social observation. In Ted Chiang's *The Story of Your Life*, the author uses his unique writing strategies to deconstruct the thoughts of logocentrism, the traditional male-female relationship and self-righteous rationalism in the western society. In this way, Ted Chiang successfully revolts against the western hegemonic culture and its values, and advocates the universal values of mankind through the literary discourse with Oriental philosophy.

Key words: Deconstructive strategies; Oriental philosophy; Ted Chiang ; *The Story of Your Life*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Chinese American science fiction has risen rapidly. Ted Jiang, Ken Liu and other Chinese science fiction writers have successively won the Hugo Award, Nebula Award and other science fiction awards. Some Chinese science fiction writers make use of the futurism perspective of science fiction to link the past, present and future organically so that they can better express their reflection on reality and insight into the future development of the world. The "Chinese-American futurism" of Chinese Science fiction integrates its own ethnic consciousness and cultural values into modern science fiction, showing a backlash against western hegemonic culture and its values, and advocating universal values of mankind through the poetic expression of science fiction literature with Oriental philosophy. This paper will analyze the deconstructive strategies on illustrating the Oriental Philosophy in Ted Chiang's The Story of Your Life, revealing his intention to revolt against the western hegemonic culture and its values, and advocates the universal values of mankind through the literary discourse with Oriental philosophy.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

The term "deconstruction" first appeared in the field of philosophy, and its main theoretical foundation comes from Nietzsche's philosophy, Martin Heidegger's phenomenology and the ideas of European Left's critical theory. The representative of phenomenology, Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl, believed that the essence of things should not be defined by absolute rationalism. Martin Heidegger, on the basis of Edmund Husserl, made a systematic study of the Western traditional metaphysical philosophy. In order to disintegrate the ontology of traditional philosophy at its root, Martin Heidegger constructed an "Ontology of being", in which he believes that the meaning of "Being" changes with the state of human being, therefore, "Being" is also supposed to be found in the state of man's change. In this way, the fixed concepts emphasized in traditional philosophy were dispelled.

Tracing back to its roots, we can see the real transformation of deconstruction from the external attack to the internal analysis of traditional philosophy began with Nietzsche, whose subversive ideas "God is dead" and "All values are reassessed" are very powerful shocks to the whole traditional philosophical circle, and at the same time opened the door to a new philosophical era. Since then, the philosophical community has begun to deconstruct the spirit, ideas and thoughts of the tradition in depth and to spread widely, which gave great impetus to the emergence of deconstructive strategies in literature criticism. It was this bold and rebellious idea of the "Death of God" that opened the door to the subversion of tradition and allowed some thinkers to truly discover from within the shortcomings and decay of the Logos, and the rigidity and occlusion of traditional rationalism.

In addition, the emergence of the Left-Wing Movement in Europe also contributed to the development of deconstructive strategies in literature criticism. In order to oppose the Vietnam War, European students started a large scale reactionary movement in 1968, but due to government repression, the students had to devote this reactionary enthusiasm into the academic world, and they targeted their attacks precisely at the capitalist system and beliefs to dismantle and destroy them. From existentialism to the critical theory of the Left-wing scholars, the original appearance of Western traditional philosophy has been broken up and subverted. By the time of Jacques Derrida, a more complete theoretical foundation had been established. In a sense, Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism was actually a systematic summation of the above. Jacques Derrida points out that the central idea of the deconstruction is not to deny the whole of traditional philosophy, but to go from the outside to the inside, deconstructing the internal original problems or the parts that do not apply to contemporary times in accordance with the structure inherent in tradition, and focusing on evoking the vitality of traditional philosophy. The structuralism in traditional philosophy holds that all cultures can be treated as a structure of inter-relationship, and this structure of relationships always appears in the form of binary oppositions, such as male and female, tall and short. In this kind of relationship, one side is often absolutely dominant. However, deconstructionists believe that there is no opposition in either objective reality or the spiritual world, but only differences between them, and deconstructionists oppose "binary oppositions" and logocentrism, advocating that differences should be preserved and diversity should be promoted.

2. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL SELF AND THE OTHER

In the exchange and collision of different national cultures brought about by economic globalization, the

game of cultural convergence and cultural diversity is going on all the time. Samuel Huntington, an American scholar, pointed out in his book Clash of Civilizations and Reconstruction of World Order published in 1996 that the clash of civilizations is the greatest threat to world peace in the future, and the world order based on civilization is the most reliable guarantee to avoid world war. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States seemed to confirm Huntington's assertion that the clash of civilizations was inevitable. However, Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" and its solutions are all based on the western perspective, judging other nations and civilizations as objects of "conquest" and "hostility" with "colored glasses". Although Huntington also talks about the importance of "crossing boundaries" between civilizations and respecting and acknowledging each other's boundaries, his views are based on Western cultural-centric theories, which inevitably lead to a false sense of justice in Western ethical absolutism. In fact, one of the important reasons for the cultural conflicts in today's world is that people living in the same world are divided into "us" and "them". Marshall Brown once said: "When we move beyond our comfortable zone, we face the crucial problem of justice and of survival. These are the issues of nationalism and globalism, of identity and diversity, of rootedness, situatedness, and multiculturalism" (Brown, 2008, p.53).

The setting of science fiction writers not only provides the basic support for the development of science fiction stories, but also shows a certain worldview in the imagined world of the science fiction, which is centrally reflected through the characters and their behaviors in the novels. In general, the worldview embodied in Western science fiction works often has a strong confrontation, especially the collision between the "Other" represented by robots, alien species, scientific monsters, etc. and the human "Self" represented by superheroes, who are usually the Caucasian. While in the works of Chinese-American science fiction writer Ted Chiang, deconstruction is the shining point of humanistic reflection in his works, which shows us a new relationship between the traditional self and the other. Isiah Lavender talked about American science fiction's obsession with "the narrative of alien -- perhaps a problem of self-identity" (Lavender, 2011, p.199). Estefan proposed that science fiction constructs "alien -- human difference, which is analogous to racial difference on earth" (Istvan Csicsery-Ronay JR. 2002, p.228). The theme of ethnicity in American literature is also reflected in the narration of science fiction aliens, who represent ethnicity with "alien" others: Contact with aliens symbolizes the conflict within human nature. Through ethnic experience and continuous differences (Mark, 1981, pp.25-26), contact with aliens has become a Sci-Fi expression of the other. In the history of Western philosophy, the concept of "Other" was introduced in response to the subject-object dualism dilemma caused by

the recent philosophy of subjectivity. Descartes, by means of universal skepticism, made the concept of an absolutely certain "self" the basis of metaphysics and achieved the inner turn of modern philosophy. After Descartes, "self" became a foundational concept for modern philosophy: the existence of the external world could only be known and made certain through unquestionable reason. However, while reason dissolves objective existence in selfconsciousness, this polarized egoism also creates many dilemmas. It creates a subject-object dualistic opposition and the absolutization of the principle of reason, which is not conducive to the construction of pluralistic and egalitarian social relations.

The "Other" in the western science fiction is represented in many ways. French scholar Régis Dibois has explained the "other", which means the other is not me, in other words, it is something different from oneself, something with a different reality and normality from me. In traditional science fictions, the "other" usually refers to aliens, who often come in a variety of forms and appearances, and carry the fear of human beings for the uncertainty of the unknown. For example, in the classic science fiction movie "Alien", they are tall and agile, with long, narrow back of the head, sharp teeth, razor-sharp claws and long, spiky tails . Their mouths are often filled with disgusting saliva, and they even have a powerful tongue that is highly aggressive. And in the movie"Independence Day", the aliens appear to have overwhelming technological and military power, they blow up buildings, and even threaten to destroy the human world with no intention to communicate and negotiate with human being, which shows their violent and predatory nature.

However, in the science fiction The Story of Your Life, the aliens in the author's novel are not the traditional image of violent aliens, they are portrayed as friendly partners or collaborators of human beings, and the relationship between human beings and aliens is no longer a dichotomy of enemy and self. This setting actually put the "self" and the alien "other" on a relatively equal footing. Although the alien heptapods in the novel had a strange appearance, they were not vicious creatures. Instead they were eager to communicate with human being by teaching their language. Besides, the aliens did not demonstrate their great technological power to pose a threat to human. During the negotiations with the diplomats, their attitude was very friendly. During her interaction with the aliens, Louise confessed that the heptapods were nice and cooperative. They were ready to teach Louise their language without any preconditions. (Stories of Your Life and Other, 2010, p.106) And it looked very likely that the heptapods were willing to be cooperative with humans in every occasion, "The outcome of this conversation the heptapods knew all about it, but still actively participated and were very enthusiastic" (*Stories of Your Life and Others*, 2010, p.137). For the heptapods, to cooperate with human beings in conducting conversations, discussions and "gift-exchanging" ceremonies, was just like performing a kind of task. As Louise summed up with the following sentences:

For the heptapods, all languages were performative. Instead of using language to inform, they used language to actualize. Sure, heptapoda already knew what would be said in any conversation; but in order for their knowledge to be true, the conversation would have to take place (Chiang, 2010, p.138).

In the novel, Ted Chiang expresses his attitude toward alien species through the mouth of Louise, "the relationship between humans and aliens is not necessarily confrontational, not necessarily their gains are our losses, and vice versa. If we handle it properly, both sides can become winners, which is a so-called non-zero-sum game". (Chiang, 2010, p.128)

The western "logocentrism" tends to divide concepts or dimensions into dichotomous relationships, such as self-other, adult-child, where the fundamental purpose of the dichotomy is to favor one side over the other, turning one side into a strong "center". This thought of "Binary oppositions" has always been the target of deconstructionist attacks. In science fiction or film, the relationship between humans and alien species is mostly presented as a dichotomy, and the conflict between the two is incompatible. On the contrary, in The Story of Your Life, Ted Chiang thinks more deeply about the portrayal of aliens as the "other" and boldly deconstructs the incompatible dichotomy between humans and alien species in traditional science fiction works. In the novella, the cause of the communication failure between the human beings and the heptapods is mainly due to the suspicious, defensive and self-centered attitude of the U.S. government towards the heptapods. The government's attitude towards the aliens in the story actually reflects its utilitarianism towards those exotic ethnic groups in America, especially referring to the Chinese immigrants. Therefore, through the novella, Ted Chiang expresses his wish for an ideal outcome of the symbiosis of the Chinese culture and American culture, that is, the win-win situation.

The presence of aliens reminds us of the existence of the other, but its function is more to clarify the rules of the universe. Through contact with aliens, "I" realized the totally different world outlook and thinking mode in the universe, and realized the diversity and incredible mystery of various beings in the universe. Instead of simply describing them as the antithesis of human beings, he uses a broader cosmic perspective to observe the aliens and a broader dimension to think about the relationship between human beings and the aliens, trying to dissolve the dichotomous relationship between the self and the other and reconstruct a friendly and win-win harmonious relationship, and to achieve a harmonious scene of symbiosis and coexistence in a true sense. In effect, the love-hate relationship between aliens and humans is actually a story between the human ego and the Other. Ted Chiang does not set up the storyline as a dualism between humans and the alien Other, and the ending is not the one that readers used to expect, where human civilization overcomes the alien civilization, but a thought-provoking ending: the aliens and humans do not have any conflict and build a beautiful picture of harmonious coexistence. The kind aliens in the novel are not only the embodiment of human's optimistic and open attitude towards the vast universe, but also the iteration of human's mission for their own hopes and sense of identity. These wellmeaning aliens communicate with humans and actively explain the purpose of their trip to the protagonist in order to eliminate threats, showing the author's positive construction of the image of the extraterrestrial other.

3. DECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL FEMALE IMAGE

The gender system of society is a powerful hand hidden behind the culture. From all societies and all cultures throughout the ages, the social system has emphasized the division of human beings into two opposing camps of male and female, while biological gender we cannot resist, social gender is not innate, it is the different behavior of men and women formed by people in their daily lives under some specific social customs and social expectations. That"Men are superior to women" is a typical expression of gender prejudice, and the "boudoir" is an existence that firmly restricts the identity and status of women. In societies where male power dominates, women are placed in a dominated and controlled position in contrast to men, and are even objectified and gazed at like a doll by men, and are seen as accessories to male values in social relationships. In the science fiction written by traditional male authors, men often hold the power of discourse, while the positive image of women are not properly expressed.

As Beauvoir points out in her book *The Second Sex*, women are not born as women, but rather are bound together by their sense of identity with their social needs, that is, the needs of men, thus women no longer have their own independent thinking of the social atmosphere, and was given the so-called social significance. All of these are molded by the cultural system and the concept of society imposed on women. While in the novel *The Story* of Your Life, the heroine Louise, who is not significantly different from other men in terms of literacy, thinking ability, and mobility, is not only a doctor of linguistics, but also helps the U.S. military with language translation work. When an alien spacecraft descended on Earth and humans were unable to communicate with them, so the military turned to her for help in translating the alien language. At this critical moment, Louise handled affairs neatly, maturely, and was always capable to play to the score, thus her role in the case of this emergency is indispensable. Whether in the process of communicating with the heptapods, or in the process of deciphering the language of the heptapods, she is always the dominant person, while the physicist Gary is her assistant, assisting her to complete her work. As a linguist, Louise is a coolheaded intellectual. When she was talking to the aliens that looked like horrible grotesques to human beings, she showed a personality of remarkable calmness and rationality. She was very patient and never acted on an impulse. When Gary was impatient and anxious to ask the heptapods about their mathematics, she knew very well that they needed a better understanding of the written language of the heptapods before they start math or physics discussions with them. So Louise said to Gary: "Patiences, good sir. Patience is a virture" (Chiang, 2010, p.110). Several years later, Gary will become her husband and they will have a daughter who is just impatient like her father. When her daughter can't wait for the trip to Hawaii and begin to cry for it, Louise will try to educate her daughter too that patience is virture. "Sometimes it is good to wait," she will say to her daughter, "The anticipation makes it more fun when you get there" (Chiang, 2010, p.111).

So in Ted Chiang's The Story of Your Life, women are no longer dependent on men as a vulnerable group, no longer a secondary social role. Even in the face of ignorance and restrictions from her ignorant boss Weber, Louise still bravely offers her opinion at some crucial moments and contributes a lot to the smooth running of the translation. In addition to the storyline of the linguist's exchange with heptapods, there is another story line in the novel, that is, Dr. Louise recalls the past with her daughter. After Louise possessed the ability to see the future, she knew that she would be with her beloved and cherished every minute of it, because she foresaw that her daughter would die in a mountain climbing activity, When she told the sad would-be fact to her husband, her husband just couldn't bear to face the reality and chose to leave home. After learning her tragic fate, Louise did not feel pessimistic, did not lose all hope and spent her days in tears, instead she showed a strong will to face the inevitable tragedy. Just as a Chinese saying goes, "A woman is weak, while a mother is strong." Although Louise could see her daughter's death, she also saw the great happiness and joy that her daughter would take to her. She appreciates all the joyful moments that her daughter gives to her, and she loves her daughter's laughing as she describes her daughter's laughter as the most wonderful and the most beautiful sound she could ever imagine, a sound that makes her feel like the fountain, or a well spring (Chiang, 2010, p.120). So in this story, Ted Chiang not only portrayed an outstanding linguist but more importantly, a real mother. He put the fragments of people's daily life and the most common human emotions into the grand narration of the science fiction just in order to highlight the intellectual women image of Louise and the female ecological ethics on her, with the aim to overthrow the logical framework of binary opposition so as to establish a new relationship of equality between men and women, and equality between man and nature. The author points to a the higher rules in the vast universe, which we should be in awe of. Actually, Louise's ability to foresee the future is just a metaphor for our life, in which everyone of us will meet with some kind of frustrations and face our final ending. The deconstructionists advocate the strategy of "decentering" and "subject deconstruction", which is a subversion of the traditional patriarchal society and the overthrow of the male-dominated social system. The world constructed by deconstructionists is a world without a center, where everyone is free and equal, where there is no male superiority and female inferiority, and where there is no superiority and inferiority, and where a society pursues diversity and has no central theme in the world. Ted Chiang's novels show the traces of deconstruction, and he creates them with a more open and daring mind. In terms of personal development, ability and social status, he gives the heroine Louise equal status with men, and she not only occupies a place but even plays a leading role to a certain extent in the traditionally male-dominated fields such as science, state secrets, military and physics. So in Ted Chiang's The Story of Your Life, this brave, reckless woman not only subverts the traditional image of women, but also poses a sharp contrast with the husband, who runs away from his responsibility, hence highlighting the author's intention to deconstruct the traditional submissive women image and advocate the independent and equal gender consciousness, which coincides with the value orientation of deconstructionism.

4. DECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL THIBKING MODE OF CAUSALITY

Theories of the world are complex, but they can be broadly divided into two categories: causation and consequence theories. The theory of cause and effect was proposed by the famous philosopher Socrates. He pointed out that everything comes into being and develops for a reason. When looking at "spring, summer, autumn and winter" and "the rotation of the earth", according to the traditional way of thinking, people regard the rotation and spin of the earth as the cause of the change of seasons, while spring, summer, autumn and winter are defined as the result. In addition, it is commonly believed that time is a necessary condition for the formation of cause-effect relationships, and without the continuation of time, no cause-effect relationship can be formed. The causal link exists as a process, with the cause having an originating nature and the effect having a subsequent nature. The cause is the original starting point of the process, and the result is the result of this original starting point after a series of changes. Therefore, the causal connection must be sequential in time; the cause must come first and the effect must come second. Therefore, traditional philosophy believes that the process of transformation from cause to effect must take a certain amount of time as a necessary prerequisite, and time is a necessary condition for the formation of causal connections. The thinking mode of western social development and scientific development are mainly based on this thinking model of causality. However, it contrasts sharply with the fatalistic attitude that characterizes people from many other cultures, notably Asian, where there's a conspicuous reverence or even worship for the holistic cognitive view.

In The Story of Your Life, when facing the same objective phenomenon, humans and the heptapods have come up with completely different understandings, and there is no dichotomy between the two. Humans are accustomed to a coherent mode of consciousness, while the heptapods have developed a synchronous mode of consciousness. Whereas we perceive events sequentially and understand the relationship between events as cause and effect, the heptapods perceive all events simultaneously and understands them in a way that all events have a purpose, a minimum purpose and a maximum purpose. Because of this essential difference, it becomes extremely difficult for both sides to understand each other, and they may even get farther and farther away from each other on the road of temptation. In the novel, humans persistently try to find out the purpose of the aliens' visit to the earth, but the heptapods leave for no reason at all, and from the beginning to the end, perhaps their visit has no reason at all.

Generally speaking, people believe that there is a cause-and-effect connection between free will and the future, that is, those actions in the present will determine the outcome, but for the heptapods there is no such logic, because in their civilization there is no free will and no future. In their way of thinking, the act is not the cause of the end, but the end determines that the act must happen that way. Humans cannot get rid of their deeprooted thinking patterns, so the whole issue is entangled in dualistic thinking. In the traditional law, when people think about problems, they often simplify it into a formula to express causality, and elaborate certain events in a sequential order, i.e., one event triggers another event, a cause leads to a result, and things then develop from a past state to a future state. The heptapods are exactly the opposite of human beings, they already know the result before they know the cause. Ted Chiang's plot setting in the novel reflects his rich imagination and antilogocentrism. Instead of conceiving the story according to the traditional causality theory, he breaks the limitation of the linear feature of causality, so that the aliens' text has no backward and forward relationship and can be

read at will, and his way of thinking has no cause and effect, and he can see "the past" and "the future" at any time, this is undoubtedly a dismantling and subversion of traditional philosophy and rules. And in some sense, the heptapods' mode of thinking is similar to that of oriental culture. In his book No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth, Ken Wilbe made a comprehensive reflection on the thinking mode of western social development and scientific development, and believed that western dualistic thinking caused the disaster and suffering of human beings. "A growing number of scientists are beginning to agree with the physicist Capra that 'two fundamental arguments of modern physics reflect the Oriental world view'." (Wilbe, 2012, P.82) These two basic arguments are system theory and holism which Qian Xuesen often mentions. "The real world is an indivisible form," Wilbur tells people through Capra. He even borrowed a Buddhist phrase, "One is all, all is one." He went on to say, "The Oriental people already know what western science has stumbled through." (Wilbe, 2012, p.103)

As an American of Chinese descent, Ted Chiang was inevitably influenced by both Chinese and American cultures. In The Story of Your Life, we can easily find the thoughts of Chinese cultural values. While Americans firmly believe that what happens in the future is within their control, or at least subject to their influence, Ted Chiang does not accept the purely American mode of thinking. Understanding The Story of Your Life is not an easy task because the heroine, Louise, abandons the linear way of thinking and narrates events without cause-andeffect connections. According to Louise, after she learns the words of "heptapods", she thinks about the problem in such a way that the cause and the effect are no longer two separate entities, but are intertwined, influencing each other, acting on each other, and inseparable from each other. In Louise's thinking, there is no certain order between ideas, nor is there a so-called "chain of thought". Because in her thought process, all components are of equal importance, no one thought has priority. Even if there is such a thing as priority, then all components have the same priority. In the novel, the "heptapods" can perceive all events simultaneously, and in their eyes, the past, present and future have no boundaries. This non-linear way of thinking is the unique feature of Ted Chiang's creation, where cause and effect no longer exist in sequence. There is no sequence of cause and effect anymore. This mode of thinking is a deconstruction and subversion of the linear characteristics of causality in traditional philosophy.

In fact, the storyteller does not focus on sorting out the order of the plot, but to offer a new outlook to see the world. At a macro level, this is a meditation on life and death—Birth means death. And from a micro perspective, it is because Louis is an expert in linguistics that she has access to aliens, so she begins to explore the survival of the human species, and then starts to think about her own life. Knowing that one's life will be tied up in a certain way, she still sticks to the same place and does not do anything that makes her regret. This spirit of living for death is what the author wants to express, which shows the influence of oriental causal dialectical thinking. The main purpose of this novel is to construct an unprecedented language and to create the possibility of life with the elimination of linear time by using the relativity theory of cognition. This is the purpose of science fiction, and even literature itself -- to alter a variable in the real world, and then anticipate and document its possible impact on the world around it. No knowledge is perfect, and neither is language. All meanings cannot be completely expressed in the combination of groups, even if there are moods, punctuation and content words and function words needed, they cannot be properly expressed. This is the author's warning to readers from another level - warning human beings that such a huge group is only a small part of the myriad cosmic star river. Even at the highest levels of evolution it is impossible to see the world in infallible terms. Whether it is the relativity of cognition or the relativity of human survival or death, what the author wants to express is for human beings to learn humility and compromise, and to keep in mind the harmonious coexistence with nature on the basis of the rapid development of human society.

CONCLUSION

In general, the main social function of science fiction is to provide an alternative "other reality" for "this reality". Chinese American science fiction integrates its own ethnic consciousness and cultural values into modern science fiction, showing a backlash against western hegemonic culture and its values, and advocating universal values of mankind through the poetic expression of science fiction literature discourse with Oriental philosophy. Through the analysis of The story of Your Life, we can easily find deconstructive strategies in it, whether it is the attitude toward the alien, the remolding of the female image, or the subversion of the traditional theory of cause and effect. They embody the rebellion of Ted Chiang against the traditional logocentrism and his opposition to the binary opposition. However, deconstruction is also the process of reconstruction. Although science fiction is a form of fantasy that represents the life of human beings in the future world or the vision of science and technology, as a literary work, it also reflects the contradictions and problems in social reality and expresses the author's humanistic thinking. Ted Chiang respects the different forms of life, knows that diversity is the essential characteristic of the world, and a certain tension should be maintained in the process of cultural pluralism, so as to maintain its own progress and development. The strategy "Non-zero-sum game" put forward by the heroine in the novel provides an important inspiration for the development of global modernity, instead of a cold war mentality in which one country deprives another or in which one system triumphs over another, we should move from a single to a pluralistic mindset in pursuit of a win-win symbiosis among civilizations, looking for the unseen forces of diversity behind the binary opposition.

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