

- [VANCOUVER SUN STAFF BLOGS](#)
- [VANCOUVER SUN COMMUNITY BLOGS](#)

[/STAFF/Life/Spirituality/The Search](#) [The Search RSS Feed](#)

[Dig into world literature, but 'don't toss out Shakespeare'](#)

November 13, 2010. 2:50 pm • Section: [The Search](#)



Paulo Lemos Horta

Second of two parts on the 'Western canon' [\[Read Part 1\]](#)

Metro Vancouver's university campuses are some of the most multi-ethnic on the planet.

After an eight-month fellowship at Simon Fraser University, I wrote in 2007 about how the campus's student body was at least 70 per cent "visible minority," mostly Asian and South Asian.

This ratio was based on my count of cafeteria populations. Why my own survey? Because Canadian university officials refuse to chart their populations' ethnic demographic.

While I revelled in my time in academia, I was struck by the way virtually all higher education administrators avoided discussing the sharp rise of visible minorities and decline of white students on B.C. campuses.

Behind the scenes, however, many academics were concerned about how the vast majority of visible minority students target career programs, such as science, engineering, medicine, computing and business. Meanwhile, white students, especially young white women, were generally keeping alive the humanities programs, the critical-thinking courses in literature, sociology, anthropology, art, psychology and philosophy.

Of course there are many individual exceptions to this pattern, but it remains unmistakable throughout Western higher education.

In 2007, it didn't necessarily seem worrying.

Since then, however, some prominent scholars have been ringing alarms. On our conflict-ridden planet, they say it's worrying so many young people are being funnelled into technical or business programs. Famed University of Chicago philosopher **Margaret Nussbaum**, for instance, studied the disturbing relationship between homegrown Hindu-Muslim terrorism and education in the violence-racked Indian province of Gujarat.

She found schools in Gujarat "have cut out all trace of critical thinking and the humanities, and placed a relentless focus on the technical training of people going into engineering and computer science. I do

think that is conducive to a culture where you blindly follow authority.”

Echoing Nussbaum's conviction that the humanities teach empathy, **Feisel Mohamed**, a literature scholar at the University of Illinois, believes the liberal arts counter the prejudices that fuel radical religious and political action.

RELATED: [The State of Academia: A Three-part series](#)

When I was at peaceful SFU, we were not discussing homegrown terrorism. But one scholar who wanted to do something about the ethnic divide on campus — which saw visible minorities favouring the technical programs, with whites filling the humanities — was **Paulo Lemos Horta**.

Horta, who spent most of his early years following his Brazilian diplomat father around the globe, was meeting in 2006 with SFU administrators to make a case for its new Surrey campus to include an innovative program titled “World Literature.”

Horta and colleagues wanted the literature program to respond to the ethnic makeup of Surrey, where Statistics Canada reported in 2006 that 46 per cent of the population was a visible minority (28 per cent had South Asian origins).

Wisely, SFU listened to the appeals of Horta and others.

I caught up with Horta this fall via long-distance from the United Arab Emirates, where he is on a short leave from SFU to teach world literature at prestigious New York University at Abu Dhabi.

The few world literature programs that now exist around the globe, Horta said, are successfully drawing a wide ethnic range of students.

In particular, visible minority under-grads in B.C. who might have avoided the humanities have been signing up by the hundreds for SFU's world literature program, directed by Ken Seigneurie.

“I don't believe immigrants and the kids of immigrants don't want to do the arts,” Horta said. Rather than blame visible minorities for avoiding the humanities, Horta and colleagues have shown that universities can address the eclectic passions of diverse students.

“It's been quite dramatic,” Horta said. “World literature is just getting off the ground and SFU has been ahead of the curve. There is definitely no clear majority of Anglo students in our classes, as you would find in most literature programs.”

Given his devotion to global literature, what was Horta's answer to the decades-old question I raised in last week's column: What should we do with the Western canon of most important artists, composers and writers?

Along with the black British writer **Lindsay Johns**, I defended the concept of a Western canon, including against the complaint it contains too many DWEMs, Dead White European Males, like Homer and Chaucer (plus a small number of dead white females).

While some feel it necessary to mock the Western canon, I wrote that those of us who are against colonialism must accept the historic conditions that elevated so many DWEMs into the canon.

We should also revel in the “universal truths” they elucidate — which often challenge our own timebound cultural mythologies.

At the same time, the list of who should be in the Western canon must also be fluid, open to respectful revision.

What did Horta have to say?

A specialist in the classic Arabic work, *The Thousand and One Nights* (a.k.a. *The Arabian Nights*), Horta has no desire “to jettison the Western canon.”

Even in Metro Vancouver, where 41 per cent of the general population is a visible minority and the ratio is much higher at universities, Horta maintains people don't need to feel defensive about standing up for time-tested DWEM geniuses such as **Cervantes** or **Mozart**. However, Horta said he believes the time is right for thinking more cross-culturally, “without tossing out **Shakespeare**.”

That includes, Horta said, recognizing that the Western canon is not as “hegemonic” as some assume.

For instance, Horta speaks eloquently about how *The Arabian Nights* affected European culture; about how one of the West's most revered books, *Don Quixote*, was shaped by **Islam**; about how

Zoroastrianism is an undercurrent in *Moby Dick*, and about how Canada's **Michael Ondaatje**, **Margaret Atwood** and **Leonard Cohen** are achieving border-transcending greatness.



Thinking cross-culturally also requires placing the Western canon in the context of what may be an emerging **Eastern canon** — then deciphering what can be learned from the convergence.

The new band of world literature specialists encourage young students to compare, as Horta does, **Homer's *Odyssey*** with Czech writer **Milan Kundera's *Ignorance***, or Chilean novelist **Pablo Neruda's *Love: Ten Poems*** with Persian artist **Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis***.

Instead of an unnecessary battle between the Western canon and world literature, Horta would also like to see more people studying how some of the great texts of the West and East, including those of **Shakespeare** and *The Arabian Nights*,

resonate outside the cultures in which they were created.

It all sounds fascinating. We will benefit if more people, including Canadians of whatever ethnicity, learn to engage the world's great works of literature, art and music.

As Nussbaum says, studying the humanities, West or East, lifts us out of our own ethno-centricity. Instead of provoking red-hot reactivity, which is becoming common in the Internet age, the exploration of literature, art and philosophy helps us understand another's point of view.

That's a key foundation of democracy.

The internationally renowned Canadian philosopher **Charles Taylor** addresses this issue in his acclaimed essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, which is a must-read for anyone trying to think through multiculturalism.

Rather than overcoming colonialist guilt by adopting the condescending attitude that the art of all cultures is of equal worth, Taylor urges us to work hard to explore the esthetics and values of different cultures.

We can't really judge the writers and artists of other cultures until we agree upon common standards, Taylor says. And we're a long way from having the necessary "fusion of horizons" to pull that off.

On a divided planet, Horta and colleagues in world literature programs are laying down the next steps of authentic cross-cultural connection.

In its small way, that's a service not only to the humanities — but to humanity itself.

[Read Part One of this series on the Western Canon](#)

[RELATED: "The State of Academia: A Three-part Series"](#)

["When times get tough, universities need to get relevant"](#)

[Pope's war against secularism stymied – by Harry Potter](#)[Next The Search post](#) [UPDATE: The future of the Jericho wharf \(and the Habitat sculpture\)](#)[Previous The Search post](#)

We encourage all readers to share their views on our articles and blog posts. We are committed to maintaining a lively but civil forum for discussion, so we ask you to avoid personal attacks, and please keep your comments relevant and respectful. If you encounter a comment that is abusive, click the "X" in the upper right corner of the comment box to report spam or abuse. We are using Facebook commenting.

[Visit our FAQ page for more information.](#)



Add a comment...



Post to Facebook

Posting as Paulo Horta ([Not you?](#))

[Comment](#)

Facebook social plugin



Powered by **WordPress.com** VIP

☺