Thank you so much to the Mullarkeys for this annual program. It is a model of academic freedom and rigor, and I think the forum’s influence will only grow in time. Many other academic fields at Fordham and beyond could learn from the example of the Mullarkeys and from Jocelyn’s wise direction.

Thank you also to everyone who is here. It is a delightful relief to be able to speak out loud about so many things that I keep inside, ever doubtful that anyone cares to listen. Now that you are here you will have at least to hear my words, however I pronounce them.

I am currently working on a book on racism, and while the chapters are respectively on art, cinema, and literature, one chapter is entitled “The State of Racism: Growing up Mexican in Texas.” In some ways I think of this section as a sequel to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. A sequel that is many years in coming and much overdue.

Lately I have been reflecting on how it came about that I was an English major in college at the University of Texas in Austin and then became an English professor in New York City. I am reminded of Caliban from *The Tempest*, who, according to the great Cuban revolutionary and critic Roberto Fernández Retamar, is an image of the Americas, conquered and dominated by Europe. Here is Caliban’s rebuke to Prospero,

“You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (Act 1, sc.2).

Certainly Caliban’s fury and ineptness in the face of absolute power which appears to him to be wielded like magic can mirror the colonial subject. But is Prospero a wizard, really? Or is he just learned and portentous? Caliban’s cry, “This island’s mine, which thou takest from me” must have rung painfully true for those in the Caribbean living their lives before the Conquest. But I have never been totally satisfied with this as a figure of my own education. I did not want to look like a twisted ugly troll described by Prospero as being of a “vile race” and I did not want to be consumed and dictated to by my rage, my ugliness, and my subservience. I want to suggest a different, more flattering image. What about George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, surely the play Shakespeare would have written if he had been a socialist and curmudgeon living about 300 years in the future? *Pygmalion* has in its title (pardon my pedantry, but since we multiculturalist postmodernists removed the Western Tradition from all curriculum, one can never assume) the protagonist of a Greek myth in which Pygmalion’s perfect statue Galatea is brought to life by Venus.

I am fascinated by accents. As a suspect speaker of two languages, I always have been. *Pygmalion* is above all about accents, and how it is that how people speak determines how they will be treated. That is a frightening thought in the United States! In the play, accents and speaking properly can bring rich rewards and royal invitations. In my own parallel, I grew up in the lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, a region on the border with Mexico and ranked with the Bronx (this, Bronx, right here) as one of the two poorest regions in the United States. A vast majority of the population are—well, it is difficult to say what. Of Mexican descent? There are many people there whose ancestors never left the area and who were there when it was part of Mexico, and even before Spain. Are they immigrants? Hardly so in the Statue of Liberty sense. Many of this population speak Spanish. But some do not. Some Mexican children grow up and have grown up without speaking coherent Spanish. (I describe the population I am part of as
Mexican. This is because a citizen of Mexican would never describe himself as a Mexican but as 
mexicano: only someone from the US would use the former. Therefore Mexican American is 
redundant). Now, clearly the most popular accent in the US is the English accent. Paul Fussell, in 
the appendix to his book Class: A Guide Through the American Status System, answers questions 
about social class:

“Dear Sir, 
   I am an Englishman planning to emigrate to the United States. Can you help me by 
explaining the class system there? 
   T. Atkins

Dear Mr. Atkins, 
   No, you’d never get it—much too complicated. You must be born and nurtured here. But 
you should have no worries because here the fact of British birth raises your class at least one 
notch, no matter how nondescript and fourth-rate you may in fact be.”

I learned very early that the Spanish accent when speaking English is not generally 
recognized as desirable in this country, not even in South Texas, where Spanish predominates. 
What merriment was caused when an aunt said sit in the share instead of chair. Somewhere in 
my Eliza quest for education and culture I must have shaped my pronunciation. I am sometimes 
told that I do not have a twangy broad Texas accent. A Texas accent is not considered desirable 
unless you are a right-wing politician and are, like various Bushes, trying to obscure an East 
Coast privileged upbringing. I also learned that speaking Spanish in the United States is not ever 
a neutral act. In this country, Spanish is not only undervalued, it is held in contempt. This 
extends to Spanish as a whole. For example, why don’t English departments devoted to the novel 
teach Don Quixote? Isn’t that -odd? More people speak Spanish than English in the world, and 
yet this does not seem to reach English departments. Why is that? Is it that Spanish is too varied? 
Is it too common? Is it associated with a working-class population? Is it like Eliza’s Cockney? Is 
this an issue of class in the Shavian sense?

But what kind of language did I inherit and what is it that I speak, or my people speak, in 
South Texas? Gloria Anzaldúa in her Borderlands describes how “Chicano Spanish sprang out 
of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with 
which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a 
homeland closer than the Southwest—for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. 
And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages.” Some of the 
languages Anzaldúa says Chicanos speak are as follows (my comments are in italics):

1. Standard English
   And what is that really?
2. Working class and slang English
   Are these the same? Why does she connect the two?
3. Standard Spanish
   And what is this really?
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
   From where?
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
   Not as precise as it sounds
6. Chicano Spanish with regional variations
   *Are these regions homogenous?*

7. Tex-Mex
   *This is woefully imprecise.*

8. Pachuco, or calo
   *To this we could add hip-hop and black slang and how it has been incorporated into Chicano vernacular for a couple of generations now.*

[What follows are my own contributions.]


10. Caribbean Spanish. And we can divide this into Cuban Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish. Dominican Spanish, and so on.

11. South American Spanish, including Argentine Spanish, Peruvian Spanish, etc.

12. Madrid Spanish

13. Barcelona Spanish

14. Languages that are not Spanish that are spoken in Spain, including Catalan.

Certainly the range of these languages is worthy of study if not respect. Did Derrida write about South Texas and its linguistic variation? Why not? Doesn’t this language come pre-deconstructed? Why are deconstructionists not toiling away at these complexities?

There is aspiration in the study of English and English literature. It promises you some degree of cultural capital. That is, if the culture is able to recognize that form of cultural capital at all. It appears that the contemporary climate in the US is becoming illiterate as far as being able to read even the basic signs of learning and erudition goes. Speaking correctly and respecting knowledge are held in high contempt. Expecting higher standards of discourse is to be described as a “language Nazi.” We can often feel in despair as Henry Higgins does in *Pygmalion*’s musical adaption, *My Fair Lady*: “Why can’t the English learn how to speak?” What happens to a fairly mandarin enterprise such as the study of literature is further exclusivity and/or eventual obsolescence. This is something the culture wars may not have anticipated.

In John Guare’s play *Six Degrees of Separation*, a young, shiftless, but ambitious black man is instructed by a white Ivy Leaguer on how to impress and therefore con the white elite he wants to mingle with and swindle. Of course, he instructs him how to speak properly. Trent tells Paul that

“*This is the way you must speak. Hear my accent. Hear my voice. Never say you’re going horse-back riding. You say you’re going riding. And don’t say couch. Say sofa. And you say boddill, it’s bottle. Say bottle of beer.*

“Bodd-ill a beer.”

“Bottle of Beer.”

[Ouisa on Paul’s success]: “Can you believe it? Paul learned all that in three months. Three months! Who would have thought it? Trent Conway, the Henry Higgins of our time. Paul looked at those names and said I am Columbus. I am Magellan. I will sail into this new world.”

Of course, like those explorers, he leaves humiliation and devastation in his wake.

George Bernard Shaw wrote in his preface to *Pygmalion* that “It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him. German and Spanish are accessible to foreigners; English is not accessible even to Englishmen.” If Shaw/Higgins is angry and despondent about the English in England, I think about English departments in the US! Are we not Elizas in the study of literature of England? Mimicking like
Paul in *Six Degrees*, mocking, changing it every time we read it and teach it? It reminds me of how in his *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*, Paul Fussell writes: “As one citizen exulted in the 1870s:

“There are two universities in England, four in France, ten in Prussia, and thirty-seven in Ohio.”

In *Pygmalion*, the lines that Caliban damns Propero with are given instead to Henry Higgins:

“Damn Mrs. Pearce; and damn the coffee; and damn you; and damn my own folly in having lavished hard-earned knowledge and the treasure of my regard and intimacy on a heartless guttersnipe.”

What is striking about Henry’s speech is that he is confronted with ingratitude and it infuriates him. How much time and energy has he expended on educating this guttersnipe? Isn’t there a hint of the colonial’s rage there? After all he has done for the colonized, and after all those gifts of Shakespeare and Milton? But it is exactly Eliza’s ingratitude that I admire and it is her unwillingness to return to being and living like a troll like Caliban that I admire so much. What Eliza does is expose how much myth-making and obscurantism conceal Henry’s natural right to superiority. Here is Eliza:

“Aha! Now I know how to deal with you. What a fool I was not to think of it before! You can’t take away the knowledge you gave me. You said I had a finer ear than you. And I can be civil and kind to people which more than you can. Aha! That’s done you, Henry Higgins, it has. Now I don’t care *that* for your bullying and your big talk. I’ll advertise in the papers that your own duchess is only a flower girl that you taught, and that she’ll teach anybody to be a duchess just the same in six months for a thousand guineas. Oh, when I think of myself crawling under your feet and being trampled on and called names, when all the time I had only to lift up my finger to be as good as you, I could just kick myself.”

And that is where many of us are in the ever-changing field of literary studies, isn’t it? I feel myself like Paul in *Six Degrees*, an imposter who is learning the forms of language but has not really got the birthright. I feel like Eliza who, unlike Paul, triumphs at the end because she depends on nobody. She does not need Henry’s respect nor does she need Freddy’s. She wants only what she can take care of her on her own, and in Shaw’s epilogue that is her flower shop. She has true independence.