

## Teaching American Literature in the Postmodern Age

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Não posso esquecer o que já li.  
Não posso esquecer onde vivo.

Caetano Veloso

Caetano Veloso provides the epigraph to this essay: "I cannot forget what I have already read; I cannot forget where I live." I take this epigraph as a point of departure for my reflections on the nature of the discipline to which my institutional practice is related, and on the resulting pedagogical project to be developed in Courses of Letters with a major in English in Brazil.

The title I have chosen is clearly incomplete. While it refers to the act of teaching, its object and the moment in question, it calls attention to missing words and empty spaces: human agency (who, teaching American Literature?), the location of this agent (teaching American literature, where?) and the target of the pedagogical experience (to whom?). It is these terms that I mean to problematize, since they will interrelate and call into question our theoretical assumptions and methodological choices, the why and how of our praxis. I believe the discussion of the possible modes of articulation of these three variables

and the adequate elaboration of the questions generated by them will endow our teaching with a new political and educational significance.

My reflections in relation to this matter have always been motivated by my positionality as a teacher of American literature in Brazil: as a teacher and cultural agent here, how can I propose, in the *periphery*, a reading of this literature produced in the *center*? What would be the possibility of elaborating, here, a Brazilian history of this literature, re/signifying it and re/inscribing it, in a critical way, in a more complex cultural landscape? What instruments of theoretical appropriation would allow us to reconstitute the field of American Literature Studies among ourselves? How can we articulate it in relation to the study of Brazilian literature, and relate both in a comparative view of historical and cultural studies?

In other words, what questions and problems are projected by our *locus* of enunciation? How can we rethink the institutional and theoretical strategies through which we produce – here and now – discourses about this object?

Although I am aware of the problematic nature of the binary models of original/copy and center/periphery on the basis of which the paradigm of Western domination is built, I do not think we can dismiss them. Rather, they must be used strategically, particularly in our case, as teachers and students of a literature produced in one of the hegemonic countries in the world. I am obviously not taking the notions of center and periphery, however, as geographic locations, but as multisituated functions, revealing a complex network of power relations located between and within so-called centers and peripheries. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that I am concerned with our institutional location. Since the University has a centralizing function in our society, sustaining a symbolic system of authority, it is crucial that we discuss the condition of the possibility of a radically different cultural and pedagogical praxis.

Alberto Moreiras has mentioned that “the marginality and deferment of all colonial societies with respect to what happens in metropolises led Latin American culture, from its beginnings, to be a culture of translation and transculturation”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, from the “discovery” on, the Brazilian intellectual system and, within it, the University, was constituted as part of a culture characterized by mediation, which has a bearing on the way we Brazilians relate to foreign cultures and teach/consume their literary products. This is why I believe our reflection must start by problematizing the cultural and the institutional context in which we are located, if we are in any sense interested in redirecting our work towards a more critical agenda. This will prevent us from remaining in the role of blind disseminators of the system of values related to the American way of life, and will disrupt the attitude of unexamined awe and wonder (the “deslumbramento”) which is displayed by so many teachers and students of Anglo-American literature in Brazil.

As we examine the constitution of the dominant cultural discourses in Brazil, it will be easy to perceive why the reception of foreign symbolic goods has been carried out in such acritical terms and how it has shaped the discipline of English and American Studies among us.

It has been recurrently stated that the process of colonization in Brazil, as elsewhere in the Americas, emerged as a narcissistic operation oriented by the ethnocentric perspective of Europe. European ethnocentrism, however, was not just one more ethnocentrism, like any that has recurrently surfaced in cultural encounters between the same and the other. What makes it different is that the expansionist project of Europe was related to the development of capitalism. Eurocentrism – and, nowadays, Nordocentrism – must be seen as a paradigm with the function of legitimating a global political project. Today, in the Postmodern age of globalization of this project, accelerated by means of mass culture, one of the most successful American products of exportation, our role as teachers – particularly as teachers of American

literature in the periphery – acquires a more strategic meaning, a clearer political significance.

Brazilian colonization, as many critics have pointed out, can be characterized as a “mimetic process of education and indoctrination which transposed to Brazil the Christian-Portuguese ethnocentric cultural project”.<sup>2</sup> This enterprise was carried out by a two-sided strategy of assimilation and destruction: through the military conquest and the pedagogical process of cultural imposition (which used, as one of its main instruments, the catechetical project of the Jesuits), the Indian was simultaneously deprived of land, language, and culture. This is what Luiz Costa Lima considers a scorched earth policy, since, unlike what happened in Hispanic America, in Brazil local cultures did not survive, not even residually.<sup>3</sup>

The dominating cultural discourse in Brazil, although presenting at times disruptions and fissures, has aimed at maintaining a reference to the metropolitan apparatus, to a system of values controlled and legitimized by the center. Difference, either assimilated or erased, was only authorized through the *topos* of exoticism, which functions for the fixation of cultural stereotypes. Thus exoticism and stereotype, through homogenization and the false concept of harmony or consensus, obliterate the notion of difference, including internal colonialism and the tremendous social contradictions that characterize our country. The myth of Brazilian congeniality – “o brasileiro cordial” –, discussed by Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, is emblematic of the ideological power of this strategy: “the denial of conflict through a forged congeniality in relationships among different races, sexes, cultures, and ideologies”.<sup>4</sup> The many others in our society harmoniously blend into a concept of the national ethos with several empowering and disempowering implications, as official culture builds a Brazilian myth which masks and erases conflict. One example is the received notion that Brazilian society is not racist: slavery, in this particular version of the myth of “cordialidade”, was abolished in 1888 due to a “generous” and “humanist”

decision by Princess Izabel, Emperor Pedro II 's daughter, the regent during one of her father's trips abroad. The myth of the harmonious social pact established by the Abolition obliterates almost four centuries of black resistance, including that of Palmares and several other Quilombos.

It cannot be denied that Brazil's insertion into the Western map was characterized by dependence. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been no significant production and circulation of symbolic goods. Recurrent remarks in travel logs, for example, refer to the lack of libraries, to the poor reading habits of the local elite, to the very low level of education of men and women. In fact, there was no reading public in Brazil, the press was outlawed, there were no printing shops, schools were scarce. The arrival of the Royal Family in 1808 marks a change in the cultural landscape. In spite of that, however, Brazil continued to be a branch of the real radiating centers – France and England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S.A. in more recent times. Even today the conditions of production and circulation of symbolic goods remain precarious, and many of our structural problems remain. If we think only of those directly related to our work as teachers, let me mention that our libraries hardly deserve that name: the collections are insufficient and outdated, particularly in what refers to journals. Periodicity is not maintained, as acquisition depends on the availability of (unstable) funds. We rely on books and xerox copies made in our trips abroad; the students take for granted that the professors' private libraries will be their most important alternative sources. With solemn disregard for copyright, we build our "xerotecas" ("bibliotecas" constituted exclusively of xeroxed material); at least in that aspect, the age of mechanical reproduction works to our advantage... .

The reading public in Brazil is extremely reduced until today, and education is a privilege for the few. In a country with very high rates of illiteracy (and in which literacy is understood as the capacity to sign one's name and draft a simple message), one wonders what the future of literature is.

Discordant voices might interfere at this point, and remind me of the progress attained in many areas, in spite of the overall situation of the country. It is true that we have some competitive Universities, for example, but we must contextualize our analysis: the radiating centers of knowledge are mostly concentrated in the Southeast, contributing to an unequal distribution of power in the country. Aníbal Quijano has stated that in Latin America (including Brazil) one talks of modernity without having gone through modernization: ours are uneven modernities, characterized by the simultaneity, rather than sequence, of stages of history, by the co-existence of extremes separated by ever more visible gaps.<sup>5</sup>

Brazilian Universities are a part of this trajectory.<sup>6</sup> The first ones were created in 1912, and even these were only the result of the association of professional schools which aimed at reproducing knowledge and conferring the professional degrees in demand. Research was not seen as a constitutive element in the academic project. In fact, there was no academic project as we understand the concept today. Particularly in the case of the courses of Law and Letters, there is the reproduction of the rhetorical model of the intellectual inherited from the literary academias of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, referred to by Costa Lima as the auditive, rather than theoretical, mode of intellectual “production”, a model resulting in a “cultura de ouvir dizer”, a culture of mediation and reproduction characterized by purely formal and external erudition. Costa Lima discusses the cult of the external which characterizes Brazilian culture, such as the frequent name-dropping, citations and mechanistic applications of formulas taken from the latest cultural fashions, which we encounter with disturbing frequency: this repetition syndrome, he concludes, makes of ours a “cultura para inglês ver”.<sup>7</sup> Roberto Schwarz has named this attitude of reproduction a cultural stiffneck, or “torcicolo cultural”, which is the unexamined repetition of imported ideas and formulas improperly received because transposed without adequate problematization.<sup>8</sup>

The courses of Letters, created in the decade of the 30's (ours was created in 1939), are related to this auditive and ornamental model. The projects of some of these courses, as Marisa Lajolo has shown, have made their objectives very clear: "to prepare intellectuals for high cultural activities, either technical or uninterested" – or, in other words, neutral, innocent activities.<sup>9</sup> Letters, then, is defined, in these projects, as a cultural adornment. The implications of this view can be recognized in the treatment given to literature, until today, in many of our curricula of Letters: the presupposition that literature helps to shape character and personality; the idea that it conveys universalist, absolute values, forming better citizens. In this sense Literary Studies are supposed to create an elite with a superior perception of reality – usually in harmony with hegemonic, dominant values. On the other hand, literature is seen by many teachers as merely instrumental in the improvement of the student's performance in English, or only as an adornment – the "soft" side of Letters as opposed to the "hard" sciences such as Linguistics.

The auditive model mentioned indicates that there has been fertile ground for an acritical reception of Anglo-American literatures in the Universities, on the basis of the notions of canon, center, and model. This ideological reproduction has fulfilled two objectives: from the perspective of dominating countries, the veiculation of their cultural values; here, the thirst for identification with such values. This results in a "ufanismo pelo alheio" (a pride for what is not ours), an inverted exoticism, unwilling or incapable of examining the ideological basis of the uncritical reproduction of values", which is, clearly, an undesirable form of mediation.

The area of English and American Studies in Brazil has been, generally speaking, much more conservative than those of the Theory of Literature, Comparative Literature or Brazilian Literature. Some of the reasons for that are ideological, others relate – also – to structural problems specific to the teaching of foreign literatures here. Our courses have traditionally privileged the study of the canon in panoramic

programs organized by period or literary gender, in part due to pressures of time and space in the curriculum. The non-availability, here, of collections of primary sources not assimilated by the mainstream results in the fact that a large part of the student's contact with literatures in English is done through the canon. These pressures, as well as structural and conjunctural limitations already mentioned, result in the presentation of these literatures as a body of great works, in a sacralizing totalization which prevents the recognition of disturbing and emergent voices. However, three factors are contributing to alter the panorama. The changes in the national and international theoretical landscape, the impact of other disciplinary gazes on the literary work, and the increasing articulation of marginal groups in the countries where these literatures are produced as well as in Brazil have been pressuring and expanding the canon, and exposing the ideological reasons that underly this cultural construct, leading to the inclusion of certain voices and to the exclusion of others.

The expansion of the canon, however, is not enough, if we persist in canonic readings of the works and in the assumption that great literature is universal and expresses general truths about human life. If there is anything universal about literature and aesthetic norms, it is the fact that "they are universally established by historical subjects in diverse cultural centers", as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has stated. Therefore, rather than looking for universal constants, we should, to borrow Fredric Jameson's motto, "always historicize", that is, discuss the text as well as the critical and pedagogical methodologies as cultural constructs historically created and situated. In our case, to historicize our gaze means to privilege our social-cultural inscription as Brazilian readers, our here and now, in order to open up new possibilities of interpretation, more significant from our perspective.

As teachers, we can choose to remain on the level of dissemination of received wisdom and established values, local or imported, but we can also challenge them and become agents of cultural change. In order to



do so, however, we must first resign our position of absolute hermeneutic power: we do not hold the key to a final sacred truth of the text. We must, then, problematize our locus of enunciation, our position in the classroom and in the academic institution, our class privileges, and our social function as intellectuals in the periphery. As David Murray has affirmed, “knowledge in its formation and dispersal is intimately related to power, it can no longer be seen as neutral and non-ideological, as part of the solution rather than part of the problem”. Thus, the epistemological position determines the object, which cannot be revealed or described in a neutral form. Once I make explicit that my gaze is not innocent, and that my model of analysis structures the object to make it intelligible, I refuse a monotopic hermeneutics and open the possibility for plural interpretations. Through the relativization of literary studies, the text is then seen as a textual space crisscrossed by various cultural codes and contexts. Literature, in this perspective, is considered as an open and decentered field of meanings. No single methodology can exhaust the text: something will always resist, indicating that the text is open to a multiplicity of readings. To read as a logocentric reader, as Sérgio Bellei has stated, is to look for a center, an interpretive constant. To read as a nonlogocentric, postmodern reader is to practice the production of meanings. As we historicize the text and the gaze that looks, and contextualize the text as well as the interpretive position, we recognize the historicity of the act of reading. For a pedagogical project, this is a crucial moment, because it introduces the student as an active co-author in that production of meaning. And this is what constitutes, for me, the only way to place American literature – or any foreign literature – in the field of interest of Brazilian students. How can we make a piece of literature become significant for the student’s personal and social understanding? As we teach, we must, as Susana Funck has stated, “acknowledge the reader as a social construction”, particularly because “the distance between author and text is not mediated by a common language or a common history”. This is why she formulates “three basic pedagogical commandments for increasing the relevance and therefore desirability of the teaching of American literature in Brazil:

- 1 - focus on ideological discontinuity by eliminating race, class, gender, and genre limitations, that is, by presenting “minor” authors and genres together with canonical literature;
- 2 - foster awareness of the processes of value formation, that is, an awareness of literary status as a consequence of structures of power enforced by dominant culture; and
- 3 - acknowledge critical as well as national and personal biases in myself and my students, that is, focus on how we respond to works of literature as Brazilian readers, women readers, black readers, etc, as compared to canonical and therefore supposedly impersonal responses.”

She concludes by saying that the goal is to create the conditions for the transformation of the student from an assenting reader into what Judith Fetterley has called the “resisting reader.”

To teach literature, then, is to teach the possibility of reading, and to acknowledge that there will always be something left in the text which the reading cannot account for. I can only read from my expectation horizon, but the text resists me. And it is this resistance that indicates the friction between my gaze and the text – the many voices that constitute it. The text is not an object to be reduced and domesticated by a final interpretation or a universal constant: “it is a force in expansion that constantly motivates new readings” in search of meaningful interpretations for each reader. We must, then, teach how to read from here, articulating possible interpretations of the text to the students’ cultural experiences, not merely to their expectation horizon, but to their social and cultural inscription in terms of race, gender, class, and nationality.

We return again to the locus of enunciation from which we formulate discourses about the text. This locus must be constructed as an interstitial space, a place in between, to borrow Silviano Santiago’s

notion. Rather than remaining in the passive and assenting position of receiving the canon and the canonical readings as a natural system, we must see literature as a cultural product, inquire into the nature and function of discursive practices in their original environment. It is also relevant to think about their function in the environment to which they have been transposed – ours – and discuss our locus of enunciation as a network of places of understanding from which we will construct our own readings. In the global village of the Postmodern Age, in which mass informational technology has taken over, we must recognize the co-existence of conflictive worlds and look for an open, plural reading of cultural experiences. Historical subjects in diverse cultural centers produce meaning as writers and readers; we must then, according to Mignolo, “approach knowledge and understanding from the perspective of a constructivistic epistemology and hermeneutic, [in which] the audience being addressed and the researcher’s agenda are as relevant to the construction of the object or subject being studied as the subject or the object being constructed.”

To conclude, I would like to add three more pedagogical commandments to those presented by Susana Funck:

- 1) In order to open a more meaningful cultural experience for the student, place American Literature within the framework of Comparative Literature, articulating the foreign literature to our own and locating both in a complex network of cultural relations.
- 2) Expand the notion of literary text to that of cultural text, exploiting the relation of literature to films, soap operas, pop music, and so on, recognizing all of them as meaningful forms of cultural production. To proceed by analogy and contrast, from the cultural text known by the student to the one he/she doesn’t know, is what Siegbert Praver has called “placing”, which I interpret as a mutual illumination of texts.

- 3) Associate the discussion of the texts to the cultural debate that interests us today: questions such as the concept of nation, cultural dependence, the relation of literature to mass culture, the process of globalization and internationalization that characterize our age, the system of values disseminated by mass media, the social function of literature in that context, the role of the teacher in the process of teaching, and the status of the humanities in our society.

In this sense we will be able to read American Literature from here, or, rather, read American Literature and our here. In this more complex interlocus, we will be constructing a significance for our own gaze, and in this constructive enterprise the text will grow, and so will we.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Moreiras, Alberto. "Transculturación y pérdida del sentido". *Nuevo Texto Crítico* 6, 1990. Quoted in Richard, Nelly. "The Latin American Problematic of Theoretical-Cultural Transference: Postmodern Appropriations and Counterappropriations". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 92, n. 3, p. 459, Summer 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Gazolla, Ana Lúcia and Pinto, Julio. "Shakespeare in the Cooking Pot". In: Barker, Simon and di Piazza, Elio, eds., *Shakespeare in the World*. Forthcoming. Several of the questions discussed in this essay are reiterated here. See, also, Silviano Santiago's "O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano", in *Uma literatura nos trópicos* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1978) and "Apesar de dependente, universal", in *Vale quanto pesa* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982), and Luiz Costa Lima's "Da existência precária: o sistema intelectual no Brasil", in *Dispersa Demanda* (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Lima, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Gazolla and Pinto, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Quijano, Anibal. "Modernity, Identity, and Utopia in Latin America", *boundary 2*, Durham, v. 20, n. 3, p.140-55, Fall 1993.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Gazolla and Pinto, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Lima, op. cit., p.9.

<sup>8</sup> Schwarz, Roberto. "As idéias fora de lugar". In: *Ao Vencedor, as Batatas*. São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, p.22, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Lajolo, Marisa. "No Jardim das Letras, o Pomo da Discórdia". In: III Encontro Nacional da ANPOLL, 1988, Recife. *Anais ...* Recife: ANPOLL, p. 91-103, 1988.