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Teaching American Studies in Brazilian Universities: Johannes Factotum Or Janus?

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Culture abhors simplification.

Frantz Fanon

"North American Culture and Institutions" courses, as they are called, have been taught in Brazil since the early 1980s. At the University of Brasilia where I teach, these courses have been offered since 1980 and are compulsory courses for the students of the Translation Department. They are designed to give support to English Language and Literature courses but look beyond language and literature by providing students with cultural awareness, an important component of the process of acquisition of the language they are learning to translate. They were (and to a large degree still are) taught in the so-called "life and civilization" fashion; i.e., as the study of North American history and institutions. Similar courses are taught at the graduate level, forming part of the M.A. programme in English.

I aim to share in this article the experiences we have been accumulating at the University of Brasilia, in order to raise points for discussion that would widen the debate around what is a relatively new area of teaching and research in Brazil. I explore in the article both the practical problems of pedagogy and the political implications of working in American Studies, an interdisciplinary but also an ideologically charged practice. I deal with problems one faces at the very beginning; i.e., when one attempts to define what the field is, and which materials, syllabi, and teaching strategies one is expected to adopt in order to incorporate Cultural Studies, inevitably a requirement of the interdisciplinarity. I also examine some political aspects related to the much-talked-about internationalization of scholarship. Nevertheless, my main concern is with the implications and relevance of working with North American culture in Brazil. Although the labels Cultural Studies and American Studies stand for distinct, albeit connected, fields, I am collapsing and classifying them as "North American Cultural Studies" (NACS) for the purposes of this article.

I would like to start by quoting from a report, issued in 1993 by the Brazilian Association of American Studies, dealing with the state of the art of American Studies in South America:

> First of all, it seems important to understand the different meanings that the term American Studies possesses in Latin America, and why it may be preferable to talk of Studies on the United States, no matter which academic field these works can relate to. If many people in Latin America have begun recently to study the US in a more serious and systematic way than before, few actually do American Studies (in the sense that American scholars understand it), and even fewer would admit being involved with American Studies. To most South Americans, American Studies usually implies a professional limitation, since in their countries no one can make a living teaching American Studies; and, moreover, no one can succeed in the academic community as an American Studies specialist. In contrast, the idea of being a specialist in the study of the United States, which does not necessarily imply a loss of identity for any given professional, seems to be more accepted. In other words, he or she will continue to be a historian, a political scientist, a literature specialist, etc., and will not lose any links to his or her previous field of knowledge. The expression, however, usually serves to delienate a special topic to be studied, one that can be dealt with from a variety of perpectives, or viewed through different lenses furnished by distinct disciplines. People agree to study the US, to do research or teach themes related to US history, politics, literature etc., but continue to view themselves mainly as historians, political scientists, literature specialists, etc. (*Panorama* 2; translation mine)

The situation has not changed much since 1993. First of all, in Brazil the label "American Studies" is considered misleading, as it covers only the study of the United States, and not the whole of the Americas. On the other hand, Brazilian scholars are only slowly and gradually incorporating the new concepts and praxis of Cultural Studies into the teaching of American Studies, no easy task by any means. Definitions of culture and Cultural Studies render apparent their discouraging as well as challenging complexities. To illustrate, culture, as understood today, is defined by Richard Hoggart—one of the "founding fathers" of Cultural Studies together with Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall—as "the whole way of life of a society, its beliefs, attitudes and temper as expressed in all kinds of

structures, rituals, and gestures, as well as in the traditionally defined forms of art" (3), while for Hall, Cultural Studies is,

> a discursive formation in Foucault's sense. It has no simple origins, though some of us were present at some point when it first named itself in that way. It has multiple discourses and a number of different histories . . . [It is a] set of unstable formations . . . [and has] many trajectories . . . [It is] constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention . . . [It] refuses to be a master-discourse or a meta-discourse . . . [and is] always open to which it does not yet know. (278)

I keep repeating these words to myself, trying to incorporate their wisdom, yet wonder if it is possible for us mortal instructors to translate all that into the everyday reality of teaching NACS in the universities in Brazil, especially when one is dealing with a culture that is not one's own. Moreover, these boundless, blurred definitions of culture and Cultural Studies give us instructors feelings of discomfort when we have to organize actual courses dealing with such a seemingly complex subject.

Indeed, there has been much discussion about the definition, function, and use of NACS. Scholars and instructors tend to require very precise specification of their object of study, as well as typical methods and academic approaches for it. Because the different elements of a culture are inextricably connected, NACS has necessarily fluid boundaries; it escapes precise definition and demands a multiplicity of investigative perspectives, taken from such different disciplines as literature, political science, anthropology, sociology, media studies, history, etc. My colleagues and I feel that never was the concept of intertextuality better suited than in this all-encompassing, interdisciplinary atmosphere of NACS.

Different from the utopian, traditional unity of the literary object, NACS has a comprehensive, ubiquitous quality which requires transgressing comfortable intellectual confines and academic hegemonies. In his presidential address to the American Studies Association annual conference in 1994, Paul Lauter characterized American Studies as being not a discipline but "a framework within which people engage in those most significant of intellectual ventures" (126). We have to admit that no responsible scholar could ever do all of this on his or her own; no one can specialize in everything. In Brazil, there has been much discussion about this dilemma of the putative "Jack-of-all-Trades" instructor of NACS.

Thus, I argue that anyone involved in this somehow pioneering field is faced with a two-fold, Janus-like course of action. Scholarly work tends to be specialized; as

such, the traditional attitude towards research tends to take one away from the broadly defined area of NACS—a practice that requires an eclectic, interdisciplinary, or even anti-disciplinary approach. It is not easy to abandon the usual practice of individual research and teaching practice in order to develop boundary-breaking research and partnership with colleagues from different departments. Moreover, there is a prejudice against "Johannes Factotum" teaching activities. Yet I believe that cooperation is a key practice for reconciling these conflicting interests.

In Brazil, some universities have already established alternative structures to the traditional departmental divisions. At the University of Brasilia where I work, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies was created some ten years ago and is now thriving, with fifteen different nuclei organized on an interdisciplinary basis around specific themes, such as Women's Studies or Environmental Studies. The Center is in the process of creating one such nucleus around the American Studies theme. This nucleus will initially incorporate professors from the departments of History, Geography, Anthropology, Sociology, International Relations, English Language and Literature, and Media Studies who have agreed to develop interdisciplinary teaching and research projects. Our first such project is the creation of a 360-hour, team-teaching course at post-graduate level on US Studies. I hope that instructors from other departments will join us in the near future.

Evidently, it is necessary to establish a dialogue that bridges the competent islands of scholarly work. Nevertheless, I believe that scholars need also to acquire some degree of competence in fields other than their own areas of specialization. Personally, I am developing research projects connecting literature and history, and literature and film.

I also think that it is extremely important to be honest with one's students about the inevitable gaps in one's mastery of such a vast and complex field. Students never respond negatively to such confession; on the contrary, they engage in a more active role in the course activities. I usually count also on external help, by inviting colleagues from different departments to help me cover important aspects that must be included in the wide spectrum of NACS yet with which I am not too familiar. I regularly invite instructors from different departments such as Media Studies, Economics, Political Science, and International Relations, since these areas are outside my expertise as a literature instructor. Moreover, the fact that Brasilia is the capital of Brazil, and as such the city where the embassies are located, makes it easy to have guest speakers from the US embassy to give informal lectures to our students on more specialized topics. Such prospective speakers always respond positively to our invitation, and the students enjoy the experience of having "native" Americans talk about their culture from their point of view.

One major issue is deciding on the *core* of NACS—what it really is, and how to make sense of it. Having to "encapsulate" material of such broadness and

complexity within the rigid framework of the credit-course system renders the process of designing a syllabus arduous. Postmodernism has made us aware that grand narratives have collapsed; and poststructuralism has provided us with a construction of power, language, and culture that is protean, ideological and discursive. This atmosphere has encouraged a healthy reconceptualization of many important topics, and the establishment of different paradigms for the interpretation and representation of North American culture. Thus, I believe that one possible strategy is to negotiate the syllabus—not only at the initial stage of the course but throughout its development—and at the end, ask the students to provide an evaluation of the whole process. A brief exposure of how my courses are regularly planned may help to illustrate this point: one basic course, distributed along thirty meetings of two hours each, initially explores topics such as US History and Geography, Art and Literature, Economics and Foreign Relations. After this basic introduction (which covers roughly one third of the course), there is a varied set of topics related to more "cultural" aspects such as race, ethnicity (multicultural aspects, etc.), gender, class, and popular culture. This part varies to a certain extent according to the interests of the students, established at the beginning of the semester through discussion; however, it also depends on the opportunities available outside the department and the university (such as guest speakers, and cultural events such as performances, exhibits, etc.). The third part is devoted to the organization and presentation of student projects.

Another issue is the choice of material. While there is currently a healthy expansion of the notions of text and textuality, some colleagues are reluctant to relinquish the comfort of the normative textbook, long-gone for some others. However, the multi-faceted nature of NACS requires that it be taught as a plurivocal experience, conveyed through a variety of sources, both academic and non-academic. When studying a specific aspect of North American culture as, for example, the educational system, one can have recourse to US government records and statistics besides academic books on the subject; yet John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson are also important sources, as well as newspapers or even popular films. Unfortunately, we have to rely more heavily on (mainly written) texts than on first-hand experiences. Other problems are related to the difficulty of getting primary sources and the variety of material that we need to incorporate in our courses, such as cassettes of TV films, songs, films, academic books, literary texts, advertisements, newspapers, etc. We all know that it is usually not enough to acquire this material once; it also has to be kept up-to-date. Yet the limited resources in our universities impose severe limitations on our courses in this respect. Let me add that we are much helped by material available at the US embassy. Internet facilities also provide an invaluable source of information and research material. On the other hand, I cannot stress enough that NACS instructors must be extremely careful to prevent knowledge derived from such sources from being either restricted or filtered through particular ideological forces. The students lack material and opportunity, but they do not lack intelligence and strongly react against any kind of sanitized information.

Encouraging an increasingly active, critical role on the part of the student has been proving quite rewarding. We can always cultivate an atmosphere in the classroom that might stimulate revisionist readings of authoritarian materials that would lead to the deconstruction of age-old stereotypes and heritage myths. I always try to put into practice the concept of "parallax," this cryptic word which recurs in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce borrows it from astronomy to illustrate the nowadays widely held belief that objects vary in appearance depending on the position of its viewer.

Then there is the issue of theory. It is a fact that we witness today a kind of "changing of the guard" in academia, in the sense that, fortunately, we do not have to have our little gods any more, as when we were asked whether we were a Lacanian, a Foucauldian, a Derridean, a Marxist or post-Marxist, a feminist, etc. On the other hand, I for one feel at pains to keep pace, without much success, with the theoretical revolution (or better still, "theoretical noise," as Hall puts it [278]), that has been taking place in the field in the last twenty-five years. As the Brazilian intellectual Roberto Schwarz well remarks, we have been moving fluently, perhaps also meaninglessly, through the several theoretical innovations that are *designed in Europe and in the US and supermarketed to the other countries in the world* (14; emphasis mine). And that is where the problem lies.

Commenting on the "duties" of the scholar on the periphery of capitalism, Schwarz asserts:

> It is true that the backwardness and the attempts to keep up have internal causes, but it is also true that the forms and techniques—literary and other—that are adopted at times of modernization were created out of social conditions very different from ours, and that their importation produces a maladjustment that is a constant trait of our civilization. From an internal perspective, this maladjustment is the mark of backwardness. In a world perspective it is the effect of the unequal cumulative effect of capitalism, of which it reveals essential aspects: from this springs its universal significance. (14)

This issue spawns political and theoretical preoccupations in two directions: the importation into Brazil of knowledge produced abroad, and the exportation of the knowledge that we Brazilian scholars produce about North-American culture.

The contemporary global setting has been increasingly described in terms of its geographical, social and economical interdependence. However, when one applies this notion to everyday academic experience, what one observes is *not*interdependence but the practice of having these so-called new paradigms for NACS produced in the US and exported worldwide. One must keep in mind Hall's warning that Cultural Studies is "in the process of being . . . widely institutionalized

and commodified" (293). One agrees with him when he sees this institutionalization as a moment of profound danger, because it might affect the distinguishing characteristic of Cultural Studies as initially formulated, which is its ultimate ideological purpose: trying to acknowledge the voice of the other in an engaged form of analysis.

In an attempt to translate that ideological purpose into our teaching and research practice, I have recently developed a project involving twelve instructors of Brazilian universities. Its main objective was to study representations of Brazil in US fiction. Its theoretical framework included postcolonial studies, multiculturalism, and the new developments in ethnography. The book to be published as a result of this project demonstrates that, in studying the way US writers objectify Brazil, a scholar learns more about US authors' own cultural values and prejudices than he or she does about Brazil. Those of us who contributed to the book only hope that US scholars will acknowledge the validity of our contribution to American Studies. I say this because Brazilian and US scholars do not at present share a critical dialogue, that would not only enrich both sides but would also more faithfully reflect the—much discussed postcolonial status of—hybridity characterizing the contemporary world. Instead of the dialogue, I feel there exists at present in the US a monocular vision best described as chauvinistic and provincial. To illustrate, US historian Robert Walker characterizes scholarship such as the one that led to this book as "dependent and derivative, a pale reflection of the genuine article" (qtd. in Desmond and Dominguez 483).

So, to be quite frank, I do not believe that North American scholars would very easily acknowledge the other-than-North-American critical perspective, even though they write about the importance of developing cross-cultural awareness. I am convinced, however, that we should on both sides strive for the development of a different kind of international scholarship, one that would truly incorporate other perspectives, that would in turn formulate questions and critiques much more fertile than those expressed so far. In this process of developing a more independent position, I believe that Brazilian intellectuals should try to make the most of the prevailing academic atmosphere that emphasizes the need for the legitimization of the voice of the other. The reading public of Brazilian works should be expanded overseas to the same degree that we in Brazil so enthusiastically welcome foreign (intellectual) production. A number of transnational discussions now made possible through the internet are expanding this interchange. I believe we Brazilians should make our voice loud enough to be heard because, as Aimé Césaire remarks, "Exchange is oxygen" (11). A critical interface between different perspectives would, I believe, reveal otherwise hidden or ignored dimensions of the cultures involved in this dialectical exercise.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said writes that "The history of such fields as comparative literature, English Studies, cultural analysis, [and] anthropology can be seen as affiliated with empire and, in a manner of speaking,

even contributing to its methods for maintaining Western ascendancy over non-Western natives." But he also adds: "Our interpretative change of perspective allows us to challenge the sovereign and unchallenged authority of the allegedly detached Western observer" (59). And it is to this second part of his statement that I think attention should be given.

Said expands Herbert Marcuse's notion of the one-dimensional society and Adorno's consciousness industry, and throughout his fascinating book argues for an epistemological revolution and for the development of what he calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion," for a "restorative interpretation" that would read the "cultural archive . . . not univocally but contrapuntally" (308, 212, 59). More easily said than done. Unfortunately, I do not have a magic formula that would translate these preoccupations into effective teaching strategies and research materials. Nevertheless, these issues definitely inform and affect my regular academic activities, be it course design, choice of material, or research interests. I believe we NACS instructors should advance further in this direction. We cannot pretend that we are convinced of the non-political nature of our work. We must free ourselves from the myth of academic freedom, according to which educational concerns can be divorced from social, political, and economic realities. Said has commented on the "practice of self-confinement of the libertarian theoretical capital produced in the West" (368). I believe that it is our turn to transform this extremely sophisticated theoretical capital into effective action of the sort that might benefit us Brazilian NACS instructors as well.

Some Brazilian critics and several of our colleagues in some Brazilian universities have been working on what could be described as the "criticism of transplants." There is an increasing concern—I would say even an increasing impatience—and reaction against some attitudes of unquestioning subservience to Eurocentric models, that sometimes function as our superego, so to speak. I would like to mention the work of Professor Sergio Prado Bellei, one of our leading NACS scholars, who has written much about this attitude of "digesting foreign texts in the tropics." He recalls the Brazilian Modernist Movement of the early 1920s, whose main attitude towards achieving our cultural and literary independence came to be known as *Antropofagia* (Anthropophagy), or reading as cannibalism. *Antropofagia* had a strong impact in the development of our newly formed Republican nation; it became a point of reference for subsequent generations and its influence is being renewed in the contemporary atmosphere of globalized values and interests.

It is by quoting from Bellei that I would like to conclude this article. Discussing the notion of "mediation"—according to which we have been promoted overnight, i.e., we are not imitators any more, but "mediators"; therefore, we do not have to feel guilty in continually and increasingly importing from Europe and the US—Bellei warns us that "mediation may be very comforting but [it is] unfortunately unable to

change existing social and economic conditions. . . . Emphasizing mediation rather than open resistance tends to preclude rather than promote change" (59).

Notes

1 I must comment that there is a tension underlying this work, rising from the dichotomy between my very much existing pedagogical interest and my constant "wrestling with the angels," to borrow from Stuart Hall (280). I might add that this conflict has been present throughout my academic life. I have always been concerned with how best to use theory so that it can be of help to me in my teaching and research, rather than see it as a mere intellectual "tool," the reading of which is a painful exercise at times.

Bearing in mind both Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's verdicts that to talk about culture is a violation of its very meaning and an affirmation of the classifying approach which is anathema to it (qtd. in Riedel 61), I nevertheless attempt to "anatomize" this mushrooming field for practical purposes. I have to confess my great difficulty in understanding some theoretical works but from what I have understood from my (not extensive) readings of Adorno, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, Tony Bennet, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Pêchaux; the British "trinity" Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Hall; and others, I feel that apparently everything under the sun of theory and method can somehow relate to culture, civilization, power, hegemony, ideology, and their derivations. And these concepts have undergone a radical change, receiving a revolutionary, libertarian dimension. Nevertheless, we must try to translate this phenomenal production of knowledge into concrete praxis, or else this intellectual exercise might become just a sort of intellectual "voyeurism."

2 Here, it is worth repeating Frank Lentricchia's comments about theory; although he criticizes what he sees as the "smoke-screen of esoteric terminology," or the "phletora of critical vocabularies," he also remarks that to be against theory is to be against self-examination (109).

3 The need to develop a dialectical practice that would avoid the extreme positions of both nationalistic, xenophobic negation, and colonialist, uncritical acceptance has engaged our best Brazilian critics, among whom I would mention Alfredo Bosi, Antonio Candido, Sergio Buarque de Hollanda, Eduardo Portela, and Silviano Santiago.

I sometimes feel uncomfortably unable to follow all this brilliant intellectual production because we have an importation timelag that hinders the reception of these new ideas; however, our belatedness might be of some use in a near future, when we all hope that this new neoliberal fashion is out-moded before our country embarks on it full force.

4 Hall writes: “I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we have been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything.” Concerned as he is with the marginality of the critical intellectuals who make indisputable effects in society, he asks, “What happens when an academic and theoretical enterprise tries to engage in pedagogies which enlist the active engagement of individuals and groups, tries to make a difference in the institutional world in which it is located?” He then makes a claim for the “wordly affiliations” of Cultural Studies, i.e., the return of “the project of Cultural Studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below” (278).

5 I firmly believe, like so many of us do, that we must politicize the aesthetics, that we must enrich the walled-in, platonic comforts of the campus by incorporating the challenging arena of politics.

6 The supposed cannibalism of the native Indian population was used as a metaphorical image to describe a different cultural relationship between Brazil and the (mainly Eurocentric) outside world. The Modernist Movement cultivated this notion of devouring foreign texts and cultures with the purpose of transforming them into a source of energy for the construction of our national literary and cultural identity. The movement, which had the writer Oswald de Andrade as its founder and major figure, was a form of mediation, if not of resistance, to foreign influence, that was not to be copied, but digested and absorbed for the creation of a new and independent national culture. As the *Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*has it, the cannibalist metaphor for the act of translation expresses “the experience of a colonized people who devour what is offered to them by their colonizers but do not swallow it whole: quite the opposite, they spit out what is noxious to them, but what they keep they make wholly theirs by altering and changing it to suit their nutritional needs” (322).

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