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Another Kind of “road map”?: A Response to Helena Maragou’s "American Studies and Gender Issues in an International Classroom"

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I remember the first time, several years ago, that I (an American woman, raised in a white, middle-class suburb on the West Side of Cleveland, Ohio) saw a world map that was not made in America. Something was desperately wrong with it. Where was Cleveland? The map was manufactured in Britain, and in the fairly central position where I thought Cleveland should be, I believe I saw Edinburgh. Cleveland was somewhere to the left – to the West – and the massive American continent that I was so used to seeing centered and whole was, fundamentally, cut in half and “marginalized,” in a most literal way, while the United Kingdom was smack in the middle, floating there in a glistening, always sunny sea.

This was when I came to realize how concepts of nationhood and identity are scripted into us, from childhood, in some very innocent, yet subversive, ways. Maps generally centralize the country in which they are manufactured, pushing to the edges and even fragmenting or distorting other countries. The foregrounding of the country of one’s birth, (or the country of the map’s production) while distorting other countries to accommodate that centrality is a fundamental building block in the construction of both national and global perspectives.

This rather simple incident came to mind as I read Helena Maragou’s contemplations on “American Studies and Gender Issues in the International Classroom”. I concur with many of her claims about the current status of literary scholars and scholarship in the academic world, and I smile at her accounts of teaching feminism in Greece. Having just completed my fourth and final year of teaching in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Başkent University in Ankara, Turkey, I, too, have taught feminism courses, and can share stories in which somewhat “*essentialist* definitions of ethnicity, gender, race and culture” (my emphasis) are “destabilized” in such a forum. The questions I would like to pursue here include these: *Why should American Studies be named as a platform for such destabilization*; and *How might we likewise transport such destabilization into the American classroom itself?*

First, the term “essentialism” itself deserves some attention, and feminism provides a tool for that task. Essentialist feminists argue for the primacy of biology and nature in determining gender. In the first feminism course that I taught here in Turkey, I discovered that almost all of the students were at least semi-essentialists. I set out to prove them wrong. We performed role-plays from Turkish life that displayed situations in which power was determined solely by gender. Discussion of these role-plays did indeed lead us to see how, in a largely patriarchal society such as Turkey, gender is “scripted” (or constructed), and that script is transferred from one generation to the next, reinforced by both women and men within families and the immediate community. However, in a culture such as Turkey, the script is an ancient one, the distance between urban and rural life is not far, and the historical-geographical story of Asia Minor itself all contributed to a discovery that I did not quite expect: whereas it is true that the patriarchal structure has been artificially developed and refined over the centuries, we can also trace the woman’s “nurturing” role to its rural roots in which, yes, her role is

defined in part by what she is physically capable of doing. Essentialism and non-essentialism blur, and simultaneously, I at least came to see how concepts of *gender and nation* grow hand in hand.

Recently, one of my colleagues asked me to read a paper she wrote, in which she considered *Gilgamesh* alongside of Ayla Kutlu's women-centered revision of that work, *Kadının Destanı (Woman's Epic)*. In this paper, my colleague pointed out how the epic itself, a narrative form that historically contributed to constructions of nation, is, traditionally, male-centered (this, of course, is one issue that Kutlu attempts to challenge and remedy: a brave task for a Turkish woman.) For me, this also helped to show how those ancient stories and texts that we recite to ourselves in order to make sense of who we are – like the maps we look at in grade school – come to us, vacuum-packed with pre-inscribed definitions of the relationships between race, ethnicity, and gender; sometimes they are inscribed so deeply within our identity that we consider them "essential." I came up against this so profoundly in nearly every class I taught, and it truly served to destabilize *me*, and to force *me* to pose the question "Why am I teaching about America here in Turkey?" The majority of American Studies programs developed in Turkey during the 70s and early 80's, when the Republic was redefining its allegiances with the United States, in an attempt to extend the initiative begun by Atatürk to westernize and modernize. But packed within that project is yet another deeply embedded script, one that many Turks have believed to be essential, that being one of the needs to westernize. (Again, this is a script based on geography as much as it is based on culture, religion, and other factors.) Problematic as that might be to the Turkish national identity, it might be further complicated by the existence of programs such as the one in which I have taught. Ultimately, this leads to the next question: *Why should American Culture & Literature be the site from which we seek to "destabilize"? Is this because American Culture is essentially "better"?*

When I came here, I believed that I was hired to offer a pedagogy and critical perspective which, when combined with Turkish pedagogy and thinking, could help our students develop something new, something that was distinctly Turkish, even as it subsumed the best of American critical practices. I still believe this, but with some modifications: in my view American pedagogy and society was the best, in the same way I once thought Cleveland was at the center of everyone's map. My "decentering" came most profoundly in the fall of 2002, when I was assigned to teach a course called "American Social and Political Institutions." While attempting to teach the U.S. Constitution – a document that I gained new respect for that semester – my government revised it, in a most inexplicable way. As one not fully trained in political history, I stumbled a bit over the task of explaining the Electoral College, that select body which made it possible for George W. Bush to assume the presidency, despite the fact he did not win the popular vote. The students, all very nervous about the ever-increasing talk of war in Iraq, were both amazed and fearful. "Don't worry," I said, "Look here." And I pointed to the constitutional passage which forbade the president to begin a war without the consent of Congress. "This is essential to the idea of America!" I declared, and I firmly believed that this system of "checks and balances" was one of the things that made the American system great. My belief in the essentialism of the Constitution was shattered about a month later, when the Senate and the House voted to give the President the power to begin a war without that consent.

Considering this experience, and the experiences recounted by Helena Maragou, I wonder if teaching American studies abroad truly creates that intellectual space "of engendering challenging and progressive discussions on matter of global ideological interest", or if it only serves to polarize, and to re-enforce existing concepts of nation, gender, race: essentially, of power. During my first year, I asked students why they were studying American Culture and Literature, and one young man said: "how can you conquer the enemy if you don't understand it?" My above-stated experience of teaching the constitution, in a classroom that promoted discussion and critical thinking, only served to assure the students that the Turkish constitution was probably superior. Ultimately, perhaps, I succeeded in

doing something; however, I had to change my own perspective in order to be able to acknowledge this as a success.

Furthermore, when it comes to teaching feminism, we must remember that western feminism, and American feminism in particular, evolved out of western secularism, which is, essentially, not secular at all. Most of the ethics of western secularism are based upon premises derived from Judeo-Christian, and even Platonic, pre-existing texts. Therefore, western secular texts and principles sometimes produce an uncomfortable fit when an Eastern or Islamic country attempts to put them on.

At this point, I am not going to say that some of the practices considered to be "right" by some Eastern and/or Islamic countries are indeed "right" when placed in their cultural perspective (in particular, those practices that involve the mutilation or torture of women, such as female circumcision, female seclusion, wife beating, and sacrificing); however, often times western feminism fails to acknowledge the historical, socio-cultural, even geographical experiences of other cultures wherein these practices grew. I think, as a simple example, of Nawal el'Saadawi's criticism of Western (American)-based post-colonial critics, who label the third-world woman with terms such as "the subaltern;" through these terms, that woman's oppression is then intellectualized and mystified. (In essence, this may be what Maragou calls "gibberish.") However, for Saadawi and others who actually witness, experience, or attempt to curtail practices such as *sati* or female circumcision, this type of critical discourse offers no real practical solution to the very real torture of women.. In fact, in both feminism courses I taught, I did find that those texts produced by Islamic women living in Islamic countries resonated far more fully with my students then did the Western texts.

What I find provocative in Maragou's discussion is her suggestion that literature and the humanities could, in theory, offer a venue wherein the academic community might take steps towards rectifying our skewed world views, and bridging our cultural differences. Perhaps the American Studies classroom, which, for one reason or another, can now be found all over the world, and the idea of "America" itself, upon which we all have different perspectives, may be the crucible for that discussion. However, the only true way to produce a full "destabilization" and constructive discussion is to engage the American classroom itself. Who, after all, was most destabilized by the discussions cited by both Maragou and myself? Was it the students? Or was it us, the American teachers?

As I leave Turkey, I regret several things, but one most of all: there is one project I attempted to initiate which did not reach fruition. I sought to create an exchange program between our program and American institutions. Ideally, I sought an exchange between American Studies students in both countries; however, because of language issues and incompatibility of course offerings, I began moving towards a more general exchange. For a variety of reasons, including the Turkish economic crisis, I was not able to complete this project. Yet, I still hope to pursue it, from the United States, because I believe that no one can appreciate another nation's perspective until they have lived inside another country, in essence, until they see what education looks like when the map on the elementary school wall was made in another country. This is probably a more acute need for Americans themselves, because other nations have seen maps manufactured in America; in fact, many are educated using those maps in which their own country is wrongly represented. Although a fair number of American academics have traveled on the Fulbright program or on contracts such as my own and perhaps Maragou's, the majority of the U.S. academic community has not left their own borders, and continues to believe that its "critical practices," theories and pedagogies are central, infallible, and desired by all. It is not until the international academic community produces a means by which we can attain a true fluidity and exchange that we will be able to create that necessary, continual, and generative state of destabilization out of which we can all begin to perceive a globe.