

Presentation

The Worldliness of Postcolonial Studies*

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If, since the publication of *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1992) by Edward Said, the postcolonial studies have spread widely, finding new places of enunciation and fostering diverse critical approaches, what is the place of postcolonial studies today, particularly in relation to the Brazilian academy? Based on which repertoires and areas of studies have the problems posed by thinkers associated with the postcolonial debate been reactivated and redefined? If current binarism, such as “primitive/civilized”, “archaic/modern”, “illiterate/literate”, “regional/cosmopolitan”, “particular/universal”, “underdeveloped/developed”, have come forward as historically localizable inventions, what nationalist discourses (including progressive and anti-colonial) have been (or can be) revisited?

By highlighting the concept of “worldliness”, by Edward Said, the call proposes that postcolonial studies are in the world, being seized and instrumentalized by different social actors during their political battles. In recent years, because of movements such as *Black Lives Matter*, that questioned monuments and public spaces built in honor of colonizers and enslaving in Europe, Americas and Africa, postcolonial criticism occupied public squares and social networks, sometimes using the terms “postcolonial” and “decolonial” as synonyms. On the other hand, in countries such as France, postcolonial studies were treated by the

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government as enemies of the nation, able to threaten national identity with a supposedly imported agenda from the US universities. Thus, it seemed urgent to carefully examine the ideological assumptions, the specific contexts of production and the logic of instrumentalization of the various postcolonial theories. We then tried to add greater conceptual precision to the dialogue and critical confrontation between the Indian Subaltern Studies, the Modernity/Coloniality Group, the criticism over Orientalism and Occidentalism, African Studies and the African Diaspora, the Epistemologies of the South, the Critical Race Theory and Feminisms.

The dialogue with Marcos Natali, professor of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the University of São Paulo, immediately seemed fundamental to us. Natali studied with Dipesh Chakrabarty, at the University of Chicago, and brought an original reflection to Brazilian Literary Studies, elaborating a detailed critique of Eurocentrism that inhabits the idea of literature as a humanization agent. His interventions cause amazement and discomfort in an intellectual field that reproduces relations of coloniality under the sign of well-thought-out, paternalistic progressivism. The interview that we now publish, whose main focus is the discussion of his book *A literatura em questão: sobre a responsabilidade da instituição literária* (Editora da Unicamp, 2020), indicates that his dialogue with subaltern and postcolonial studies unfolds in fruitful interrogations about the field of literary studies itself, its consensuses, assumptions, practices, and forms of sociability. In the interview, we highlight the attention given to “the specific shape of our patriarchal sociability, with the requirement of fidelity to the institution of literature justifying different types of violence, while the name literature disguises the requirement of fidelity to institutionality”.

Since “Além da literature”, a paper published in 2006 in the journal *Literatura e sociedade* (and which integrates, revised and expanded, the book *A Literatura em questão: sobre a responsabilidade da instituição literária*, 2020), Marcos Natali has reflected on the rhetorical and political-institutional uses of idealizing and universalizing formulations of the literary. In his perspective, more than denouncing “false universals”, it is important to question their necessity, in other words, to understand what the defense of the universality of literature is for and what it responds to. Commenting on his reading of Antonio Candido’s essay “O direito à literatura” (2011), the scholar says that “the challenge was to understand why it did not seem possible, to imagine a politics that *did not* originate in the affirmation of similarity, a politics that *did not* stipulate homogeneity as a requirement”. After all, “What does that tell us about the contours and limits of our political imagination? If we expanded the scope of the question, we could speculate about the reasons that made literary studies embrace such an unlikely formulation with such enthusiasm, to the point that it became a kind of slogan for the field, appearing in descriptions of departments and opening ceremonies of academic conferences”.

The discussion about models of democracy, especially based on Dipesh Chakrabarty, is then crucial for Natali: “in the pedagogical model, culture is understood as part of the civilizing mission that aims to transform people into citizens and, therefore, into political subjects, while the performative model of democracy understands any community or person as already political, even before, and possibly against, any pedagogy”. Natali observes, in the famous essay of Antonio Candido, an unsettling tension between the two models of democracy, the performative and the pedagogical. After all, why is it necessary, for Candido, to dissimulate his adherence to the pedagogical model, a model that precisely underlies the defense of access to literature as a “humanizing good”? Taking *A literatura em questão* into account, Natali says: “The book argues that the inclusive gesture becomes especially problematic when it is accompanied by the certainty that the nature of the other’s desire, the subaltern’s desire is well-known, in a movement that may be associated with the discursive economy of representative democracy, in which power is acquired precisely through the appropriation of the other’s voice, for whom somebody will speak. In this framework, political-pedagogical subjects need to deny their own particularity, while disguising their desire to reform or transform the subaltern, ensuring that what they are doing is simply representation”. The productivity of the dialogue between the scholar and Gayatri Spivak is evident here.

Marcos Natali is, in fact, central to what we call postcolonial studies in Brazil. He was not the first to open the “theoretical franchise” at the mall of jargons and concepts of the Brazilian Universities, but he was certainly the one who more consistently succeeded with what the postcolonial viewpoint could offer. Not by chance, his seminal text, “Além da literatura”, has as antagonist the emblematic character of progressive thought and the narrator of *Formação da literatura brasileira*, Antonio Candido (1993). The situation is quite uncomfortable, because the one being critically scrutinized is “one of us”, a left-wing thinker. This discomfort is the most visible consequence of the reflexive view of postcolonial studies, which intervenes in the intellectual field as a questioning of the Eurocentric assumptions of anti-colonial thinking. According to Partha Chatterjee (2004), the nationalism of the colonized world was frontally opposed to the colonizer, but aimed at building a nation based on the political and social grammar of the so-called “European Modernity”. Returning to Natali, we observe a potent critique of that discourse which is the cornerstone of progressive good conscience: literature as both a human right and an inexhaustible source of humanization. The thesis that every human being has the right to literature to cultivate their own humanity hides the metonymic character of “literature” with European literate culture and its worldly role in a colonization process that destroyed and ranked cultures. Complicating the seemingly simple narratives of emancipation has been a feature of

postcolonial studies, and perhaps for this reason it has been considered as not very politically engaged (an accusation very similar to that received by deconstruction). The “decolonial” turn, which comes from Latin American Studies in the US, seems to adopt much more a political program of decolonization than to propose an analytical instance of appreciation of the contradictions, ambiguities, limits and potentialities of a project that aims some kind of decolonization.

The article by Nadia Altschul seeks to historicize the rivalry and theoretical tension produced between postcolonial studies and decolonial theory. Through postcolonial analytical lenses, it apprehends the fundamental ambivalence of the MCD group (Modernity, Coloniality and Decoloniality), a group of Latin Americanists in the United States that creates this rupture with postcolonial studies (seen as postmodern critics of Eurocentrism, but still unable to break with the Global North Theory). In the MCD, Altschul sees a logic of symbolic and epistemological expropriation of the subaltern thought that circulates in metropolitan universities without due credit. In addition, the imagined overcoming of an international division of knowledge (where the Global North calls the shots and the Global South follows the patterns created in the North) is far from happening, since the MCD has as its primary place of elocution the neoliberal metropolitan university. The criticisms made by Altschul are well-elaborated and provide food for thought. It should be noted, however, that in Brazil, the “decolonial” vocabulary starts circulating in public universities in the period when there is a significant demographic change in Brazilian undergraduate and graduate education, perhaps coming more from Coimbra, with Boaventura de Sousa Santo than from Durham (North Carolina) with Walter Dignolo. Thus, the dynamics of decolonial studies in Brazilian universities still need to be analyzed. In this sense, it is very auspicious to publish here the stimulant review “A abordagem decolonial da crítica em *Meu país é um corpo que dói*”, by Lúcia Ricotta, because, by reflecting on Claudete Daflon’s latest book, it helps us think of different possibilities of questioning decolonial theory in Brazil.

In her article, “Combined and Uneven Comparisons. Rethinking the Fields of African and Postcolonial Literary Studies within the Debate on World-Literature. Notes for New Comparatist Avenues”, Elena Brugioni proposes a review of African literature studies in Brazil, through a substantial revision of postcolonial studies, especially the dialogue between Edward Said and the most Marxian postcolonial strand, centered on the figures of Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus. It is also noteworthy how she places herself in the position of a comparatist in the Brazilian intellectual field, seeking for a revision of what has been done in Brazil and proposing an alternative paradigm for African studies in the country, beyond the paradigm of formation, which has always structured the field of African Literature of Portuguese language here. Brugioni then proposes Comparative African Literatures.

Also betting on an exercise of comparison, Maryllu Caixeta unravels the intricate intertwining between literature and modernization projects in her article “Demasiado humanos, mundanos e situados: universais, em língua portuguesa”. By comparing three canonical Portuguese language writers – João Guimarães Rosa, José Saramago, and Mia Couto – the author compares their models of consecration and draws attention to “the aesthetic-political interventions of these authors, celebrated for their universality, observing the way they positioned themselves regarding integrative rhetoric, employed in their processes of canonization”, investigating “the ways in which their fictions theorize the materials available to them, starting with the historical dimension of the Portuguese language, with its variants”.¹ In the metaphor constructed by Saramago in *A jangada de pedra* (1986), the author discovers a critique of the integrating/modernizing European project, suggesting the insight of other possible articulations, towards the South. Caixeta thus investigates, with remarkable sharpness, the complex interplay between literary writing and the reception of specialized critics, a gesture that also characterizes her approach to Guimarães Rosa and Mia Couto.

By questioning the terms of the consecration of Guimarães Rosa, Caixeta turns to the studies of Antonio Candido, especially to the thesis that Rosa’s writing represents a supposed regional-universal synthesis or the purification of the regional in the universal. In the category of “super-regionalism” (proposed by Candido in “Literatura e subdesenvolvimento”, 1970), the author perceives a Europeanizing vector that stigmatizes what is considered either regional or local, taken as rest or survival. The dialogue with Dipesh Chakrabarty is extremely opportune, since it is based on it that the author adds her questioning to the “purely abstract universalism” that bases Candido’s model. Her attention turns especially to linguistic violence, that is, to the links between colonial/modernizing violence and monolingualism. In her perspective, Rosa “explored the babelic character of a colonial and postcolonial language, the Brazilian Portuguese, but to disentangle Babel, its evolutionary ambition and its penchant for the elimination of the other”.² As the author points out, it is very significant that Mia Couto announces, in his speech at the ABL (Brazilian Academy of Letters), that the Bantu languages produced affinities between the Brazilian and Mozambican Portuguese. It is worth mentioning a comment by Mia Couto alluded to by Caixeta. The writer, in an interview to the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* (11/16/2008), commented that some of his narratives circulated in Mozambique and were adapted to theater and translated into African languages: “I convert my texts into plays. Some of my pieces were translated from Portuguese to local languages. I work for radio and television, I write for newspapers. I have a public intervention. I can’t get stuck to books only”.³

It is this fractured, plurilingual and heterotemporal Mozambique that is also configured in the most recent novel by João Paulo Borges

¹Our translation.

²Our translation.

³COUTO, Mia. Temos apenas um nome diferente. *O Estado de S. Paulo*, São Paulo, year 128, 16 nov. 2008. Cultura, p. D6. Our translation.

Coelho, analyzed in two other articles published here. Rui Miranda, in his article “World(s) apart – Borges Coelho’s *Museu da Revolução* and writing in (and of) a changing world”, examines João Paulo Borges Coelho’s novel based on a notion of world literature reviewed and re-evaluated by Pheng Cheah’s cosmopolitan lens. In his book *What is a world?* (2016), Cheah advocates that the world of world literature is basically a spatial notion: place where literary circulations take place. Contrary to such a spatial vision, Cheah thinks of *worlding*, as the ability literature has to recreate and invent worlds, impossible to be reduced or domesticated by a subject. Considering this view of “the world”, Miranda reads Borges Coelho’s novel as a narrative against the homogenizing frame of a “forward-looking” neoliberal Mozambique. The novel, in this evaluation, opens up to the bordering, interethnic, nostalgic windows of the “retreated world”. The article “As histórias dentro da história: mapeando a nação no *Museu da Revolução*, de João Paulo Borges Coelho” by Sheila Khan and Sandra Sousa, draws up a more compelling reading. It intends to investigate, based on Marianne Hirsch and her theory of post-memory, the objects figured in the novel (vehicles, telephone, tractors *etc.*) and their functions in the complex narrative economy. For the authors, “post-memory does not aspire to tidy, pure, and satisfying conclusions, but rather aims to leave audiences with the discomfort and boldness of discovering that history – especially the history of events of extreme violence and suffering – creates loose ends and gaps that no account is able to tie up and fully complete”.⁴ In this sense, they argue that such theorization maintains affinities with postcolonial criticism, inviting further investigations.

In “Literature and development on the occasion of the Antropoceno”, Carolina Correia dos Santos investigates the complex participation of intellectuals from the so-called “third world” in national modernization programs. Based on Chakrabarty, the author suggests that the Anthropocene (when men perceive themselves as geological agents) radically disrupts the ideas of progress and modernization by eroding a basic dichotomy of the Western episteme, the opposition between “culture and nature”. The author also points to the need for critical reassessment of some assumptions of subaltern studies, since decisive categories such as “human agency” and “human history” have proved to be problematic. Perhaps, the most controversial point in the discussion proposed by Santos is the thought-provoking strategy of collating speeches by the Brazilian intellectual Antonio Candido (1918-2017) and the Indian politician Nehru (1889-1964), Prime Minister of India from 1947 to 1964. It is by highlighting the intertwining of cultural and economic policies that the unexpected comparison finds its productivity. After all, for Antonio Candido, to think about the functions of literature in Brazil is to imagine the construction of a modern nation in the tropics, integrated to the civilized nations of the West. According to the author, for Antonio Candido, the writer “works *on* nature, which therefore remains

⁴Our translation.

the object of an epistemologically active dichotomy". Similarly, Nehru's industrial development project assigns the Himalayas as raw material, the mountain range is seen as an inexhaustible source of wealth for the human agent, the sole subject of the relationship. That is why the choice of reading two short stories by João Guimarães Rosa, "As margens da alegria" and "Os cimos" (respectively the opening and closing stories of the book *Primeiras estórias*), is so significant, because Santos finds, in the partnerships of the main character, the boy, other possibilities of contact with life, beyond (and against) that which guides the adults engaged in building the "big city".

If in Carolina Correia dos Santos' article, national-modernization presupposes a teleology in which archaism must be overcome by modernity, Mariana Ruggieri, in her article "A abstração da inequivalência: subalternidade e escravidão", questions such linear sequence in the way of narrating the history of capitalism. The author critically juxtaposes the thoughts of Gayatri Spivak and Sylvia Wynter in order to reflect on a possible theoretical equivalence between the figures of the proletarian and the enslaved person in the materialist theory of labor exploitation. Ruggieri suggests there is no equivalence and that forced labor is far from an archaic residue when compared to the work performed by workers on the factory floor. Rather, *plantation* is a disciplinary laboratory of modern capitalism that precedes the factory. Such a claim of *inequivalence* greatly shuffles the game of what is perceived as central and peripheral in world capitalism and poses new questions for any theory of subaltern subjectivation.

A rather unusual configuration of subaltern subjectivity appears in the article "Entre ficção e crítica: Abdellah Taïa, leitor do orientalismo de André Gide", by Júnior Vilarino. The author argues that Abdellah Taïa's novel *He Who Is Worthy of Love* (2017) consists of a potent historical fiction settling of scores with the Orientalist *ephebophilia* of the French writer André Gide, who saw in his frequent sexual relations with the bodies of young Arabs the apex of an emancipation and sexual experimentation. The asymmetry between European master *versus* Arab ephebe, which structures this orientalizing and predatory sex tourism, also provides the formalizing principle of Taïa's novel, which narrates the relationship between Emmanuel (a French professor of French literature, named after Christ "God is with us") and Ahmed, an Arab fellow student of French literature. The narrator is Ahmed who seeks to analyze the colonial and oppressive ties that held him in his relationship with Emanuel, while creating strength to free himself from such ties. The novel appears as a postcolonial settling of scores, a way of rethinking power relations from a different narrative perspective.

The relations between sexuality and power also appear as an object of analysis in the article "A Autômata: a *Unheimlich* no tema do duplo", by Ana Luíza Duarte de Brito Drummond. It is the automaton, being "the engine of discomfort in the order of dichotomies, especially

between mind and body, nature and culture, male and female, animal and human, organism and machine, self and other, automaton and autonomy”,⁵ that brings to the surface (despite Freud) what should remain hidden (*Unheimlich*). The author relates the historical disqualification, persecution, and killing of women to their annulment in loving relationship, in which the feminine is desired as a non-subject. In her perspective, it is through comicality (a bias that would have gone unnoticed by Freud in his reading of Hoffmann’s tale “The Sandman”) that the automaton Olympia exposes the violence of male desire, their will to dominate and annihilate. The only subject, the masculine is the quintessentially spectator, producing the feminine as an image, or the “image-woman”. Man fears the inversion of positions though, which is already insinuated in the myth of Perseus and Medusa, a myth that runs through the article as a guiding principle of reflection. The author’s willingness to confront theories and observe their limits is remarkable, problematizing some of the foundations of psychoanalysis and theories such as those of René Girard and Georges Bataille. The conclusion of the article reiterates the dialogue with feminist thinkers, fundamental to this kind of reflection, and suggests possible bridges between feminist and postcolonial criticism. After all, as Carolina Correia dos Santos points out, in a significant footnote (footnote 10 of her article published here), patriarchy grounds the dichotomy “culture and nature”, locating not only women in the second term of the binomial, but also the so-called “primitives”. Indeed, in her review, Lúcia Ricotta indicates that the critical scrutiny of such dichotomy is also crucial in the dialogue that Claudete Daflon holds with decolonial theory.

The material presented here shows, in our evaluation, a small fraction of what is being done in postcolonial studies in the field of Brazilian literary criticism. Brazil is a country that has presented, throughout its history, powerful anti-colonial reflections, be it in the *front* of black radical thought, be it Amerindian, or even in the scope of Euro-American thought. At the same time, however, Brazilian academic culture is full of examples of classic colonial alienation, when the appreciation and reverence for adventitious theories distort the critical sense in thinking tasks. Anti-colonial and colonized, here is the ambivalence of the Brazilian intellectual subject. This should be, it seems to us, the starting point for any reflection of postcolonial studies in Brazil: a set of knowledge produced by several peripheral/subaltern/non-western actors that may have an enormous potential to question structures of domination (subjective and objective, intellectual and material), whilst there is a chance of becoming a word ornament, a sign of academic updating, without any commitment to an analytically sharp and politically powerful thought. Just like Marxism, which experiences a dialectical tension between theory and practice, critical sharpness and dogmatism, postcolonial studies also experience powerful contradictions. The challenge proposed here is for us to face the worldliness of our

⁵Our translation.

field and place ourselves as a force that challenges postcolonial studies, advocating for a conceptually rigorous standard of cultural analysis that does not simplify the enormous complexity and contradictions of the postcolonial scenario.

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