

Interview

A Conversation with Marcos Natali: *literature in question*^{**,*}

Marcos Natali^a 

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*Interview conducted by Anita Martins Rodrigues de Moraes.

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Anita Martins Rodrigues de Moraes (AMRM): *The critical approach to the universalizing and idealizing discourse of the literary spans A literatura em questão: a responsabilidade da instituição literária – Editora da Unicamp, 2020 (Literature in question: on the responsibility of the literary institution). In the first chapter, entitled “Além da literatura” (Beyond Literature), the universalization of the literary is understood as the result of a violent process of abstraction, of the production of equivalences. Such violence is an act of translation, for it responds to an epistemological imperialism whose horizon is the disappearance (supposedly inevitable, that is, naturalized) of cultures considered “primitive”, “archaic”, “not modern”. Could you comment on the impact of subaltern studies and Postcolonial Criticism in your questioning of “literature” as a universalizing category?*

Marcos Natali (MN): Recalling that the concept of literature is historically specific and that, therefore, the history of its emergence and transformation can be narrated, as with any other social practice, is not, in itself, controversial. There are many versions of this account in literary theory and literary history, in several critical schools and national traditions. Even in Brazilian literary criticism, including

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Como citar:

NATALI, Marcos; MORAES, Anita Martins Rodrigues de. A conversation with Marcos Natali: Literature in question. *Gragoatá*, Niterói, v.27, n.59, e55786, set.-dez. 2022. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.22409/gragoata.v27i59.55786>

the work of Antonio Candido, which is the main subject of this first chapter, one finds versions of the historicization of the practices and institutions required for the existence of something that can be called literature, the most evident example being the way in which the critic recovers the notion of a literary system. This increases the importance of the fact that, in “*O direito à literatura*” (The Right to Literature), we find something so different. Although idealist remarks also appear in other works by Candido, the movement gains an especially dramatic shape in this article, suggesting that it could be useful to investigate this point further, considering still that it highlights an ambivalence that does not appear only in Candido. In this sense, denouncing “false universals” is less important than identifying, describing and understanding the decisive moments in which Candido’s thought decides it is necessary to take this leap toward the universalizing and the idealistic, going so far as defining literature, with a vocabulary that is distant from the one he uses in other texts, as a “universal manifestation” of “all men in all times”, insisting that “there is no people and no man who can live without it”. In this scenario, the truly productive question would be why did Antonio Candido, a critic capable of recognizing the historical and conceptual peculiarity of the literary in other circumstances, feel the need to affirm, in this more conventionally political text, something as questionable as the universality of literature?

After discussing some of these concerns in the classroom, a space in which the weight of the institution stimulates the naturalization of the literary, I thought that taking this question seriously might lead to a more precise understanding of the tensions that characterize the political and theoretical imaginary in which we are inserted, in the university but not only in it. In other words, the challenge was to understand why it did not seem possible, in that essay by Candido, to imagine a politics that did *not* originate in the affirmation of similarity, a politics that did *not* stipulate homogeneity as a requirement. Adding one more twist to the question, why, in this defense of the right to literature elaborated in the Brazil of the 1980s (although the text was based on an earlier essay, “*A Literatura e a formação do homem*” (Literature and the formation of man, 1972), does the author need to *deny* that what he proposes, and seems to desire, is the transformation of the *other* into the *same*? 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 demonstration that some of the statements in “*O direito à literatura*” – those concerning Amerindian discursive practices, for instance – are difficult to sustain would be important, although that was not exactly the goal of my text. (The directions taken by the text do not

lead to research of this sort, except for a few isolated observations, as in the allusion to the difficulty translating notions such as “literature” and “fiction”, as well as “rights”, “universality” and “human” to Tzeltal; there is much valuable research on these matters in recent years, both in Anthropology and in Compared Literature). In the case of my essay, the idea was to try to understand in what sense Candido’s gesture had been *true*, as long as “true” is understood as what is experienced as *necessary*. In what sense, then, for Candido’s critical-political project, was it in fact dangerous to have doubts about the similarity and equivalence (albeit subaltern) of these cultures considered “primitive” and “archaic”? What was the risk to be avoided?

Candido’s text believed that it was *necessary* to affirm the similarity and legibility of Amerindians, as well as that of workers, gardeners, etc., in order to defend their rights and even for this defense to be formulated. According to the conditions established by this imaginary, it is necessary first to make the other legible, affirming one’s access to their thought, affect, and intimate desire, so that one can then affirm their dignity and rights. The fact that this was seen as a gesture necessary to advance the argument, a movement that, in addition, corresponded to the desire of the intellectual, helps explain why the affirmation of similarity receives so much emphasis.

To return to your question about Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Criticism, the exercise sought to situate Brazilian critical thought in a context analogous to the colonial theater, causing the recognition of the complicity between the colonial domain and the teaching of literature to reverberate in the archive of Brazilian criticism, an intuition that in Postcolonial Criticism is commonplace (the book *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule*, by Gauri Viswanathan, is one example among many). The fact that this Brazilian archive is, to a certain degree, the continuation of the colonial mission is not an unknown idea in the Brazilian tradition, and actually appears even before what we usually call Postcolonial Theory. Though available in the Brazilian critical repertoire, the fact that the intuition was not routinely used to analyze the evolutionary and Eurocentric aspects of Candido’s work is relevant. In order to understand this fact, one would have to consider not only the universalizing and humanistic elements in the author’s texts, but also their importance in the history of the institutionalization of the teaching of literature. Critical tools for analyzing the relations between politics and pedagogy, and for thinking with precision and rigor the space of the classroom, questioning the confidence of the intellectual who acts as spokesman for the subaltern, from whom no friction nor response comes, may be found throughout Gayatri Spivak’s work, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and the texts gathered in the book *Outside in the Teaching Machine*.

Some readings of “*Além da literatura*”, whose first version is from 2006, questioned, justifiably, I think, the reference to a “beyond” [*além*] literature, an expression that seems to indicate the possibility, and

perhaps even the desirability, of overcoming the literary. The adverb “beyond” does in fact refer to the notions of horizon and border, in an attempt to highlight how the idea of literature acquired a certain type of sovereignty, hindering the recognition of its limits and restricting our imagination. Even today, years after the first version of the text, I don’t think that this speculative line of thinking should be proscribed, since the question regarding the end of literature, with everything it represents, still has energy and needs to be placed. However, the initial objective was more modest than a proposal for abandoning literature; it was something closer to the use of “além” in the sense of an addition or supplement, closer to “besides” – “He is rude, besides [além de] stubborn” – is the sentence offered as example in the dictionary *Houaiss*. (For the publication of the English translation, I suggested, without success, the title “Beside Literature”.) (NATALI, 2009). The only mention of the expression “beyond literature” [além da literatura] in the body of the essay occurs in a question in the last paragraph, an interrogation that forces the polarization between *literature* and *justice* in an attempt to recover the tension that conciliatory models, in which aesthetic and political interests converge, sought to diminish. The recognition of the existence of legitimate demands different from those posed by literature would be in itself an important step, and this is what the specific cases examined throughout the book try to contribute to, regarding tensions between the rights of literature, on the one hand, and the demands posed by the experience of mourning, antiracist politics, ethics, pedagogy, and indigenous alterity on the other.

AM: *Also in the chapter “Além da literatura”, you suggest that the defense of access to literature, common in cultural policies thought of as progressive, is often limited to considering what “already exists”, revealing itself often incapable of imagining “the creation of what is yet to be” (NATALI, 2020, p. 40). At the end of the book, in “Post Scriptum: autobiographies of the beginning of a class”, you propose that we “imagine a classroom that does not presuppose the ignorance of the students” (NATALI, 2020, p. 251), a classroom that would be “the adventure of the capacity to think with other people” (NATALI, 2020, p. 253), of “being with others without the obligation to be the same” (NATALI, 2020, p. 254), maintaining a place for “friction and dissensus” (NATALI, 2020, p. 245), “pointing to the openings present in thought and politics, and signaling everything what is yet to be done” (NATALI, 2020, p 260). Putting “literature in question” has, therefore, implications for the classroom. Could you talk about such implications and, if relevant, articulate them to the distinction, borrowed from Dipesh Chakrabarty between two models of democracy, the pedagogical and the performative (NATALI, 2020, p. 25)?*

MN: Your question invites us to think the issue of scale, including parallels between the dilemmas found in broad cultural and educational policies and the micro-politics of everyday life in the classroom. When, in each

sphere, we are convinced that the problem to be tackled is merely one of access – to literature, to valued cultural goods, to literacy, etc. – there is little left to be theorized. According to this perspective, the challenge would be to bring elevated cultural goods closer to populations that have historically been excluded from the possibility of enjoying them, increasing the size of the cake, so to speak (the number of schools, the number of vacancies in universities, etc.). Although these restrictions and exclusions are part of the history of colonial and postcolonial violence and, as such, need to be confronted, the point is that hegemony does not only operate through exclusion, but can also choose to increase its dominance through certain forms of inclusion.

For some years now, in debates over changes in Brazilian college entrance exams, we hear the appeals for including marginalized social groups in public universities that assume that universities themselves would not change if the modifications were to come into effect. This way of thinking hinders the recognition that it is also necessary to transform cultural practices and existing institutions, ignoring the ways in which the country's brutal history of social exclusion contaminated the cultural and intellectual production of its institutions (academic, but not only, and notwithstanding the complex and contradictory nature of these relationships). We do not have to think the relation between academic works and the context of their production in a mechanical or deterministic way to realize that this blind spot is relevant and deserves to be investigated. 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*.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's text cited in your question ("Museums in Late Democracies"), an essay that returned to a distinction made previously by Homi Bhabha (in *The Location of Culture*), was interested in understanding how, in some ways of thinking, it was assumed that the subaltern – the peasant, for example, would be a kind of pre-political being who, as such, would first have to be inserted into modern rationality in order to acquire a political imaginary. In another essay ("A Small History of Subaltern Studies", published in the book *Habitations of Modernity*), in a reading that sought to contrast historians Eric Hobsbawm and Ranajit Guha, Chakrabarty draws attention to the way in which the British historian, in his writings from the 1970s, used the term "pre-political" to define peasant revolts organized through categories such as kinship, religion and caste, defining them as movements that exhibited a "backward consciousness". According to Hobsbawm,

peasants would be “pre-political people who have not yet found, or have only begun to find, specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world” (HOBBSAWN, 1978, p. 2). Guha (1983), on the other hand, refused these evolutionary models of “consciousness”, observing how even discourses associated with kinship, caste identity and religion could lead to the expression of a consciousness that could be considered insurgent.

To return to the opposition between the two conceptions of democracy, 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. Regarding “*O direito à literatura*”, my sense is that these two conceptions of politics coexist in the text, but in an ambivalent manner, with a rhetoric derived from the performative model serving mainly to dissimulate the pedagogical model, which is the main drive that moves the desire of the text. The text’s starting point is a performative model of democracy and a neutral and inclusive definition of culture – everyone has literature, everything is literature, etc. – but this serves as a trampoline for a leap that will end in a very different place, in a pedagogical and normative model of politics. Thus, the affirmation of the universality of what is defended – “literature” – slides into the claim that a specific discursive practice – high literature, also called “literature” – is delivered to everyone. In my reading, I was interested in understanding why the discourse of the right to literature seemed to need to cancel the tension between these two politics, presenting one as if it were the other.

The fact that the same name is used to define these different discursive practices is decisive; and it is the appeal of this name – *literature* – that will often justify the demand for fidelity and agreement and will define similarity as a condition for being, seeking to prevent or interrupt new gestures of thought.

AM: *A literatura em questão argues that the literary institution resembles, in many respects, a religious institution, functioning as a kind of secular cult (we refer here especially to the chapter “O sacrifício da literatura” [the sacrifice of literature], especially pages 98-99). In your argument, the notions of “institution” (institutionalization, institutionalization), “field”, “space” and “literary system” become decisive. How, in your perspective, are these notions related, gradated, and differentiated? Could you comment on the conceptualizations you turned to and that somehow contributed to the construction of your critical perspective? Considering your experience in an institution of higher education, the University of São Paulo, how do you evaluate the implications of the demand for absolute and devotional fidelity to the literary for research activities and teaching of literature in universities?*

MN: To proceed with the attempt at gradation, it would be possible to ask to what extent is it useful to distinguish, at least temporarily, and in certain situations, the institution of literature and institutions devoted to teaching literature, spheres that overlap, but are not identical. The differentiation would help us to understand the place in academic institutions of an economy dedicated to the capture and incorporation of extramural knowledge, through complex processes that include assimilation, potentialization and neutralization. Although these incorporations are always announced “with pomp and circumstance”, in the words of Chilean philosopher Willy Thayer, when it comes to the university, “the transplantation of knowledges” requires them to first submit to the university, subordinating themselves to it. Thayer even states that, given this framework, “every empirical university will be against the poem and will not protect the poet” (in *The Non-modern Crisis of the Modern University*).

In any case, religious institutions have an advantage over literary institutions: they admit that their fundamental problem is theological and regards thinking the relationship between God and the world, with all the imperfect communities and practices that characterize the earthly sphere. It tends to be less clear that secular cults, whether organized around the devotion to reason, the human or literature, can be heirs of this religious tradition, surreptitiously appropriating the energy and experiences that had been posed theologically without theology, to recall Adorno (2006). Regarding the legacies received from the so-called religions of the Book – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (and the fact that only these three are usually mentioned is significant) – the main clashes will always be connected to the practice of reading, given the impossibility of disciplining and homogenizing the reading of any text, that is, the impossibility of transforming a text without noise and instability into dogma and doctrine. The new requirements of fidelity to literature may be situated in this framework, recovering the figure of the apostate, the heretic, the priest and the hermeneut, now in another institutional environment. In it, disputes over the preference for one work or another, or about the relative value of one author or another (Oswald de Andrade or Mário de Andrade? etc.), are accepted, seen as clashes within previously demarcated territory, possibly serving even to reinforce what the disputes have in common and keep untouched (the value of literature).

Less forgivable will be the controversies that question the priority of the literary, and against them divergent groups unite, from conservative to progressive critics, from immanent criticism to belletrism, from close reading to stylistics... In any case, accusations of infidelity to literature are useful because they are always, to some extent, true; reading would be useless, invisible and ultimately impossible without infidelity. Given the uncertain nature of any reading, whose infinitude cannot be controlled, declarations of exclusive fidelity to the literary are always revealing – “I

will begin from the work itself”, “I will respect and prioritize the work”, etc. – because of the ambivalence indicated in these very speeches. Such moments gain relevance if understood as performative acts and attempts at persuasion, rather than the transmission of information. In other words, paraphrasing Kierkegaard (1983): who can say with such certainty that he does not serve two masters at the same time? With this in mind, the book sought scenes in which the desirability of literature, so often enunciated with naturality and in a pious tone, needed to be revisited.

Regarding Brazil, in an attempt to think a bit about my own institutional affiliation, my sense is that some of these tensions, which have different versions in different national contexts, here meet 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. In order to justify these movements, it is fundamental that the world be understood as a binary opposition: on the one hand, high literature (critical thought, erudite criticism, etc.), and, on the other, something else, something that will receive different names in each case, among them “Cultural Studies”, “Identitarianism”, “the Market”...

The theoretical identities that predominate in the different literature programs and departments in the country influence and give specific shape to the encounter between these institutions and the patrimonialism, clientelism and endogeneity of our patriarchal culture. I would say that this is a story yet to be told, but perhaps this is exactly what we do in the texts we write and the classes we teach.

AM: *In the controversy studied by you in “Uma segunda Esméria: do amor à literatura (e ao escravizado)” [A second Esméria: on the love of literature (and of the slave)]- (fifth chapter of A literatura em questão), the tone of the statements of writers and scholars responsible for the “mission” of “defending” Monteiro Lobato seems to corroborate the idea that absolute devotional fidelity to literature is required. Some of those statements seem committed to ensuring the preservation of social hierarchies, positions of privilege and racism itself, that is, they serve the “naturalization of a certain worldview, as if the very existence of a national culture depended on the ability to preserve what in this original scene merges literature and power” (NATALI, 2020, p. 129). Since you propose to think of these situations as scenes (dramatic, romanesque) in which characters are outlined and roles are played, would you like to comment on this “original scene of confluence between literature and power”, in this case, a scene portraying an introduction to reading narrated by Leyla Perrone-Moisés (NATALI, 2020, p. 122-123), comparing it with another scene that you also analyzed (2020, p. 49), regarding literary humanization in Antonio Candido’s “O direito à literatura”?*

MN: When, in critical texts such as these, anecdotes are inserted with references to personal experiences, particularly ones narrating the moment of initiation to reading, the affective aspects of the relationship

with reading and books are highlighted. The gesture underscores an important aspect of the literary experience, including the relationship, more or less mythical, in each case, with a certain notion of childhood. The anecdote is a resource among others, no less legitimate nor necessarily worthy of censorship, so that the solution is not to require greater rigor or impersonality from these or other texts, condemning them for their use of memorialism and sentimentalism.

In fact, these texts become *more* interesting when they make use of these artifices, although, as with any other discursive device, they need to be read and analyzed, taking into account all of their complexity. In some of the excerpts mentioned in your question, in texts such as “*Por amor à arte*” [For the love of art] by Leyla Perrone-Moisés and “*O direito à literatura*” by Antonio Candido, the dramatic scenes are grafted onto arguments about difficult theoretical issues, as part of an effort at persuasion, revealing the expectation that their meaning would be clear and available to everyone.

The anecdotes in “*O direito à literatura*” recall several examples of successful encounters between poor people and high culture, in a series that reminds us of testimonies of miracles and revelations that immediately led to conversion, although this time what is confirmed is the value of a certain type of literature. In “*Por amor à arte*”, a talk held at the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2005, the author recalls that her introduction to reading and to Monteiro Lobato’s books took place in a context similar to those in the volumes in *O Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo*. The two sets of scenes can be read as part of the construction of a foundational myth. The structural element in common in the accounts is a confident narrative focus that does not anticipate that the secondary characters in the narratives might exchange places with the narrators, an inversion that would raise the possibility of those episodes being narrated in another manner.

The fact that similar scenes have recently come to be narrated differently is part of the controversy around Monteiro Lobato’s racism. Furthermore, the fact that so many reactions to the attempts at critical resignification of his work have adopted a tone of incredulity indicates that there is something there close to the unthinkable; the aggressive indignation in many of the manifestations in defense of Lobato suggested that an important boundary had been transgressed. And in this context the association with the religious universe, and especially with the institutionality that is built around religion, with its rituals, its vocabulary, its hierarchies, and its silences, can indeed be enlightening.

The fact that many reactions to the prominence given to Lobato’s racism in recent critical interventions have been taken a similar form – some version of the phrase “I read Monteiro Lobato as a child and I did not become racist” – also indicates an attempt to regain a *self* that was displaced. The *self* thus returns, with renewed strength, reoccupying a central place in the public sphere and offering itself as guarantee.

Imagining that it won't be questioned, it expects to maintain the privilege of the absence of a label – seeking to escape what Kate Manne will associate with “melancholy whiteness”, the sensation of having lost the right to anonymity and neutrality, that is, the right to the absence of racialization.

However, the representation of naturalized scenes that reproduce and confirm, in their structure, the symbolic architecture that frames the fictional universe of *O Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo* does not add much to the debate. What is proven by the anecdotes, once again, is that a fictional universe can emotionally move us when read in similar contextual circumstances, in ways of reading that encourage processes of selective identification with the white characters in the stories. Thus, in the account exposed in “*Por amor à arte*”, the context similar to *O Sítio do Pica-Pau Amarelo* in which the books were read included “a blackberry tree that I considered mine” and, although “there was no Rabicó, [...] there were chickens, etc. And I had an Aunt Anastacia, because the cook was a very dark Black woman who, in a politically incorrect way, was known by the nickname “Vavão”. That was the way we, kids, would pronounce ‘carvão’ [coal].” (PERRONE-MOISÉS, 2005, p. 335).

These testimonies are interesting because of their exemplary character, and they could even be read as the opposite of what they claim to be: the evidence of the naturalization of a certain supremacist imaginary, seen as a synonym for the country and its cultural life, so much so that threatening such a culture is equivalent to threatening the country. But these are not the accounts that would help us evaluate the effects of the use of Monteiro Lobato's books in elementary school classrooms, the issue that was, after all, what was under discussion in the National Council of Education in 2010. We would have to listen to other types of testimonies, narratives describing other reading scenes, such as the following. In the article “*Obra infantil de Monteiro Lobato é tão racista quanto o autor*” [Monteiro Lobato's children's books are as racist as the author], historian Lucilene Reginaldo, responding to an article by Jorge Colíthath had stated that “Only those who did not read or did not understand Lobato's children's books can judge them to be racist”, writes that, at the time of the controversy, she decided to read *Caçadas de Pedrinho* (Pedrinho's hunts) to her six-year-old son. What she found was a text in which “Aunt Nastácia was always the next in line: naïve, simpleminded, fearful, servile and a target of racism and explicit discrimination. All in perfect consonance with the racial hierarchy: at the bottom of the pyramid, the Black woman.” (REGINALDO, 2019, n.p.). Since both Nastácia and Barnabé do not have families of their own, the suggestion is that “good Blacks are sterile. The desired elimination of the black element – aiming at the advancement of civilization and the public good, of course – and the defense of colored people's subalternity were exposed by Lobato without any shame.” (REGINALDO, 2019, n.p.).

As many people have insisted in texts written in recent years – Ana Maria Gonçalves, Osmundo Pinho (2021), Fernanda Silva e Sousa (2019), among others – when considering the presence of Lobato’s works in the first years of elementary school, the essential question would be this: what is the effect of such reading on Black children, also the point where Lucilene Reginaldo’s text ends: “I do not want to believe that it is necessary to have a Black child to become sensitive to the harms racism causes in a child’s formation. And I also think that we are, or should be, far from wanting a Black boy (or girl) to learn from Nastácia what their place in the world is.” The focus on these reading scenes attempts to shift the importance to questions like these, welcoming the renewed energy noticeable in the demands made in Brazilian university classrooms and schools since the implementation of affirmative action policies. The displacement also suggests that if one still wants to insist on defending the use of Lobato’s books in schools, the argument will have to recognize that what is being claimed is the right to cause the other to suffer.

AM: *When dealing with authors such as José María Arguedas (who you especially deal with in three chapters: “José María Arguedas aquém da literatura” [José María Arguedas below literature]; “Aspectos elementares da insurreição indígena: notas em torno de Os rios profundos” [Elementary aspects of indigenous insurgency: notes around Deep rivers]); “Futuros de Arguedas [Arguedas’ Futures] and Roberto Bolaño (focus of the ninth chapter, “Da violência, da verdadeira violência” [Of violence, of true violence]), you unfold and deepen your criticism of the defense of literature as a means of cultural integration and synthesis, discussing Antonio Candido’s theory of “superregionalism”, and Ángel Rama’s notion of “transculturation”. Such “literary” writing seems, then, able to challenge hegemonic theoretical models in the literary field, also challenging their self-representations. How should we think about this potential for destabilization within literature? Or yet, how should we recognize it without reactivating the problematic devotional fidelity to literature that you are criticizing?*

MN: This aporia – the elaboration of a critique of literature within literature – is the most notable aspect of Bolaño’s and Arguedas’ works, authors who are different in so many other ways, but that question brings together. While the theoretical models summarized by the concepts of transculturation and superregionalism celebrated, with more or less ambivalence, according to each case, the supposedly successful nature of integration in the global cultural economy, Arguedas, in his time, formulated, in a unique fashion, the treacherous aspect of the promises of the inclusion of indigenous people in the literary institution. Meanwhile, in Bolaño, the recurrent concern is with the possibility that the devotion to literature, especially the public performance of the love of literature, might serve as an alibi for violence, reinforcing a sacrificial logic in which the suffering of the other is justified thanks to a higher interest. For Bolaño, the problem is the relationship between literature and evil;

for Arguedas, between literature and extermination. In both cases, texts are tormented by tensions that can be read as an inventory of impasses and risks, not permitting that writing and thinking finally rest in a stable place, inside or outside literature, in favor of or against the literary. If the absence of guarantee or security can bring anguish, especially in classrooms, it also carries potential, opening up space for these dilemmas to be thought, considering that each one needs to be assessed singularly, on a case-by-case basis. When presented to students, the hope is that this indetermination will bring with it the recognition that they will also need to take a position in an ongoing dispute, situating themselves in difficult discussions in which the name literature will not necessarily be the point of arrival nor the outcome of the reflection.

AM: *As you warn in the “Apresentação” [Presentation] of A literatura em questão, the “name Derrida appears in several moments” of the book (NATALI, 2020, p. 12). In the chapter “O sacrifício da literatura”, when dealing with “Circonfession”, you ask: “What happened, in the peculiar circumstances of the context of its production, to cause the author’s usual enthusiasm for literature to find a limit?” (NATALI, 2020, p. 106). Advancing in your dialogue with Derrida, such a limit seems to point to a certain ethics: “at every moment we must recognize that the other ‘is gone forever, that it is irremediably absent’, because it would be a type of infidelity to delude oneself and ‘believe that the other living in us is living in itself’” (NATALI, 2020, p.106). The illusion that “being for me” would be equivalent to “being itself” is also one of the serious problems perceived in projects of cultural integration, that is, in the demands that Latin American literature “incorporate” elements of cultures considered “archaic” (cultures that would be in the process of disappearing). Would you like to comment on how Derrida’s reading crosses your discussion about the ethical limits of literature?*

MN: I hadn’t thought about the question in these terms, but I think that the approximation between the notion of mourning in Derrida and the hegemonic projects of cultural integration makes sense and is enlightening in several ways. In both cases, what needs to be thought is how loss, absence and different possibilities of survival are articulated.

When writing about Roland Barthes, shortly after his death (2008), Derrida realizes that he is mimicking, in his writing, stylistic procedures “typical” of Barthes’, recovering concepts and expressions that could be seen as “Barthesian”. In this context, Derrida asks rather it would be more responsible to take the opposite approach, a strategy that would highlight the *discontinuities* between the world in which Barthes existed and this one, this world in which he is absent. In this other way of writing, this other way of understanding the work of mourning, the insistence would be on the impossibility of continuation and survival, especially because, with his death, Barthes lost the chance of being different from himself. The tragedy, after all, is that, after his death, Barthes can no longer have a new life, surprising us by beginning to write in a new way, a way that

would initially be seen as not very Barthesian (until, with time, this new writing could change what is considered characteristic of Barthes).

Transposing this problematic of the work of mourning to the theoretical models that were dominant in the middle of the twentieth century (maybe they no longer are, at least not in the same way and in the same spaces), what predominated in them, that is, in the representation of cultural difference made by the theories of narrative transculturation and superregionalism, was the triumphalist tone used to celebrate the successful integration of otherness in Latin American literature and culture. If that was what the works of José María Arguedas, Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, Miguel Ángel Asturias or João Guimarães Rosa, to mention the names most commonly cited, actually did is another issue, that would need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, sometimes work by work, or even page by page. Be that as it may, even if the violence present in these transcultural processes is seen – and both Rama and Candido recognize it –, the question about its desirability ultimately remains. As Alberto Moreiras writes in *The Exhaustion of Difference*, transculturation and superregionalism are not only concepts used in factual analyses, nor are they merely descriptive categories, but projects to be accomplished and completed, explaining the positive tone that prevails in the histories of their advances. Evidently, as Moreiras writes, considering inscription in the dominant culture a success, and its absence a failure, summarizes a specific ideological position in relation to modernization. (The work of the Peruvian critic Antonio Cornejo Polar would be an example, among others, of a less triumphalist version of this story developed in the Latin American critical tradition in the same period in which Candido and Rama wrote.)

In other words, resuming the analogy proposed in your question, and thinking of expressions we commonly hear in wakes and funerals, sometimes even next to the coffin, the celebration of the way the other, despite its death, continues to live in me, the celebration of the other's presence in my memory, is the celebration of the *I* that survived, of its power and of its memory. The comparison helps us understand how praise for the successful inscription of difference in literature, diminishing what is lost in the process, understands literature itself as the perspective and locus of enunciation. Ultimately, it is literature that is being celebrated.

AM: *In the memoir you wrote in 2016 as a requirement for the position of Full Professor, Memorial (mais de uma autobiografia) [Memoir (more than one autobiography)] (unpublished text), you reflect on the “form given to intellectual dispute”: “More than the dispute between one or another existing position, the question that persists is the difference between conceptions of dissensus, democracy and community. At stake is the possibility of a way of life in common and an intellectual life in which antagonism, an endless antagonism, would have a crucial role. Thus, the decisive exercise is always that involved in reading our*

adversaries and antipodes; that is why the important task is to think about how one reads – how one lives with – whoever is not the same”. Would this ethics of reading, which values dissensus, be the core of your work?

MN: In the activity of reading, the most challenging situation is always the reading of texts we disagree with, works from which we feel distant, texts that generate in us negative affect. Surely feelings such as anger and indignation can be catalysts of thoughtful, careful and productive readings, but there is always the risk of sacrificing precision for the benefit of the critical argument (readings moved by positive affect, such as admiration and passion, bring other sorts of risks). This is why it is always productive, in the classroom, to draw attention to the effects of our cognitive biases on our reading, which is another way of saying that desire is always present in the relationship we establish with texts. In these situations, we are placed before the challenge of trying to see our act of seeing, as well as our blindnesses, of reading the way we read as well as our inability to read, examining our biases. Reading difference is not only an ethical challenge, but also a methodological and epistemological one.

A question of another order, of second degree, so to speak, is how one should analyze and respond to authoritarian forms of intellectual dispute, that is, what form should the response to violence take. I have been trying to study this issue recently, trying to name and understand a common discursive form in our intellectual debates, a variant of mockery that can be called patriarchal (the adjective is important since it signals that it is mockery in alliance with the institution, tradition and power, one that seeks the closure of the field, reducing the new to the already known). Here also, as in other cases, there is no possible distinction between theory and practice; indeed, the way in which theoretical premises and philosophical assumptions gain shape in institutional lives is endlessly fascinating. As I already said, although the practices of endogeny and patrimonialism are repeated in departments and programs with different theoretical profiles, it is not true that the form of the dispute is always the same and that the group in the dominant position in particular institutional contexts always behaves in the same manner.

As for the form and texture of the clashes, I think that the tone of some of my interventions mentioned here – in the debate on Monteiro Lobato's racism, in the discussion of critical concepts that have influenced Latin American literary studies – makes it clear that what I see as a desirable alternative is not the absence of tension and conflict, nor the liberal fantasy of an empty notion of “dialogue”, but a practice of discussion that would at least require some time, something interdicted by the quick response found in mockery. It also requires that the other not be understood necessarily as an enemy, that which justifies the desire for annihilation.

Since the classroom is our main working environment, since in it most of our work takes place, and since it is in the classroom that our everyday life unfolds, the question is how to demonstrate there what productive dissensus may be, signaling that life in common does not require homogeneity. In this space, if any basic rule should serve as a starting point, it would be this: I must read what I criticize. Then, the objects of my critique should be identified and named, so that others may verify in the text criticized whether my reading hypothesis holds up. In addition, it is always helpful to maintain some doubt and hesitation regarding the critical methods we adopt, asking ourselves once and again if there is an other way of expressing our critique, one that would cause less suffering to others.

AM: *Still in “Memorial (mais de uma autobiografia)”, you propose that it would be necessary to consider the “history of what has happened with Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Criticism in the last two decades”. Given the theme proposed in this issue of Revista Gragoatá – “A mundanidade dos estudos pós-coloniais” [The worldliness of postcolonial studies] –, would you have something to say about this history?*

MN: The topic proposed by the issue places the postcolonial in the world and pluralizes it, suggesting further that there are points of contact between the various Postcolonial theories, critical race theories, African and diaspora studies, the epistemologies of the South, feminisms. Sharing this disposition, while seeking to sketch a history of Subaltern and Postcolonial Studies of the last 20 years, one possibility would be to examine some changes in scale in these studies, such as the passage from the subaltern to the planetary, or from studies of “Minor Histories” to the debate about the Anthropocene. However, since there is always something questionable in these excessively linear accounts that name epistemological turns and categorical passages from one thing to another, it would be necessary to recognize that even in more recent Postcolonial Studies, as in work by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has been investigating climate crisis, the focus is still on the way the crisis is perceived through our cultural and anthropological differences, recognizing that, even in such an extreme situation, the “humanity” that will finally act as a united political agent never appears. In Chakrabarty’s texts, such as “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change” (2012), the question of intrahuman and even interspecies justice remains, the environmental catastrophe being necessarily filtered by inequality and the social antagonisms that determine the unfair distribution of the effects of climate change.

Another task that has gained urgency in the last decade is the examination of the resurgence of variants of fascism, these fascisms that, like Postcolonial Studies, are also in the world, also have their worldliness, and may also be studied productively using concepts and tools developed

in Postcolonial Theory, as in analyses of the vernacularization of fascism in India, in Brazil, in the Philippines, etc.

If the goal were to think of something like the fortune of Postcolonial Studies in Brazil, the touchstone will always be, it seems to me, the ability to talk about and learn from the country's tradition of Black radical thought, along with the vast and varied production of Amerindian intellectuals. As the slavery studies in Brazil have been demonstrating for some time, in addition to recent works that dialogue with the notion of Afropessimism, such as those of Brazilians Osmundo Pinho (2021) and João Costa Vargas (2020), what the figure of the "slave" demands of thought and politics is specific and difficult to analogize, given the dimension of the violence in question (without reason or limit, as Orlando Patterson (2008) wrote) and the nature of the dispossession involved (it is not simply land that was lost, but the very possibility of registering the loss in a language). In the Frank Wilderson's recent book on some of these topics (*Afropessimism*), it is argued that there is no possibility of overcoming slavery within the world as it is, a place in which the categories of "human" or "world" depend on the category "slave" in order to stand. Keeping in mind these critical debates and social movements within and outside universities, Postcolonial Studies in Brazil have a lot to gain when they place enslavement in the foreground, including the way in which its violence differs from the colonial relationship (colonizer/colonized).

Another way to map these questions using categories that might help us to think about existing positions in the Brazilian intellectual environment would be through the different trends in the reception in Brazil of the work of people such as Frantz Fanon, an author who thought about both coloniality and slavery, a history studied by Deivison Faustino in *Frantz Fanon e as encruzilhadas (Frantz Fanon and the crossroads)*. Regarding the different conceptions of transformation in Fanon's work, and now following a hypothesis developed in the book *Subterranean Fanon: An Underground Theory of Radical Change*, by Gavin Arnall, this mapping would distinguish, on the one hand, a dialectical theory of change, in which transformation takes place through the encounter between two poles in opposition, whose relationship is of antagonism and also interdependence. It is the dynamics of this antagonism – between colonized and colonizer, for example – that will produce the *new*. Thus, throughout the process of transformation, elements of the past are denied and their old form is abolished to gain a new, "higher" form, in which these same elements are preserved. What is important here is the idea that change is also preservation, since elements of the past would have a place in the transformed world.

On the other hand, although not dominant, there is also in Fanon's writings, as Arnall observes, a non-dialectical theory of change. In this theory, the emphasis is on interruption and destruction, rather than on preservation. In place of a contradictory opposition, a union between

opposites, there is opposition without unity, an encounter between radically different forces whose only relationship is one of heterogeneity and incommensurability. It isn't easy, obviously, to say what this "non-dialectical change" would be, beginning with the linguistic difficulties – what existing language would be able to narrate this rupture? –, but the theory seeks to represent excluding forces that are only able to imagine the destruction of the other, imagining a change that would be an opening generated by a radical rupture with what exists, allowing the emergence of something so new that it could only be seen as disconnected from the before – hence the importance of a new form of writing.

Although these two conceptions can describe conflicts that occur in the colonial context, as Arnall thinks, my impression is that it is especially productive to think of this distinction highlighting the difference between the colonial relationship (the colonizer/colonized dialectic) and the non-relationship of slavery, in which the idea of preserving elements of the past is obscene and unacceptable. In my reading, the predominant trend in Brazilian criticism has been the interdiction even of speculation regarding what a non-dialectical transformation would be like, with the corresponding naturalization of the idea that synthesis is the place of criticism *par excellence*, perhaps the only possible place for critical thinking, turning irony, which undermines the discourse of power from within, into the preferential discursive mode. Thus, criticism has often taken on the task of defining which elements of tradition would deserve to be preserved, even in a transformed society, insisting on the need to gradate negation and recognize that overcoming also involves preservation (the reasons that lead to this situation were even examined by Antonio Candido in studies on the social position of the Brazilian intellectual).

A relevant aspect of this question is the way in which it slides from what seems to be, at least in part, a desire – the preservation of tradition – into neutral and descriptive speech, one that assures us that there is no possibility but conciliation. Again, the most productive question seems to be what this – this desire for preservation, and the ambivalence in relation to such a desire – reveals about the desire of national literary criticism. As I have already suggested, not only do transculturation and superregionalism assert that the negation of subaltern cultures is inevitable, but also that this negation must be *celebrated*. If another type of transformation were possible, would it be celebrated? The repressive impulse that lashes out violently to the emergence, albeit incipient, of a gesture or movement that seems more difficult to incorporate into an integrating horizon suggests not. Here, again, the consequences for a theory of institutions are important, for each of these postures generates specific expectations.

Finally, a last speculative effort, from an example that may help to shed light on some of these issues. In fragment 32 of *Minima Moralia*, ("Savages are not more noble"), Adorno guarantees that between "African

students of political economy” and the “Siamese at Oxford” there is “an inordinate respect for all there is established, accepted, acknowledged”, a feeling typical of “neophytes” and “epigones”. In “newcomers”, Adorno continues, tradition raises “a possessive, intolerant kind of love”. In contrast, a true critical disposition “presupposes experience, historical memory, a fastidious intellect, and, above all, an ample measure of satiety”. “One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly”, Adorno concludes.

In the fragment, first there is the transformation of one’s own place into the norm, identifying the immanent critique of the West as the only one possible (they are newcomers to “tradition” because there is only one tradition; there is no imaginable critique that might come from another tradition). But the onslaught against neophytes, epigones and newcomers puts the duration of contact with European culture in the foreground, placing the underdeveloped in a race that is impossible to win, particularly because postcolonial intellectuals are imagined as a bad repetition of the already known (European petty-bourgeois intellectuals). Given the scarcity of elements – what “African students of political economy” are these? how many “Siamese at Oxford” are there? –, the confidence in the diagnosis is surprising, suggesting that here too the question about to what degree the analysis corresponds to the critic’s desire would also be pertinent.

Developing the reasoning of *Minima Moralia* would lead to the conclusion that, in the educational context, the most responsible political-pedagogical act is to foster the interiorization of tradition in students, these eternal newcomers. Then, at the right moment, they might come to hate it properly, hate it with an immanent hatred, not a hatred coming from outside Europe. Would this hatred also be taught? It remains to be seen. Because one would expect that love and hate would become entangled in students’ minds and bodies, as is certainly the case with experienced teachers and critics, who spend years in intimate contact with tradition. Among other aspects, what makes this conjuncture interesting is that the premise of an obligatory interiorization of tradition will permit an alliance with conservative cultural criticism, those who simply love tradition, without hatred, and require the reproduction of this sentiment by newcomers. In addition to the adherence to tradition, the contempt for foreigners forges the union between the two groups.

In order to recall how similar arguments are recycled in discussions about Latin American culture, I briefly recount here a version of these hypotheses presented by Roberto Schwarz in a debate in Venezuela in 1982, later published in Ana Pizarro’s *Hacia una historia de la literatura latinoamericana* [Towards a history of Latin American literature]. Following Cornejo Polar’s presentation of a text on Andean heterogeneity, where he defines the application of the European concept of literature to non-literary spaces as a “misunderstanding”, Schwarz replies that, although that it is true that the region did privilege high culture, reinforcing a

prejudice that consolidated the social order, he is concerned with what he calls “democratism”, since the suppression of the primacy of high culture would hide the reality of social domination. Thus, the demonstration and confirmation of this primacy once again become the required critical and political task. In the case of scholars and writers, the duty is to participate in a project of epistemological integration that might show “that instructive facts of world history happen here” in Latin America as well. This “attempt to interpret the present with maximum conceptual and imaginative energy has its true place in high literature. This cannot be expected from other sectors of the social imaginary – something that does not reduce their importance in any way – but they simply do not live under the sign of historicity.” Instead, he laments, “we imprisoned ourselves in issues of identity that have a solid base because these are literatures in formation”.

AM: *In A literatura em questão there is a brief commentary on the discursive genre of the “interview”, “a genre commonly understood precisely as the opportunity for clarification (of what was written, for example)” (NATALI, 2020, p. 246). Would you have something to say in this interview regarding the questionable functions and expectations associated with the genre?*

MN: Deleuze once wrote that the goal was not to answer the questions that were asked, but to escape them. The observation arose when he referred to the difficulty he experienced when he was asked to “explain himself” – explain his own work, his thought, as if they were stabilized and fixed, when what he wanted was to formulate new questions, questions that were increasingly difficult and aimed at the future, indicating that there was still much to study.

When one questions the notion of the interview as clarification, the concern is with the expectation that in this genre – as in the academic memoir, another genre conventionally understood as a place for the explanation of one’s self – there would finally be the transparent exposure of truth, and that now everything would finally be explained, reducing attention to features such as style, form, contingency, and doubt. Regarding oral interviews, there is often the belief that speech will be more enlightening and more revealing than writing, something that is far from certain. In his reflection on the classroom, in the book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière elaborates on this point, questioning the assurance that the master’s oral explanation will be better – clearer, more understandable – than the written text.

Undoubtedly, there is always strangeness in the experience of seeing what we write reflected back to us in someone’s reading, although the strangeness is not any lesser than the one produced by the experience of reading what I once wrote. In any case, we don’t have to understand the question and the interview as demands for an explanation – or, worse, for a confession. They can also be seen as invitations to speculate, to

engage in the task of trying to think against one's self, circling around what remains hidden in my own text, even when it is read by me. When the interview is based on texts that have already been published, an additional challenge is to leave open whatever remained open in the published texts, insisting on the idea that something remains to be thought.

I thought of this interview in these terms, understanding the questions as opportunities to unfold or return to issues from previous texts, so that my main impulse here is just to be thankful – for the invitation, for the questions, for the careful reading – and express once again the surprise felt whenever I discover that something I wrote was, one day, read by someone.

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