

## Asymmetric Cultural Flows and Community Reflections

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**ABSTRACT:** Analysis of the rise of cultural communitarianism, as it stands before the international political covenantal rearrangement that originated in the 2008 financial crash. At the Brazilian locus of enunciation, two main connections arise from the literary and cultural standpoint: with Portuguese-speaking countries and with Ibero-American ones. Such formulations do not restrict policies of cooperation and solidarity, because, according to the author, the world is increasingly configured as a place of multiple borders and plural identities.

**KEYWORDS:** management of difference, cultural communitarianism, cultural hybridity, Ibero-African-America.

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Supranational community relations today are ties of a society that tends to organize itself into networks. In relation to Portuguese-speaking countries, these linguistic and cultural ties were formed through a common historical experience associated with the colonial system. The first settlers of Latin America came from the region that the Arabs called Al-Andalus. The name Algarve comes from al-Gharb al-Andalus (Andalusia West), which currently covers Algarve and low Alentejo. The greatest part of Lisbon's population in the age of discovery was of Moorish origin. These were culturally hybrid regions, where many cultures from the Mediterranean basin converged. Extending this observation, we could say that the Mediterranean basin, considered as a field organized as a network, is composed of a polysemic node with historical and cultural intersections among Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the process of the colonization of the Americas, its hybrid and polysemic repertoire became even more mixed owing to interactions between Amerindian and African peoples. We understand that these Ibero-American countries, and even Ibero-African-American countries, meet the conditions, at present, necessary for the establishment of a community bloc, which, along with others, more limited or more comprehensive, may be able to set limits to the imperial asymmetries of cultural flows.

I have argued that the world is increasingly configured as a place of multiple

borders and identities that should be perceived as plural.<sup>1</sup> Cultural-linguistic rapprochements demand multilingual horizons and reciprocity in terms of symbolic power. In our case, besides the noteworthy connections with Spanish-speaking countries, there is the variety and breadth of community networks. In a world where English has become a kind of lingua franca, it is also necessary for us to speak in Portuguese and in other languages, even in the technological field. In linguistic terms, it is necessary to use Portuguese as a language not only of culture but also of science.

Many supranational community networks are being consolidated on a planetary scale, as for instance the movements related to gender issues, the protection and promotion of human rights, ecology, and so on. Thus fields for dialogue are established beyond the borders of the state, creating possible counterpoints to the monology of hegemonic flows. Such multiple fields of supranational community life are in a position to contribute to the democratic interference in social life, where the national idiosyncrasy tends to be articulated in a supranational network. It may be possible to continue to dream, as in the past and in view of a future not too distant, of a time when an American worker will be concerned about the salary of another worker from Latin America or Asia. It is true that the conditions necessary for this to occur will exist only when this worker becomes aware—the crisis is systemic, with globalizing effects—that how much another worker earns will have an impact on his own salary. In this way the possibility would arise of a desirable link between the community and the social.

### **A Mixed World: Reconfigurations**

At this moment of crisis in global capitalism, a moment of strategic reconfiguration, it seems vital that criticism assume a more active attitude in order to create or promote cooperation and solidarity, and, if possible, to let the ground for political action in the form of blocs converge toward community dialogue. These blocs are politically more effective in the attempt to establish counterpoints to the monology of competition that has marked the globalizing process and that reached its climax, as the dominant global ideology, prior to the financial crash of 2008.

However, as stated by Riobaldo, one of the characters in Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), "the world is very mixed." Riobaldo is tormented by the fact that he cannot identify sharply de-

marcated pastures. He searches for a binary rationality, as if reason did not involve limitless variations of a whole package of possibilities:

I need the good to be good and the bad to be bad, that on one side there be black and on the other there be white, that ugliness stays far apart from beauty and joy far from sorrow! I want all pastures clearly demarcated. . . . What kind of world is this? Life is unpleasant in its own softness, but cross-brings [*transtraz*] hope even in the midst of the gall of despair. So, this world is very mixed.<sup>2</sup>

In a similar manner, from economics to the cultural arena, adverse effects were caused by the articulatory models of finance capital, which made borders less rigid so as to enforce a hegemonic order; on the other hand, the principle of contradiction gave rise to reactive attitudes, and this weakening favored the strengthening of community actions through the breaches of this policy. In this new post-neoliberal situation—we can allow ourselves this optimistic statement—community associations become even more urgently needed, and they involve the possibility of new articulations in addition to traditional ones. It is worth remembering the emergence of BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—among other possibilities.

Because of the expansion of communication between countries and blocs, there is now the possibility of a better dialogue, including in relation to the United States itself, in the possible reconfiguration of the politics of that country. At the state level, of course, the United States seek to establish new ways to preserve the asymmetries in the field of cultural circulation, and to promote the acceptance of discursive formulations that inculcate and naturalize particularistic and universal American assumptions. In the new international configuration born in the midst of the current crisis, the possibility of greater openness unfolds. It is time for a paradigm shift—that is to say, a shifting of the pigeonholes we have created in order to make sense of the world.

### **Cooperation, Reciprocity**

Literary output increasingly requires an understanding of the supranational meaning of cultural flows, especially when it comes to literary comparisons. In comparative literary studies in Brazil, the consolidation of a kind of comparison that derived from impositions of our colonization process was due to historical facts. To verify this foundation has been a way to place ourselves be-

fore the flows inclined to colonize our imaginary. This is an important kind of comparison; it is even necessary for our own self-knowledge. In the attitudes of cultural actors of the past, one can identify lines that are essential to a better understanding of our current social and cultural environment. However, to limit ourselves to this comparison does not seem enough in political and cultural terms. We have proposed another form of comparison to stand next to this one, with which it may be integrated in practice: a prospective form of comparison, guided by community relations and based on solidarity and cooperation. We must undertake comparisons while facing problems that involve us all, in order to know ourselves in terms of what makes us unique and what we have in common, to explore the connections that tend to promote relations of reciprocity.

Clearly, any new approach that implies actions of a political nature can generate new forms of hegemony. Even when we get carried away by the establishment of bonds of cooperation, we must still pay attention to ingrained cultural habits that embody hegemonic gestures in the dealings between countries and regions, in situations of apparent reciprocity. To illustrate this point, we would do well to recall the comment of the Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar<sup>3</sup> who claimed that he liked European critics who described the Caribbean as the American Mediterranean, but added that he would be much happier if they would also describe the Mediterranean as the European Caribbean.

The colonial process bred habits and literary and cultural repertoires that came from this historical experience as well as from cultural contacts between peoples who, until then, did not know one another. Although today there is an inclination in criticism for paradigm shifts, be they philosophical, aesthetic, or otherwise, I would argue that this trend cannot be naturalized under a generic label of “post”-something, which is only to reduce to obsolescence a whole experience that is embodied in the present. Something even worse may occur in the political arena, where the “post-,” accustomed to the terms set by the media and fashion trends, seeks to reduce everything to a *tabula rasa*, with no past at all.

### **Postcolonialisms**

We must take into account that postcolonial theorization has conveniently discussed issues related to globalization, the displacement of peoples, and the Americanization of the world under the rubric of media and consumer market-



ing. In relation to political and social issues, however, it may tend toward generic inclinations. The view that all societies marked by colonialism are equally postcolonial, without further consideration of their historical particulars, puts countries that emancipated themselves during the post-World War II period on the same plane with those that emancipated themselves in the nineteenth century. To speak about postcolonialism without regard to specifics implies equating a culture such as that of Canada or South Africa, for example, with the complex cultural situation in India, though all three countries are former British colonies. Only a sociocultural analysis may reveal to which postcolonialism it refers. This situation becomes even more complex if associated—as often happens—with the diasporic emphasis of postcolonial studies. Once again there is the need to consider the critic's orientation and the sociocultural ties that end up entangling his discursive formulations.

As noted in a good-tempered but ironic observation by Retamar, the construction lines of the imaginary, when coupled with an intellectual field, as a form, continue to operate beyond the original situation. They are updated many times as marks of the hegemonic symbolic power that comes from specific historical situations and cannot be concealed. Critical thinking cannot override, by adding the prefix “post-,” five centuries of contact and cultural asymmetries, including the cultural repertoire that was built over that period. The big problem with the concept of postcolonialism is that it can mitigate what is fundamental to the critical act: a critical and active view, able to discuss historical and cultural facts that arise from specific historical experiences.

There are many postcolonialisms—for example, the postcolonialism of the former colonizer, which can be found in a novel like Lobo Antunes's *Os cus de Judas*,<sup>4</sup> and, that of the ex-colonized, as in Pepetela's *Mayombe*.<sup>5</sup> The first deconstructs myths and makes his memory a testimony that aims to be history. Pepetela, by contrast, is motivated by myths, while criticizing individuals who pretend to embody myths. This criticism highlights the past ethnocentric attitudes that are abundant in the present. In Lobo Antunes there is the deconstruction of myths and dystopia, whereas in Pepetela there is the construction and utopia that lie in the formation of a new nation-state. There is also the postcolonialism of the settlers who remained in the metropolis and that of the ex-colonized who migrated. The clear delineation of the so-called locus of enunciation and its historicity is therefore essential for a criticism that aims higher than generalization.

### Cultural Mimetism and Cultural Power Relations

Reflecting on national characteristics implies situating them in a process of community assemblages that have a historical framework and relations of symbolic power. We have highlighted the political meaning of discussing literature under Ibero-African-American communitarianism, but community articulations can be of many different types, and politically it seems important to emphasize that the contemporary world is one of multiple boundaries and plural identities, from both an individual and a national perspective. Those are interactions that lead to the analysis of an interactive hybrid cultural complex in which Brazilian culture, for instance, is multifaceted and productively feeds itself with pieces of many cultures, while suffering the effects of the asymmetries of cultural flows. Such considerations, which go beyond national circumstances, make it necessary to account for the strongly hybrid repertoire of Brazilian cultural heritage. In the appropriation of this repertoire, the consciousness of such historicity and of the power relations to which it gave rise may contribute to the detachment from mimetic productions that have affinities with conventions or stereotypes. This critical sense contributes to the development of a propensity for creativity that sometimes turns to the question of ideological corsets and mythical identities. This is what happened, for example, with Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem "Camões: história, coração" (Camões: history, heart, language), written in a post-Revolução dos Cravos context. Through the appropriation of Camonian images and poetic methods, Drummond established a dialogue with the historicity of the Portuguese poet's readings and with the new historical democratic situation in Portugal:

Of the heroes sung by thou, what is left  
but the melody of thy song?  
The weapons crumble into rust,  
barons in tombstones say nothing.<sup>6</sup>

In this de-ideologization of conservative apprehensiveness, particularly in the era of Salazar, while still following Camonian images and rhythms, the Brazilian poet ends with these lines:

Louis, strange man, who with the verb  
thou art more than an amateur, thou art love itself  
throbbing, forgetful, angry,

submissive, resurgent, reblooming  
 in a hundred thousand hearts multiplied.  
 Thou art language. Private pain  
 ceases to exist in order to become  
 pain of all men, musical,  
 in the voice with Orphic accent, pilgrim.

Identifying the common repertoire, therefore, does not lead necessarily to the mimetic. Critical distance comes from the perspective not only of a Brazilian but especially of someone who establishes his poetic grounding by persisting in a determined community language. Extending these observations, we can state that it is important from the critical standpoint to study these critical dialogues embedded, explicitly or not, in the literary repertoire that circulates among the Portuguese-speaking countries. On the other hand, highlighting the power relations involved in this movement can ward off the celebration of the mimesis, or of an alleged syncretism, or of a hybridity that ignores power relations and assumes assimilationist attitudes in favor of the culture of the colonizer, with all the implications this might have regarding political co-optation. One cannot, however, ignore the fact that the plasticity of Portuguese literary language has endured since medieval times and can be adequately studied only in the dynamics of the tendencies of supranational intellectual fields, in the globalization processes of European cultures.

### **Beyond Skin Color**

It seems important to counter the flexibility of the circulation of cultural products, the nomadic pace of financial capital, which is articulated as a network, always decreasing distances by increasing speed, with counterhegemonic strategies associated with supranational communitarianism. This vertiginous process of standardizing cultural products in the market economy is not restricted to mass standardization. We should not forget that hegemony has broad foundations, which are nonetheless market-oriented, and seeks to incorporate into its networks even disagreement with the system itself. This is the perspective of managing the difference—the difference as administration policy and the opening of a niche market. In another sense, this co-optation can contribute to the dynamic survival of the system: promoting the appearance of change so that things will remain structurally the same. As Giuseppe Lampedusa put it in *The*

Leopard, "Some things must be changed so that everything remains the same." The partial emergence of the new, under the political and social control of pre-established structures, enforces their hegemony in order to control it, while benefiting from its apparent novelty to enforce their power in a new historical configuration.

There is no way, however, for engaged criticism to escape this situation: otherwise it risks isolation. The critic must get into these waters, being careful not to lose the direction of his or her project and be co-opted by the apparent nomadic flows that ultimately always shore up the hegemonic base. This is a political issue enmeshed in sociocultural network. To this end, in view of the need for a forward-looking attitude, the critic cannot be limited exclusively to negative critical attitudes, although this is always an essential counterpoint. From the political point of view, one should fundamentally be motivated by a kind of critical optimism that aims to give continuity, under new forms, to gestures that came from the past, with actors imbued with the hope that social life can always improve. It is worth noting the following excerpt from the poem "Coração em África" (Heart of Africa), by the São Toméan Francisco José Tenreiro, with its relevance to postwar intellectual culture, and particularly to the context of Ibero-African-American horizons and the cold war:

with a heart in Africa with his hands and feet deformed encumbrance  
and deformed as the Portinari paintings of the sea dockers and the boys  
snotty addicts of the deep dark circles from the Orchard's gums  
I was considering the blackness of the world beyond skin color itself  
of yellow black white men<sup>7</sup>

Tenreiro is one of the intellectuals of the 1950s for whom "the blackness of the world" surpasses the skin color of "yellow black white men." His poem illustrates not only the cultural communitarianism of the Ibero-African-American but also, in other passages—it is a long poem—the libertarian attitudes of black personalities in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.

The actors of a supranational intellectual field, whether situated at the center or at the margins (though there are margins at the center and a center at the margins), who effectively consider themselves critics, cannot ignore the relations of belonging of these subjects. Those are ties that lead to sociocultural life and that cannot be usurped, owing to the very objectivity of criticism. Even if one acts as if they are in the same psychosocial situations as migrants, dialogue is



performed abstractly, but with different cultures and historical experiences informed by particular political motivations. And being in the United States is not like being in Brazil or any other part of the planet, in spite of certain speeches aimed at neutralizing the difference. A critical lens may sharpen perception, but it cannot create an optical convergence that will preserve the colonization of the imaginary on the margins or outskirts of the capital.

Uncritical considerations, dissociated from the sociocultural situation and especially from historical specifics, are part of the process of colonizing the margins. In this sense, the critic cannot stick to the narcissistic performance that would be proper to those who are only passing by, as an apology for an apparent lack of commitment, with affinities for the hyperindividualism of the situation prior to the financial crash. By adopting postures related to a kind of nomadic relativism, it eventually confines itself to tripping over the obstacles, without maintaining any situational ties beyond the ephemeral speech of what is fashionable. Basically, it ties itself to circumscribed parameters with predetermined dimensions. To be limited to them means to be restricted to a monological course, even when it is erected as a temporary bridge. An effective and serious critical praxis will not remain restricted to these discursive frameworks, oblivious to other dialogic bonds, especially those that lead to a multidiscursive node, connected with discourses that take the world of culture to the cultural-political ground. Even the migrant—recall the paradigmatic case of Edward Said—connects him- or herself via networks, lives in certain areas, and bonds with defined social meshes.

#### NOTES

1. For an in-depth treatment of this subject, see Benjamin Abdala Junior, *Fronteiras múltiplas, identidades plurais: Um ensaio sobre mestiçagem e hibridismo cultural* (São Paulo: Editora SENAC São Paulo, 2002).

2. João Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* 29. ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1986), 191–92. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3. Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Para el perfil definitivo del hombre*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1995).

4. *Os cus de judas*. Lisboa, Editorial Veja, 1979.

5. São Paulo: Ed. Ática, 1982.

6. Benjamin Abdala Junior, *Camões—épica e lírica* (São Paulo: Editora Scipione, 1993), 62.

7. “Coração em África,” in Mario de Andrade and Francisco José Tenreiro, *Poesia negra de expressão portuguesa* (Linda-a-Velha: África Ed., 1982), 68.

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