

INTRODUCTION

Neil Besner

At first glance, the cultures of Brazil and Canada would seem to have very little in common. Their colonial and pre-colonial histories and languages have developed in different, and differently conceived landscapes and geographies, invaded, settled, and, most importantly for this collection of essays, narrated by different colonial powers. Over very different stretches of time, with necessarily different relations to the advent of modernity, the British and the French in Canada, and the Portuguese in Brazil, established different power relations between aboriginal and colonial cultures, and the heterogeneous cultures that developed have consequently entered the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first, in quite different ways, thinking and writing their narratives of the relations among their ethnic, regional and national, local and global aspirations—in every genre—in quite different registers. Given the sharp differences in their geopolitical positioning at one level and those of the realities of their citizens' everyday lives at another, one might be forgiven for assuming that contemporary Brazil and Canada, as colonies, nations, or postcolonial cultures, continue to inhabit quite separate worlds and worldviews. Indeed, even the casual assumptions of mutual interest that have organized the friendly economic relations between the two cultures since at least mid-century

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 40	p.011-023	jan./jun. 2001
------------------	---------------	-------	-----------	----------------

have recently come into question; the ongoing dispute between Embraer and Bombardier, followed by the misguided Canadian embargo of Brazilian beef, shows how fragile these assumptions can quickly become in the new world order.

At second glance, one might assume superficial similarities between and among the two colonial cultures. Both have extraordinarily large land masses, and although Canada's population of thirty million is dwarfed by Brazil's 180 million or more, both populations have settled largely along a border—in one case, running east to west, gazing south along what typically used to be referred to as the longest undefended border in the world (this designation, in theory and in practice, has quite recently and suddenly changed), and in the other, running north to south, along a coastline that it is tempting to imagine as gazing bifocally back to Europe and Africa. Both cultures, looking inward or upward, west or north from these borders, narrate stories of sparsely populated or inhospitable land; arid or barren, drought-stricken or frozen, impenetrably overgrown or desolate and bleak. (As part of the project of nationbuilding, both cultures constructed highways across the nation, Belém-Brasília and, preceded by the railway, the Transcanada.) And both cultures are suffering increasingly tense, but traditionally powerful, ties to American culture, economically, politically, ideologically, as they look immediately south or farther north from their increasingly permeable borderlands.

It is also true, as both Sergio Bellei and Imre Szeman remind us in their contributions to the present volume, that necessarily, the institutions of literature and literary study in each culture have developed along quite different paths—although it would be a typical mistake, born of ingrained habits of mind in both cultures that some of the essays in this volume scrutinize to salutary effect, to assume that one culture is simply “ahead of” or “behind” the other in this respect as in many arenas. And if one of the many strengths of Bellei's essay is to remind us, following Stephen Greenblatt, of how precariously plural and indeterminate the meanings of the overused term “culture” have

become, and then to offer a provisional, working definition of culture, another strength is to remind us of the very different relevance, significance, and prominence of postcolonial theory and practice in the academic institutions (and beyond) of each culture.

What, then, might constitute the kind of “authentic dialogue” between the two cultures that Diana Brydon calls for in her striking essay? What might be the grounds for thinking, speaking, or writing the postcolonial in a dialogue between Canadian and Brazilian cultures, literary institutions, and critics? And what might be the value of such a polyphonic dialogue? These are the questions that, explicitly and implicitly, have informed the five essays that constitute this special issue of *Ilha do Desterro*—three in English and two in Portuguese, by two Canadians and three Brazilians.

In his overview of the four essays in this issue, “Post-Colonialism: Cultures in Dialogue,” senior Brazilian theorist Sergio Bellei acknowledges that while four essays, or five, with his, cannot possibly address all of the major threads of this kind of dialogue between the two cultures, it is possible to, first, define “culture” in such a way as to at least work towards an operating definition of an overused term, and, second, to ask several pertinent questions about the relations between these two cultures. Bellei opens the first section of his essay, “Culture, Memory, Counter-Memory and Dialogue,” with the following observation:

Alongside “postcolonialism,” “postmodernism,” and “globalization,” it is quite possible that “culture” joins the list these days of concepts that are at once useless and indispensable. If, on one hand, they defy precise definition, on the other they are ubiquitous and cannot escape being used. (107; this and all other translations my own)

Given that we must use the term, Bellei offers us Stephen Greenblatt’s working definition as a way of avoiding “absolute

definitions;" Bellei reminds us of Greenblatt's thinking of "culture" as a term overseeing "the opposed ideas of 'control' and 'mobility.'" Bellei understands Greenblatt's conception as "a definition of culture as a vast dynamic [sic] system of inclusion and exclusion of signifiers and behaviours that survive ... thanks to their mobility and capacity for adaptation in the face of the foreign or the strange. As a vast collective memory at once flexible and controlled, culture continuously actualizes itself as the preserve of a past to be remembered and forgotten, and as the legitimizer of new events capable of being absorbed" (108). With this operative definition in place as a context for approaching the four essays at hand, Bellei poses three questions vital to the project of establishing Brydon's "authentic dialogue" between the studies of postcolonialism in Canada and Brazil:

The first two [questions] would inquire into what in each context constitutes the systems of inclusion and exclusion that forms the postcolonial cultures in Brazil and Canada.... And the last question would inquire into what possibilities exist for mutual benefit in recognizing the differences in these systems of inclusion and exclusion. (109)

Bellei advises that, of course, "the possible answers to such questions cannot be thought of as anything but precarious and provisional. Reading two texts as a frame for a much wider cultural range of reference, to be compared a posteriori with another two texts, also minimal fractions of another cultural universe, can only point metonymically to certain tendencies in both vast collectives" (109). But Bellei asserts nonetheless—and I agree—that these limitations do not signify the uselessness of the project, suggesting that "it is precisely in the perception of the differences and similarities within the two systems that it will be possible, in both, to expand and enrich in the direction of the new and the as yet unperceived" (110). This kind of perception, Bellei writes, presents itself "as a rule in terms of a shocking and culturally productive recognition," pointing to Diana Brydon's

description, on the opening page of her essay, of the “shock of recognition” that she and Imre Szeman both experienced on reading Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz’s essays in his collection *Misplaced Ideas* as they saw that “the Brazilian critic was writing not only in and for Brazil, but also from Brazil to Canada.” (I recall a similar recognition, in the late 1980’s, when I first read Schwarz). Indeed, both Szeman’s and Brydon’s essays, and particularly via Szeman’s extended analysis of the force and relevance of Schwarz’s ideas of belatedness and imitativeness for understanding both cultures’ persisting apprehensions of their alleged inauthenticity, point to Schwarz as the key figure in their recognition that Brazilian and Canadian cultural location—and dislocation—share some key postcolonial misrecognitions.

Bellei opens the second part of his essay, “An Analysis of Migrant Knowledge and in Praise of Travel”—referring to the essays by the two Brazilian contributors to this issue, Maria Bernadette Velloso Porto and Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida—by reminding us that postcolonial studies have been asymmetrically institutionalized in Brazil in Canada:

The cultural voice that speaks through the Brazilians represented in the current collection does not take as its point of departure, as do the Canadian essays, the question of postcolonialism as a unified discipline or an established discourse. This fact should not surprise us given that the area has not yet been institutionalized in the Brazilian academy, at least not in the mold in which institutionalization has occurred in Canada and the United States.

While Bellei recognizes that “a systematic discussion of the historical motives that could explain why nothing similar has occurred in Brazil” cannot be unpacked in his current essay, he advises that it is worthwhile recalling Roberto Schwarz’s early reflections on the subject, even though the Brazilian critic, “writing at the end of the eighties, could not speak explicitly of postcolonialism” (111). “For the Schwarz of

'National by Subtraction,' postcolonialism as an institution [sic] would be, in Brazil, only another 'misplaced idea', imitated belatedly after the central producers of theory, and, as an imitation, a motive for the typical Brazilian experience of the 'false, imitative, inauthentic [sic] character of its cultural life.'" Bellei concludes, therefore, that "if Schwarz is right ... then the open practice of institutionalized postcolonialism would end up being included among those cultural practices that, because they cause discomfort, academic culture would prefer to forget.... It is not surprising, therefore, that postcolonialism as an institution [sic] is not a marked presence in the Brazilian contributors' essays. These essays ... speak less of postcolonialism proper and more of a certain postcolonial thematics marked by a significant local relevance: the theme of the migrant in Quebec literature, and the question of travel in the Americas" (111). As Bellei outlines the themes of the Brazilian contributors' pieces, he points to their relevance to the context of this issue. Through the mapping of the migrant experience traced in Porto's essay, "Cartographies of Migration in Contemporary Quebec Literature," Bellei notes the discussion's productive attempt

to understand, in the migrant's life, the complex issue of identity in relation to movement and nomadism as a productive cultural practice: what the migrant is, and the forms of cultural expression in the life of the traveller. A traveller permanently in transit, who can never go home again, but at the same time never arrives at a destination, the migrant finds himself in the position of negotiating his identity with himself and with others as a negation of stability. Movement implies a constant mutation, in which identity is shaped more as a process and as fragmentation rather than as a closed product. Thus conceived, identity in permanent formation escapes the fixation of all essentializing totalities, including the nationalist, to become hybrid, fragmented, and in constant mutation. Without forgetting that the migrant condition,

particularly in the era of post-modern globalization, is marked mainly by suffering and oppression (mass dislocation these days is mainly that of exiles, of victims of starvation, of war and misery), Maria Bernadette's essay nevertheless insists on the phenomenon of transculturation as 'a two-way street between different worlds who nourish each other reciprocally.' ... And the cultural practices that follow from this fertile mutuality attend the cultural productions of migrants in Quebec as much as the postmodern cultural practices of Brazil. The common elements are those already mentioned: hybridism, fragmentation, the refusal of essentializing totalities. (112-113)

Moving to Almeida's rewarding discussion, "Expanding Boundaries: Travelling Theories in the Americas", Bellei advises that "between migration and the voyage, which is the postcolonial thematic" explored by Sandra Goulart, there is one basic difference and some important similarities:

The migrant is the traveller who does not return, and the traveller is the migrant who, in a manner of speaking, never leaves home. But both occupy, in different circumstances, a problematic, liminal space, a mixture of confidence and fear, adventure and solitude, pleasure and suffering. Sandra points, in generic form, to the importance of the discursive use of travel in the Americas and presents, in summary, several significant examples: Elizabeth Bishop, who meditates on the motivations for travel, P.K. Page, who seeks the voyage as adventure, and Silviano Santiago, who believes in the potential that a voyage along peripheries has for delineating presence in "universal" centres of power. As these are all travellers who, to different degrees, differ from European travellers, the analysis can, perhaps, deepen our

understanding of this difference: Bishop does not find, let us say, the “other” Brazilian in the sense that Santiago finds a French cultural practice at once similar to and different from certain Brazilian cultural practices. Be that as it may, the essay points directly to a certain cultural obsession—perhaps even a dominant myth—in the Americas, and, principally, in Latin America. In the history of Brazilian cultural practice, the importance of the theme of the migrant/traveller is indisputable.... Writing on Oswald de Andrade, Antonio Candido recalls not only the centrality of the issue of travel in his life and work, but also the relations between the “travelling Oswald” and the Brazilian ethos of travel that also characterizes, for example, a romantic like Gonçalves Dias. Both, so to speak, visit Europe to discover Brazil and return to Brazil to invent a Europeanized Brazilianness.

Poised with these Brazilian contributions at what I perceive as one kind of opening of the authentic dialogue that Diana Brydon seeks between the two cultures are her essay, “Global Designs, Postcolonial Critiques: Rethinking Canada in Dialogue with Diaspora,” and Imre Szeman’s “Literature on the Periphery of Capitalism: Brazilian Theory, Canadian Culture.” Part of my fascination with how this dialogue is developing has been to discover how Bellei, as a Brazilian theorist, reads these Canadian essays, and how I read the Brazilian pieces. First, Bellei reminds us of the position of postcolonialism as an institution in Canada, alluded to earlier: “the [Canadian] essays speak from a discipline marked by a history of institutionalization which—in an analogy with the cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion outlined earlier—admits of a certain flexibility capable of opening pathways not pursued at the same time as it imposes limits on that which it institutionalizes.” Szeman, notes Bellei, is keenly aware of what I understand as the ironic position of postcolonial theory in the context of the globalizing impetus of capitalism: “The dominant narrative of institutionalized

postcolonialism is at present anemic: losing itself in hybridities and difference, it does not adequately theorize the actual circulation of power, or understand the dynamics of a capitalism that promotes hegemony by cultivating difference rather than by trying to eliminate it." Bellei is struck by Szeman's observation that "No-one objects to difference today; indeed, biopolitical power circulates by means of it." In this context, continues Bellei, "hybridization and difference can become, even in apparently less relevant sectors such as the academy, a form of celebration of the mechanisms of capital" (117).

Bellei reads Szeman's approach to Roberto Schwarz, and Szeman's shock of recognition at Schwarz's thought, as proceeding from the reality, now evident, that "Schwarz has already rigorously defined the dead end into which the cultural elites on the periphery have inserted themselves as they try to preserve their identity; they have not, and will not find a solution to belatedness or to the aping of European culture." Most striking for me in Bellei's reading, and in Szeman's and Brydon's mutual recognitions, is the contemporary force of Schwarz's signal perception of the common problem of belatedness, which seems to me to be charged with one of the most powerful currents of connection between colonial cultures. At a time when postcolonial theories, as Szeman, Stephen Slemon, Bellei and others show themselves to be fully aware, are in danger of proliferating to the point of dissolution, multiplying to near-infinity the generative but also dislocating forces of hybridity, difference, and dissonance, Schwarz reminds us that—threats of totalizing essentialisms aside for a moment—a common and continuing perception among colonial cultures is that of the belatedness of their experience, leading to that notorious moment of no exit so familiar to Canadian theory, the perennial standoff between what A.J.M. Smith called, in another related context, the native and the cosmopolitan. As Bellei, reflecting on Szeman's discussion, puts it:

As they are always late in relation to the modernism produced by European imperialism, these elites perceived themselves,

historically, to be faced with two pseudo-solutions: the search for a national, authentic, and original culture, which simply repeats, belatedly, the European concept of “origin”; or the cosmopolitan and hybrid stance, which conceives of itself as modern and progressive, but which is, in practice, a legitimization of the global cultural hegemony that obscures, on one hand, the local relations among literary forms, and on the other, in social, political, and economic life. Through diverse ways and means and voices, including that of the influential Northrop Frye, this forgetting occurred in Canada as well, and it is precisely in the reflections of Schwarz that Szeman finds a way of making this process visible and interrogating it. Canada, explains Szeman, always tried to constitute a national imaginary in which the nation perceived itself always ‘more as a part of Western modernity than as a colonial society with its own form of modernity—that is, ... [Canada has seen itself] more like the United States or England than like Brazil or Mexico.’

Bellei notes Szeman’s reference to Canadian critic Glenn Willmott, who understands Canadian culture’s positioning through a reading of Nietzsche’s *On The Genealogy of Morals*, as a process whereby “the weak ... invent the myth of moral superiority against the strong, as compensation for a negatively constituted identity. But there is a price to pay,” Bellei cautions, “in Canada as in Brazil: the weak who imagines himself strong must, necessarily, forget his weakness, but this he can never do. Be that as it may, it is through a rigorous reading of Schwarz that Szeman more clearly perceives that Canada is more similar to Brazil than he would like to admit, at least as defined through the voices of some of its elites.”

Bellei turns to Diana Brydon’s essay as a discussion that

points, as well, to the limits of institutionalized postcolonialism and to the necessity of the reformulation of the objectives of the discipline. For this reformulation to occur, it is necessary to bypass the emphasis on the national and identify, in the actual imperial forces of globalization, the real problem to be confronted, not in isolation, but through interdisciplinary and transnational solidarities. 'Canadian academics in the humanities,' Brydon proposes, 'cannot stop collaborating, across the established institutional boundaries, with Brazilian academics and with those in the social sciences, because it is only in this way that our voices will be heard.' But while Szeman explores the possibility of this exchange in terms of the production of theory that, because it is grounded in different material conditions, can perceive more clearly the mechanisms of domination which are also operating in Canada, Brydon turns her attention to the task of identifying, and reading appropriately, the discursive productions, principally literary, which have as their focus forms of resistance to the horrors of globalization. Responding to Edward Said, who recently lamented the absence, in the humanities, of alternative models capable of interrogating the excesses of globalization, Brydon affirms that such models exist, in Canada and elsewhere. It is necessary to find and to dissect these, which is a task particularly relevant to postcolonial studies, since postcolonialism has already developed valid strategies to identify the rhetorical mechanisms and techniques of control of imperialist expansion that, having at one moment operated in national and transnational orbits, now circulates the planet.

Commenting on Brydon's focus on literary texts in her discussion, Bellei notes that "the texts chosen by Brydon to exemplify this discursive counter-memory which denounces globalization are principally literary.

This is because for Brydon, literature is a privileged discourse to critique because it has historically specialized in seeking alternatives to rationalist illumination which, particularly with the advent of globalization, has reduced the human to irrelevance. The image of the coyote on a marble pedestal, peeing in a golden arc, configures itself as a problematizing mimicry of the McDonald's golden arches that are scattered across the globe." And moving outward from Brydon's discussion to more general observations about globalization's inroads and excesses, Bellei advises:

It is necessary to humanize global rationalism, which has forgotten the human being, either by using literary or critical discourse, or by political action. South of the equator, the urgency of this task ... is signalled by the news on television, which daily shows an Argentina on its knees, with children who were once middle-class starving or falling asleep at school, and an infuriated population protesting against banks, bankers, ministers, and ad hoc presidents. It is more necessary now than ever to imagine that the coyote's fine stream has some strength, minimal as it might be, to poise against McDonald's torrents. Otherwise, which Latin American country will be tomorrow's Argentina? (120)

Bellei closes the final section of his essay, a richly suggestive series of more general reflections entitled "Dialect, dialectics, and dialogue," by returning to Brydon's and Szeman's opening recognition of Roberto Schwarz's renewed, contemporary significance for both cultures: "Might it not be possible," asks Bellei in conclusion, "to think of the possibility of a Roberto Schwarz who, after being read in Canada, could be re-read to advantage in Brazil?" The force and form of these five essays, I hope their readers north, south, and in various easts and wests will agree, is to make Bellei's closing question transparently rhetorical.

Note

I would like to thank Professor Anelise Corseuil of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina for first proposing the subject of this special issue, and for her continuing support of the project over the last two years. I would also like to thank colleagues such as Professors José Roberto O'Shea and Dilvo Ristoff in the Department of Language and Literature at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina for their generous hospitality during March through May, 2001, when I taught the course "The Postcolonial Moment: Canadian Writing at Century's End." I owe a large debt of gratitude to the students in this course, Marina Borgmann, Eduardo Marks, Joseph Rega, and Magali Sperling, for their passionate and abiding interest in the Canadian writing and postcolonial theory we engaged. To Professor Sergio Bellei I owe many personal and professional thanks for his work in making possible the Brazilian contributions—for long labours, manifold emails, and overarching critical acumen. Many thanks to Diana Brydon for all her guidance in Canada, particularly in commissioning the Canadian reviews. And finally, my warm thanks to Professor Maria Lucia Milleo Martins at UFSC, who first encouraged me to come to teach in Santa Catarina, and then worked so hard and successfully to make that possible. Um grande abraço, com saudades, pra todos.