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# Literature Education in Brazil: Reflections upon a Theme

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# LITERATURE EDUCATION IN BRAZIL: Reflections upon a Theme

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Cyana Leahy-Dios

## I. Introduction

*Globalization*, in the present context, appears to signify a unification of economic interests for the haves, while formalizing the exclusion of the have-nots. The political aspects of globalization tighten the chain of partnerships and close frontiers to the “others,” “less equal,” who are ultimately defined in terms of sociopolitical exchange. Although a state-of-the-art affair, economic globalization resumes an ancient, recurring phenomenon related to a culture of power and control between countries.

Cultural globality is figured in the *in-between* spaces of double-frames: its historical originality marked by a cognitive obscurity; its decentred “subject” signified in the nervous temporality of the transitional, or the emergent provisionality of the “present.”<sup>1</sup>

It also occurs within countries, particularly in multicultural societies, whose “minority” groups view globalization factors as the reenforcement of social, cultural, political, and economic differences. According to Bhabha, “the demographic and phenomenological impact of minorities and migrants *within* the West may be crucial in conceiving of the transnational character of contemporary culture.”<sup>2</sup>

It is my belief that the only means of access to the interest and profit culture generated by the inscription and/or weaving of the global text is through education, seen here as a process of critical reflection toward the creation of knowledge. Relevant

education, as I see it at all levels, is the appropriation of the power to think, criticize, and theorize, a sort of *pedagogical anxiety* that, according to Bhabha, is “a necessary caution against generalizing the contingencies and contours of local circumstance, at the very moment at which a transnational, ‘migrant’ knowledge of the world is most urgently needed.”<sup>3</sup>

Brazilian society is as multilayered as any other colonized nation. So far, one marked aspect of the country’s educational situation has been the disparity in the allocation of resources between regions, compromising the idea of social justice for all. The text of the newest education law, *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases (LDB)*, published December 1996, emphasizes the recognition of multifarious accesses to knowledge, considering for the first time out-of-school learning as valid and valuable. According to the *LDB*, the basic reference for the distribution of educational resources now is the *student*, an attempt to include the excluded through the guarantee of basic education for the less privileged segments of Brazilian society.<sup>4</sup>

My reading of the great educational questions and dilemmas in Brazilian society in the age of globalization and change lies in the domain of teaching and learning theories and practices. To teach can only be to mediate the access to learning tools, whereas to learn is simply to be able to develop an inquisitive look at the universe, to critically read it, see it and—hopefully—creatively rewrite it. No other area of study can do this as well as can *literatures*. And I use the plural form intentionally here, meaning the rethinking of literature education curricula, toward the inclusion of multidisciplinary theories of thought and, in the Brazilian case, of the lusophone literary agenda from other colonized cultures.

## II. Literature, Theory, and the Curriculum

I see literature education as one cultural representation of societies. The use of literature is essential to the process of educating social subjects. It is a subject founded on an interdisciplinary triangle that combines three areas of study: language, culture, and society. A change in any one of these segments indicates a shifted emphasis on certain sociocultural and politico-pedagogical characteristics. As a border-crossing discipline, literature

education can have a central role in the creation of a sociopolitical conscience in the future citizens of a particular society.

Brazilian school literature programs still follow a positivist paradigm centered on literary history, imposed in the 1890s by the first military Republic. The paradigm privileges a pseudo-scientific objectivity in a systematized, descriptive model. Throughout recent years I have tried to define for myself the role of literature education as a subject of studies. Why ought one study—not simply read—literature along with other academic disciplines? What contribution does literature make to individuals, to the process of education, to society? Is the artistic, sociocultural, linguistic character of literature emphasized at school? Should it be? Is the study of literature an end in itself, or a means to reach other intrinsic aims?

Also connected with literature education at school are other questions, such as, How is a syllabus produced, by whom, under which influences, and aiming at what “product”? What is the role of literature exams—the A-levels in the English system, the *vestibular* in Brazil—and what sort of knowledge do they aim to test? This leads to another question that refers to classroom methods and the kind of knowledge to be constructed in literature lessons: Is its objective the creation of consumers, producers of literature, or both? Provided that a theory, according to James Britton, “should be a way of interpreting what has been observed,”<sup>5</sup> what theory or theories support the literature education process in actual practice? Can such theory be universalized? And how about historical differences, philosophical foundations, and ideological influences? “Theory” has been variously defined as “the kind of reflective, second-order discourse about practices that is generated when a consensus that was once taken for granted in a community breaks down”<sup>6</sup> and as the insistent questioning of familiar categories and distinctions.<sup>7</sup> Such questioning is surrounded by conflicts that are never openly debated in classroom situations. Theory has also been used in a broad sense by Gerald Graff as “denoting an examination of legitimating presuppositions, beliefs, and ideologies,”<sup>8</sup> whereas for Gramsci personal experience was always the point of departure for theoretical generalizations. My position in this essay is to consider *theory*, and its strongly felt absence in classroom practices, as a category of conceptual contexts through

which it is possible to integrate perceptions, and expand them. With this in mind, I hope to lead the reader through the pedagogic-literary dilemmas and tensions that I have experienced myself and which are the foundation of my present reflections.

### A. Once Upon a Time

As a subject of study, literature formally entered my academic universe in 1966 at the Instituto de Educação, then an élitist, selective, and competitive state school for girls that for many decades offered the only public secondary education pedagogical (primary-teacher formation) course in Niterói.<sup>9</sup> At secondary school,<sup>10</sup> literature started with reading Portugal's epic writer and poet Luís de Camões, who, in the Portuguese-speaking world, plays a similar role to that of William Shakespeare in English. The method then used required reading for the gist, with vocabulary comprehension, verse scansion, and a summary of each stanza. In order to clarify the story being told, while reading Camões's *Os Lusíadas*, for instance, historical and biographical data were supplied, and after going through comprehension checks and exercises, the class would be ready for the monthly test, leading to the term's exam. There was no question about its relevance to our politico-cultural education, or any criticism of the values that that literature represented for us; likewise, there was never any concern about other Portuguese-speaking countries or literatures. We never participated in the Latin American literary corpus because, with the exception of the three Guyanas, all the other nations spoke Spanish.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, there was a deliberate exclusion of Third World culture as an atrocious nuisance, culturally and politically inferior, as described by Said.<sup>12</sup>

This is what my secondary-school teachers of literature used to do, which was basically what I myself did in my early years of teaching; then it was *the* literature teaching-learning pattern known. Classroom methods placed an emphasis on concrete data such as dates, names, and titles; versification, figures of speech, and literary written resources were studied analytically; each literary text was read with a clear objective ahead, which was to define its genre and specific movement by producing textual evidence. The emphasis on *knowledge* has been pointed to as

a positivistic heritage strongly found in Brazilian education but not less influenced by the Jesuits' system. In practice, the liberal-humanistic "transmission of values" approach found predominantly in the English-speaking, British-influenced literary education was little stressed in Brazilian education in general; literature being a compulsory subject for all, neither teachers nor students were supposed to have what Mathieson calls a "literary personality."<sup>13</sup> The knowledge built, produced, or reproduced in the Brazilian classes of literature could be measured objectively in tests and exams.

From the initial reading of classical Portuguese writers, we were tuned in to the study of Brazilian literature, starting from the epoch of the historical "discovery" (European exploitation of resources) by Portugal in 1500. The first century and a half of colonial life is represented by the so-called *informative literature*, composed of travelers' accounts of Brazilian nature and natives, and also of sermons and essays produced and used by the Jesuits not only in the colonization of the indigenous peoples but also as historical documents for their congregation.<sup>14</sup> Bosi states that those texts cannot be considered literature, but rather historical chronicles, and that their interest as the prehistory of our literature lies in their reflection of the world's views of the time through the first observers of the country: they must be valued as temporal witnesses and as sources of thematic and formal suggestions.<sup>15</sup> Such recommendation is based upon historical, not literary, criteria. In fact, the aesthetic realization of Brazilian literature has traditionally been linked to its "nationalist" features.<sup>16</sup> Invariably, informative literature was succeeded by the Baroque in Bahia and by Neoclassicism in Minas Gerais, followed by nineteenth-century Romanticism in São Paulo, Rio, and Recife, and by Realism, Naturalism, and Parnassianism at the turn of the century, mainly in Rio. Or so we learned.

Our literature was studied chronologically up to the early decades of the twentieth century, usually halting in 1922, with the Modernist manifest made public at the *Semana de Arte Moderna* in São Paulo, which protested against the aesthetic principles valued by Parnassianism and Symbolism. With the exception of some of the so-called regionalist authors representing the country's Northeast, contemporary writers were usually out of the syllabus for examinations and left out of our class-

rooms. One of the reasons may be the fact that literary Modernism is such a complex concept, having such a large variety of aesthetic options and vague contours, that it was almost impossible to examine students' *knowledge* of "objective" characteristics in the period, following the positivist, historical approach. As Said states, processes of imperialism occurred, in addition to economic and political decisions, through education, literature, and the visual and musical arts. These practices assumed a fixity in national culture such that they were often regarded as "a realm of unchanging intellectual monuments, free from wordly affiliations."<sup>17</sup> In this sense, acts of social imperialism occurred in the prescription of syllabi, curricula, and methods for literature education in Brazil.

Certainly, the historical approach to literature, if used critically, could be a significant source of information and reflection upon the establishment of a country's cultural character, as well as a source of historical inquiry about politics, economics, race relations, and women's role in society. As massive quantitative information to be read through quickly and acritically, however, literature history loses its artistic and dialogic element of relevant reflection, expression, and communication. In the pedagogic-literary study of Minas Gerais's written texts and politico-historical movement, for example, not only is the historical context important in the comprehension of the colonial restlessness, but so are the philosophical issues upon which the ideologies (and implications thereof) found in the *Inconfidentes'* literature, such as liberalism, were founded. This does not seem to have ever been considered in the school agenda, according to which history has clearly overtaken literature in terms of pedagogical objectives: students learn about the writers' conspiracy for independence from Portugal; the literary value of the *Inconfidentes'* written production has always been much less discussed and emphasized.

## **B. A View of Brazilian Progressive Pedagogies**

By the time I received the certificate that allowed me to teach primary school, I had decided I would not be a primary teacher. I enjoyed reading and acting out stories to children, but considered myself inadequately prepared to teach; at the age of seven-

teen, I felt too young to endure the strain of the responsibility of educating children, even if I adopted the novelty proposed by the New School Didactic Manuals, especially *Didática Geral* by Romanda A. Pentagna, herself one of our teachers. Its basic feature was the comparison of the drawbacks of traditional teaching with the advantages of progressive learning, filled with illustrative opposition charts.<sup>18</sup> Our own conventional learning methodology, however, contradicted it all, because the lessons, besides being exam-driven, were not centered on us, who were not highly motivated and far from confident and independent. In the hot months, we hoped some teacher would read the New School manuals and take us, as prescribed, to have lessons under trees in the schoolyard. I had a better understanding of it after reading Gramsci, for whom progressive education is connected with political authoritarianism to the same extent that traditional approaches are a requirement “for development of that temper of mind on which radical social criticism depends.”<sup>19</sup> I have maintained that concern in my literature education proposition toward democratic pedagogies.

In general terms, progressive education in Brazil took two different forms: In the decades prior to the military coup d'état, which occurred in 1964, the New School movement had appeared as a reaction against traditional pedagogies; it was centered on pseudo-psychological principles, according to which education served to adjust and adapt individuals to society, through the “correction” of their marginality. It survived in a minor proportion of private progressive schools. The New School pedagogy was taken over in the late sixties and early seventies by its second form, the technician approach: it preached scientific neutrality, inspired by the principles of *rationality*, *efficiency* and *productivity*, which required rational organization, industrialization of objectives, and mechanization of the educational process; the technician approach equated marginality with incompetence, and was largely implemented by developed countries interested in selling technologically obsolete artifacts to the developing societies.<sup>20</sup> In practice, it became the main feature of state-school progressivism in Brazil, and consisted of a set of techniques and methods prompting every action with abundant rules and various kinds of skill-and-aptitude testing.



While the New School pedagogy became entangled with a practice of discrimination in the public realm, lowering the demand of contents and discipline to the masses, it consisted of a valuable alternative to the children of the elites by placing the axis of the pedagogical process on the pupils and on the quality of contents, relations, and teaching-learning methods. Most progressive private schools were created in response to liberal middle-class parental dissatisfaction with formal pedagogy centered on quantitative, memorizable input. Those “experimental” schools were inspired not only by Dewey’s self-growth theory, but also by A. S. Neil’s free development of “the soul,” and Rogers’ work on the development of self-esteem.<sup>21</sup>

The most consistent attempt to develop a New School pedagogy for the masses in Brazil was the *Escola Nova Popular* proposed by Paulo Freire in his literacy movement among illiterate adults in the poorest region of the country, the Northeast. His approach included political considerations and sociocultural awareness. In fact, Paulo Freire became known to most Brazilian educators in the early eighties, after his exile during the military state, when his ideas began to be discussed and studied by teachers, academics, and pedagogy students.

Dermeval Saviani defines progressivism in Brazil as non-democratic. In truth, the technician form it took in the Brazilian public school system, coincidentally during the military government, had ambivalent features, such as the emphasis on low-ability students not being pushed against their “own inner-selves,” because behind their educational difficulties there might be family problems, ill health, or lack of environmental stimulation discovered through psychological measurement tests and to be treated through “understanding.” As a consequence, the gap between dispossessed problem children and the ones who fit in the system would be insurmountable in a few school years. In this sense, the schooling of working-class children would offer no guarantee of knowledge acquisition. Instead, it buried the middle-class inherited liberal-humanist dream of socioeconomic ascension through education among the working classes, therefore imposing on them a limit in their possible participation in society’s routes.

Literature, in the Brazilian form of progressivism, also served a dual purpose, either in the form of relaxing recreation for the

“less able” through the uncritically superficial use and treatment of written texts below secondary level, or as a strenuous exercise of food for memory for the academically oriented secondary students through the learning of formal resources and bio-historical knowledge.

While I was in school, those were the two main approaches to literary texts: either the reading for gist to apprehend the writer’s message, ideas, and meanings, trying to establish extra-sensorial contact with authors through their written texts, usually in language lessons;<sup>22</sup> or the “substantial” approach, the use of literature as a complement to history, with an abundance of dates, facts, motives, and socioeconomic-political factors, which I found much clearer, more reasonable, and a fascinating discovery as an adolescent. The impressionist attempt to guess the writer’s real message appeared little trustworthy to me for the simple reason that, as students in a repressive environment, we were allowed no voice of our own; how could I trust the “direct intuition” of my own textual interpretation in a pedagogic world where my opinions and impressions on every other matter counted little?

Then, between the late sixties and early seventies, there was a novelty in literary critique, the newly instituted linguistic and literary formalism with an emphasis on form and structure. It implied a new pedagogical approach, centered on the objective learning of formal elements and devices in accordance with the technician trend in education. Politically, this coincided with the darkest political years my generation has experienced in Brazil. Popular empowering through literature, or alternative theories, was nonexistent.

### **C. And Then It Became a Profession**

As an undergraduate student, I chose to concentrate on the Portuguese-English curriculum, which encompassed the study of both languages and the literature of Brazil, Portugal, England, and North America. We learned grammar in depth, although an initiation to linguistics was taught as a new, politically correct option of approach to language; but how to teach it in schools was still to be systematized.

Literature studies still followed the bio-historical approach, although a new discipline, *literary theory*, parsimoniously taught in two terms, seemed to offer new possibilities. It was presented in a scientific format prescribing rigorous analysis, under the influence of Saussurean linguistics and communication theories, disembodied from our own culture and social issues, in general, and placing the reader at a safe distance. For its lack of emphasis, I cannot truly say I learned much, especially if compared to the more representative table of contents found in the other areas of study. This is a situation similar to that discussed by Graff when he writes that the established forms of literary study in America have neglected theoretical questions about the ends and social functions of literature and criticism.<sup>23</sup>

Brazil has maintained an educational system that consists of investing heavily in the funding of high-level universities for “all,” in reality those who come from privileged homes and can afford to pay for private schools where education has a high market value. As Gramsci wrote, those who come from traditionally intellectual families acquire the “psycho-physical adaptation” before entering school, already possessing attitudes learned from the family environment, which are valued by the system.<sup>24</sup> The current system in Brazil, thus, penalizes those who use the public educational services in primary and secondary levels, while awarding the others free higher education.

Certainly pedagogical privileges were over when, in the 1970s, the middle classes in Brazil retreated from the traditional state schools, driving away public money investment and the good-education aura. The disappearance of admission exams (eleven plus) prevented pupil selection on academic grounds, and vacancies were officially distributed on a first-come, first-served basis. With the end of the politics of preselection and exclusion, state schools gradually found that less and less investment was to come from the state coffers to be spent on physical facilities, teachers’ salaries, and material equipment. As a consequence, with the appalling poverty found in the schools of the state of Rio de Janeiro, peopled with the neediest classes,<sup>25</sup> low-paid teachers have been supported by a massive dose of pure idealism, an ingredient commonly expected among female professionals, along with altruism and vocational domesticity. In this respect, the education legislators employed by the mili-

tary were able to produce a school system that served antidemocratic interests at mid- and long-range.

My state secondary-school students needed first and above all a certified knowledge of the standard version of language and culture that would enable them to find better jobs, through self-assurance in their reading and writing skills, set on a foundation combining high self-esteem, political awareness, critical reading, and expressive creativity. This would help them to build up relevant knowledge, considering that education goals should be to serve students' aims and needs, rather than support the unequal distribution of wealth and social division. After all, there seemed to be little concern with the well-being of students. Memorization methods and passive pedagogies appeared to be not only rather outdated, but also an impediment to the general sociocultural development, mainly of the economically deprived students.

#### **D. The Experience with Children's Literature**

I had started to work as a teacher of English as a second language. However, I was gradually driven by my students' basic necessities to act in the area of reading-writing development. In 1986 I asked to be transferred to a small state primary school with years 1, 2, 3, and 4 (the "first segment") of primary school. My required function was to reactivate the library, so far inactive for a decade. It seemed the ideal proposition, and although I was excited by the prospect of a brand new activity that I believed could be relevant to the pedagogical construction of social subjects, having never worked with primary education, I had no method of action. It was during the processes of cleaning up, registering titles, and getting acquainted with the school's books, school profile, teachers, and students that I understood how the library ought to work and what action should be taken in order to contribute concretely to the education of students as readers. I would not make reading decisions by myself and would not impose texts on them. As a space of pleasure and problem-raising, each session in the library would begin with an informal conversation from which a theme was picked out, followed by the reading of a thematically related text, and its reading expanded through creative activities only limited by

physical facilities and resources. It required from me a previous knowledge of the reading materials available, and the permanent readiness to learn. It is possible to find the influences of Freire, Dewey, Rogers, and A. S. Neil in that proposal.

The experience can be better understood and appreciated by other nationals with a similar history of politico-economic oppression, with a generation of children classified as working class for lack of better naming, whose families are not catered to by the system, with scarce medical assistance, no unemployment or housing benefit, and an educational organization that depends almost entirely on the good will of teachers. It explains why, in the first days of library attendance, most children asked how I had become so rich as to own all those books on the shelves; they also believed that the rest of the school was the sole property of the head teacher. However, what best showed their fragmentation as a community of students, so different from my own experience as a former state-school student, was their habit of denouncing each other's faults in order to win their teachers' attention and favor. It had become an established habit, unfortunately supported by some teachers as a (dividing) way to control their classes and manage discipline.

I had the feeling that more than feeding them stories to increase their vocabulary or to concentrate on an upgrading of their oral expression through the use of more sophisticated structures, literature might be used more deeply and powerfully as a process of self-recognition and politico-historical awareness. Given the option, I would attend to what appeared to me to be important *educational* needs, rather than literary illustration. It seemed urgent to concentrate on the local micro-physics of power that surrounded those individuals, using Foucaultian terms. On the other hand, I was aware of the risk of imposing a bourgeois reality, "where it is impossible to see the power invested in your charitable deeds, where the poor and oppressed are transformed into the pathological and inadequate."<sup>26</sup>

What I understood by educational needs was the comprehension of one's role as an individual and a member of a social group in the historical process of constructing a nation; the clear definition of political rights and duties in the democratic empowering of citizens; the right to a voice, a will, and to the

representation of one's sociocultural values in society; an attempt to examine the Foucaultian *power-knowledge* couple as the basis of the positive empowering of populations in the possibility of government.

In hindsight, I do not suppose those children learned any quantitatively measurable knowledge from the project. However, they did modify their self-image and their political view of the immediate sociopolitical world through "studying, cultivating, refashioning and constituting the self."<sup>27</sup> In that context, it meant a lot. I could extend this summary by relating the varied oral origins of the choice and the creative follow-up of each text that we, four hundred readers from eight classes and myself, worked on together three times a week for three years (March 1986 to December 1988). The concrete appropriation of the literary text<sup>28</sup> happened after reading it in the critical manipulation of a title, a character, the deviation of the text's route, an alteration of the story's plot, in agreeing or disagreeing with the author. If we stop to think that all this was performed by the same children who, less than a year before, believed the library was untouchable, it seems that some transformation had occurred, affecting their inner perception of the world. I think we worked on personal and social autobiographies in the sense used by Humm referring to (women's) autobiographic writing, coming literally from "within," *a sequence of alive and vivid scenes*.<sup>29</sup> We interacted on the basis of orality, freedom of speech, creative activity, and a valuation of our cultural and familial patrimonies. As a result, they learned self-confidence and individual and social self-esteem, and not only internal (between students) but also external (between students and the community) relationships were dramatically improved.

Many inquiries never end, as new or re-focused questions emerge: "curricular difficulties are not simple, one-dimensional, or static problems, and that is precisely what makes them so challenging. And teaching is, at its heart, a complex task full of complex questions."<sup>30</sup> The project was tried again, with different pupils in different areas, at new schools, on other levels, and a fresh look into problems related to literature education has been required. But results have been surprisingly similar.

### III. Expanding the View into Other Problems

I turn now to my recent difficulties as a university professional responsible for, among other functions, the final pedagogical training of undergraduate students of language and literature who are about to be “licensed” to teach Portuguese and English language as well as Brazilian literature at the secondary-school level. In that area, I have been struggling to define and conceptualize the link between the fragmented theoretical knowledge undergraduates dive into for four years and the classroom outcome they must produce when they finally emerge and are faced with the reality of secondary schools in Brazil. How is this bridge to be built? This problem and imbricated questions are related to the pedagogical efficiency of the literature teaching-learning process in state secondary schools. Literature education, its official prescription (stated aims), its observable realization, and its perception by teachers and students involve a definition of aims, methods, and results in the process of knowledge construction using literature as means to educate citizens.

Many of our university classroom discussions have been centered on the issue that education is a complex process, means and end, and that it requires a clear definition of its features and aims. We feel the need to determine the role of literature as a compulsory subject for secondary-school education in Brazil, as well as the influences it has suffered in its contemporary history and the possibilities of re-writing that history, in order to have a politically significant influence in our current times. What forms does it take?<sup>31</sup> It seems clear that literature at school cannot possibly be looked at as an expression of pure art aiming at contemplation. Its educational role is as important as its art-enjoyment character because it is set at an intersection as an interdisciplinary subject, and, different from other subjects in the teaching-learning process, it deals with varied forms, media, and objects. To use the image I presented at the beginning of this essay, literature education rests upon an interdisciplinary triangle that involves written and spoken language, history and economy; connects with social and political matters; and addresses psychological sources, touching emotions, feelings, and sensations. Its scope is almost unlimited, but as a subject of study at school,

its effects are not made clear, and any attempts to achieve a critical and creative mode of teaching and learning are still tentative.

Brazilian curricula still prescribe the *redação* (written) exams, for which there is no set syllabus except for the implicit supplementation of students' informative input through media information in order to update their awareness of contemporary social issues. Of course, students are not always trained to question the media as agenda-setters<sup>32</sup> who produce and control opinion. What is implicit in the request for examinable writing is indeed a process of exclusion based on knowledge and power, visible not only through the recognition of middle-class *parole*, but also in semiotic and graphological signs. One of the federal universities, for instance, requests that candidates write a "monograph-style" essay to be evaluated in terms of adequacy (on a theme proposed by the examining board), of coherence/cohesion revealed in its "macro-structural organization," and of argumentative competence.

As an entrance exam to the above university, *redação* is usually required as a second-phase paper, along with the specific subjects for each area, after the initial sifting of candidates. If on the one hand the valuable inclusion of a paper founded on the subjective use of the national language should be valued, on the other hand it becomes, in practice, another element of social exclusion from the academy, as implied above. It can be a selection of the very best for any course, rather than the best for the chosen area of study. The element of inequality resides in the fact that less wealthy students usually attend state schools with limited conditions and fewer material facilities, including poorer libraries, which compromises their command of the required and dominant middle-class linguistic discourse. This exam reinforces the existence of a dual school system differentiated by equipment, facilities, and access to a varied range of reading materials and other elements.<sup>33</sup> Besides, it is difficult to imagine how a one-page essay on a general topic can prove one's "capacity of expression."

#### IV. Literature and the Educational Agenda

There have been visible consequences in the recent reorganization of our basic education, with the integration of primary and



middle schools, which had as one of its objectives the consolidation of compulsory schooling in eight years, between ages seven and fourteen (Law 5692 of 1971). In order to avoid the excessive demand for university access, the law prescribed professional formation at school, or technical-skills training for all. Up until then, the dual system offered a choice between “vocational” and academic education, a euphemism for different schooling for different social classes.

Brazil’s expanding industrialization required basic schooling and training in order to increase productivity, but not necessarily the corresponding elevation of salaries. As Romanelli explains, it was in the interest of national and international enterprises that Brazilian manual labor was equipped with some education and training in order to become increasingly productive while still remaining very cheap.<sup>34</sup> At school, this was achieved through Law 5692, offering the usual pedagogical pattern plus a prospect for (and development of) “aptitudes for work” for all. Nevertheless, it had a short life, and the dual system resumed, as it better attends the separation of socioeconomic classes in Brazil in the academic-versus-vocational education model. The surviving training courses, which require no special installations or equipment, are the vocational secondary schools that train students to be primary-school teachers, nowadays called “pedagogic second grade,” and formerly known as *escolas normais* (normal schools). In order to function as training courses, they depend solely on professorial skills, requiring no special equipment other than teachers’ underpaid labor.

After 1971, languages and literature were arranged in a nucleus named “communication and expression.” The other nuclei were “social studies” (composed of history, geography, and social-political organization) and “sciences” (physics, mathematics, and biology). By law, communication and expression aimed at the cultivation of languages that grant the student a coherent contact with others, laying stress on the Portuguese language as an expression of Brazilian culture.

The vagueness of official documents allows for a certain degree of adaptability to suit different practices and interests. In fact, the teaching of literature in Brazilian schools could not be further from its prescription, still carrying the century-old

design that placed an emphasis on pseudoscientific methods and on the quantitative measurement of cognitive acquisition.

In mid-1995, Brazil was believed to have an illiteracy rate of 20 percent among citizens of varied ages. Six million children were out of school — one million more than in the early 1990s. Currently, 30.5 million students are enrolled in the first year of primary school; only 13.4 million will finish year eight; and a mere 3.6 million will enter universities. In 1983, the state of Rio de Janeiro invested 17.69 percent of its budget in education; this dropped to 11.31 percent in 1992. This percentage also includes “education-related” expenses, that is, the payment of retirement pensions, school meals, students’ transport, and the construction of swimming pools (most of which remain unfinished), among others.<sup>35</sup>

In the Brazilian public system, primary schools are usually supported and controlled by municipal governments and secondary schools set under the state jurisdiction as a rule. There is a reasonable offer of vacancies in primary schools (years one to eight), but this decreases dramatically at the secondary level. Niterói, for instance, has only nineteen state secondary, and sixty-eight municipal primary schools. This gap is filled by private schools of different prices, academic orientation, and pedagogical quality. In recent years, opening an educational establishment has become a very lucrative enterprise, and many new schools and colleges have sprung up. For less wealthy parents, who either do not manage to find places for their children in state schools or who believe their children will stand a better chance of socioeconomic success by undergoing private education, peripheral schools can be found charging lower fees and most often offering third-rate education; they sometimes hire underqualified teachers who work for even lower salaries and are installed in tight buildings with rather poor physical and material facilities in spite of the supposedly exigent official state surveillance.<sup>36</sup> Lack of public investment represents the crucial element in the inequality of opportunities, in spite of the official discourse, which guarantees public education for all from primary school to university.

To analyze the official syllabus in the Brazilian educational model is to see its emphasis on quantitative knowledge; in order to succeed academically, students’ attention and interests must

be devoted to the acquisition of a-critical knowledge, mainly in its memorized form. The literature syllabi proposed by the majority of public universities in Brazil are firmly founded on the history of Brazilian literature; only in exceptional instances do syllabi include texts by women or local authors.<sup>37</sup> Many reasons have been given to explain why literature syllabi include only the standard canonical works, leaving out most contemporary writers and all kinds of experimental literature. Brennan identifies the personification of national identity in symbols and devices, literarily represented by the *novel*.<sup>38</sup> Batsleer et al. also write that canons consist of selections and hierarchies that necessitate a continuous process of comparative placing and opposition.<sup>39</sup>

Most teachers quietly comment on their students' general dissatisfaction in reading for exams a list that is founded more on exclusion than inclusion, a practice of discrimination at the end of a long process of selective preparation and evaluation. Most students declare that they would like to have literary access at school to current works that provide, for instance, new readings of the recent military dictatorship for discussion and reflection.

Schools' survival depends to a great extent on the results they achieve in the exams. Somewhere, somehow, there is an authoritative command that demands *vestibular* exams to be in the pattern they are, with literature to be tested through periods, dates, names, and characteristics, better still if well memorized. Whoever is not tuned in to the system is out of it. The general situation found in those Brazilian schools is that a great many teachers declare themselves unhappy with the sort of literature they ought to teach: they would rather work on textual analysis and criticism as well as in the development of reading sensibility in students. The maintenance of the 1890s positivist model for literature is at the least strange and anachronistic, but it remains almost untouched. Consequently, it seems that teachers' and students' dissatisfaction is not sufficient to threaten the ideology of the "national discourse" as comfortably appropriated by the ruling legislators in education. For the time being, *vestibular* exams still represent certainty, the official discourse of homogeneous knowledge and "middle-class" cultural identity in literature education.

It is interesting to see that a federal university in Rio demanded from its 1995 *vestibular* candidates in their literature papers that they show evidence of their knowledge of aesthetic creation, literary and nonliterary language, and literary genres; the Brazilian literary process, in connection with Brazilian history and culture; Romanticism in Brazil, contrasted with Baroque and Neoclassicism (poetry, fiction, and drama); Realism in Brazil; Naturalism and Impressionism (fiction); Parnasianism and Symbolism (poetry); Modernism in Brazil, compared to past movements, its elements of permanence, opposition, and transformation; and the 1945 poetry and main tendencies post-1945.

A program of study such as this, produced in the ivory towers of the academy, seems cognitively far-fetched and socioculturally shortsighted, and elicits the wide gap between prescribed contents and realistic possibilities and achievements. The inevitable acceleration of input renders classroom discussion, exchange, and responsible problematization apparently impossible goals for teachers and students alike.

No less important is the question of a theoretical vacuum, directly linked to teachers' formation at university — as stated above, a crucial problem of difficult solution. To Graff, "theory is what breaks out when agreement about such terms as *text*, *reading*, *history*, *interpretation*, *tradition* and *literature* can no longer be taken for granted." He believes that the academic separation between departments, and units, creates a theoretical vacuum through the isolation of periods, genres, and categories; and the established curriculum's poverty of theory penalizes the average student, who "lacks command of the conceptual contexts that make it possible to integrate perceptions and generalize from them."<sup>40</sup>

As long as scholars, generalists, and critics covered their turfs within self-enclosed classrooms, the average student did not need to be aware of the clashes of principle, much less use them in a larger context for literary study.<sup>41</sup>

With a low social self-esteem, state-school teachers in general do not see themselves as producers of knowledge, but mere consumers of whatever better-equipped thinkers may offer them. In the case of literature textbooks, for example, authors/scholars

set the classroom rules, format, and method and provide the “theory.”

## V. Summing Up

I begin my concluding remarks by postulating that one of literature’s main roles is the cultural representation of societies. As such, it is important that literature enters the realm of other society-related disciplines, aiming at the production of knowledge that is relevant to individuals and social groups alike in a time of globalization. So far, the official contribution of literature education in Brazil has been to provide an uncritical and ineffective—for the aims of active democracy and robust citizenship—combination of textual comprehension, creative writing, and historical documentation. Undergraduate students of language and literature in Brazil learn historical, economic, sociopolitical, and biographical facts surrounding literature. They also read certain texts and analyze certain literary authors, periods, and genres; but they continue to receive insufficient information about literary critiques and the schools of thought that allow different readings and dialogical interpretations between text, reader, and society. What has not been part of most curricula is the process of making students aware of how knowledge is produced and how reading takes place, thereby allowing them the chance to participate actively in their society and to ably intervene in the dominant discourses of their culture.<sup>42</sup> When undergraduates finally arrive at the Education Faculty to study pedagogical disciplines, they have already classified those disciplines as unimportant, a mere formality that separates them from their diplomas. However, they also often encounter an approach that, mainly for those who come from pedagogical secondary courses (*escolas normais*) instead of the technicist pragmatism expected, often takes them by surprise by presenting an agenda of political engagement so far rarely brought into focus in their specific academic formation.

In this essay<sup>43</sup> I have tried to reflect upon the bridging of the gap between the specific knowledge construed in the domain of language and literature as disciplines of academic study, and the construction of such knowledge as problematized classroom material that adds to the political engagement teachers ought to

be committed to in their classrooms and in their social practices. The permanence of that gap will inevitably have grave ramifications for Brazil's political economy, reinforcing vulnerabilities in the face of globalization and change. How can we instrumentalize literature teachers-to-be so that they can engage in knowledge production in their classrooms so as to contribute to a more equal society? Literature teachers cannot be expected to be apolitical in their practice, for education is a political institution. However satisfied teachers and students may be with the creation and/or increase of social and personal *subjectivity*, traditional examination requirements still seem dominant in the measurement of pupils' abilities and preparation for adulthood. Such a situation turns education into a system for the imposition of supplicance and even ignorance.<sup>44</sup>

The paradigms described herein—in spite of social, political, cultural, and economic diversities and ideologies found in different forms of schooling—are designed by governmental entities preoccupied with the articulation of wider national and international interests. This is a worrisome stance, if we agree with Chomsky that “[s]tates are violent institutions.”

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## Notes

1. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 216.
2. *Ibid.*, 214.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Lei diretrizes e bases da educação nacional: nova LDB (Lei no. 9.394)* (Rio de Janeiro: Qualitymark Editora, 1997).
5. James Britton, *Literature in Its Place* (London: Cassell Educational Ltd., 1993), 24: “The word *theory* itself springs from a Greek root *theamai*, meaning ‘I behold’—indicating that a theory, in this original sense, should be a way of interpreting what has been *observed*.” Britton opposes the Greek root’s suggestion of “opening up” to the often used concept of theory as a “closing down.”
6. Gerald Graff, “Other Voices, Other Rooms,” in *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 19.
7. Cain, introduction to *Teaching the Conflicts*, vii.
8. Graff, “Taking Cover in Coverage,” in *Teaching the Conflicts*, 4.
9. The first Normal School in Brazil was created in Niterói in 1835; I attended this school as a gymnasium student from 1962 to 1965 and as a normal school student between 1966 and 1968. Brazilian law prescribes secondary education

as a minimum level for a primary-school teacher in the first four years, also called the first segment of compulsory education, after Law 5692 (1971), which replaced primary education. For the fifth to the eighth years of compulsory school, also named the second segment, a teacher must be a graduate in her area of teaching with one year of pedagogical training. The same requirement applies to secondary-school teaching.

10. In Brazil there are eight years of compulsory education, also known as first grade, followed by three years of noncompulsory second-grade schooling. At the end of eleven years of schooling, at the average age of eighteen, students take the *vestibular* (pre-entrance) exams to enter the university. Second-grade schooling can be either vocational or nonvocational.

11. Only in the early 1980s did the study of Spanish become an option as a foreign language in Brazilian schools, which until then had offered only English and/or French.

12. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 31.

13. Margaret Mathieson, *The Preachers of Culture: A Study of English and Its Teachers* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 54.

14. At the time of Brazilian colonization, the Jesuits were the most powerful and influential religious congregation in Portugal, and they participated actively in the process of colonization, especially through Christian conversion and education of the indigenous peoples. By the mid-eighteenth century, Portuguese leader Marquês de Pombal, King Francisco José I's prime minister, took drastic measures to limit their political influence and power, and the Jesuits were expelled from the colonies.

15. Alfredo Bosi, *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1994), 13. Bosi shows how the literary search for roots in the struggle against European dominance was inspired in such informative documents.

16. Silvio Romero, *História da Literatura Brasileira*, 5 vols., (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 1953), 56. Romero wrote that whatever was written to contribute to national determination should be studied, and that should be the quality-measuring criteria of writers.

17. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 12.

18. Clive Harber presents a similar list of contrasts and differences between "tendencies of the closed mind" and "tendencies of the open mind." See his *Democratic Learning and Learning Democracy: Education for Active Citizenship* (Derbyshire: Education Now Publishing Co-operative, 1992), 16.

19. Harold Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 2–3.

20. Dermeval Saviani, *Escola e Democracia* (São Paulo: Cortez, 1985), 11–18.

21. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1956); Jonathan Croall, *Neil of Summerhill: The Permanent Rebel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); and Carl R. Rogers, *Tornar-se Pessoa* (On Becoming a Person) (São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora, 1961).

22. As critically described by Eagleton, "the poem was no more than a transparent medium through which we could observe the poet's psychological processes: reading was just a matter of recreating in our mind the mental condition of the author." See his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c1983), 47.
23. Graff, "Taking Cover in Coverage," 3.
24. Entwistle, *Antonio Gramsci*, 42–43.
25. To use the expression "working class" is not accurate, as class conscience in Brazil is a distinct concept from the English. However, I agree with Richard Hoggart that middle-class intellectuals tend to hold a romantic view of working-class people, which leads to a "half assumption" about political activity in working-class life, "part-pitying and part-patronising." "Who are the Working Classes?" in his *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), 17.
26. See Valerie Walkerdine, "Progressive Pedagogy and Political Struggle," in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20. The author discusses the psychic economy of the progressive classroom.
27. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.
28. Only children's literature was used for expressive reading, although comic magazines were always available in the library for the children to borrow and exchange. The choice for literature was due to an intuitive belief that the "desecrated" access to literary texts would help to enhance the children's self-esteem, as books and literature are usually associated with wealth and power (libraries for the rich, workshops for the poor).
29. Maggie Humm, "Subjects in English: Autobiography, Women and Education," in *Teaching Women: Feminism and English Studies*, ed. Ann Thompson and Helen Wilcox (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1989), 45.
30. Carol Gilles, "Discussing Our Questions and Questioning Our Discussions: Growing into Literature Study" in *Language Arts* 71, no. 7 (November 1994) National Council of Teachers of English: 506–507.
31. Michael Bancroft questions the same problem. He writes: "What purpose would this information [genres, authors, literary history; elements of poetry and fiction; rudimentary tools of criticism] serve for the majority of students who will not take a college major in literature...? This situation reflects what I see as the absence of a coherent theory of literature." See his "Why Literature in the High School Curriculum?" in *English Journal* 83, no. 8 (December 1994) National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE): 23.
32. As used by Noam Chomsky in the film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 1994).
33. Attendance is a problem in state schools, where teachers have acquired the right to a three-day menstrual leave per month, which is also extended to male teachers. In recent years, long strikes kept school closed for some time (e.g., for three months in 1992).
34. Otaíza O. Romanelli, *História da Educação no Brasil: 1930–1973* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985), 233–35.



35. Data provided by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), 1994, cited by Ib Teixeira, "Uma Tragédia Brasileira," in *Conjuntura Econômica* (Fundação Getúlio Vargas: Rio de Janeiro, 1995), 43–45.

36. Any private school must attend to the demands of the State Council of Education; however, in the 1995 list of twenty-four councilors, nine were owners (or, euphemistically, directors) of well-known private schools, ten were nominated through political injunctions and/or favors, three were recognized as academics and educationists, and two had no public, educational, or political expression. Despite its high profile, the council has had little well-defined commitment to public interests.

37. Marly A. de Oliveira, "A História da literatura brasileira que lemos e ensinamos" in *Perspectiva*, Revista do Centro de Ciências da Educação, UFSC (January-June 1988): 49–65. After having researched twenty-five federal syllabi, the author found one federal institution of higher education, UFBA, that included women's literature in its program; seven others allowed the inclusion of local literature.

38. Timothy Brennan, "The National Longing for Form," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 49.

39. Janet Batsleer et al., *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 29.

40. Graff, "Taking Cover in Coverage," 4–5.

41. *Ibid.*, 9.

42. Gerald Graff deals with similar issues when quoting from the *Syracuse English Newsletter*, in "Other Voices, Other Rooms," 38.

43. Data were taken from my Ph.D. dissertation. See Cyana M. Leahy-Dios, "Literature Education as a Social Metaphor" (Ph.D. diss., University of London Institute of Education, 1996).

44. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 385.

### **Additional Sources**

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