

Theory and Pedagogy in the Brazilian Northeast

Darlene J. Sadlier

In November 1994, *Véja*, the popular Brazilian weekly news magazine, published a major article in response to Harold Bloom's then recently released *The Western Canon*. The intent of the piece, entitled 'Biblioteca Nacional' (National Library) was to mount a Brazilian canon by surveying fifteen of the country's most distinguished intellectuals, each of whom was asked to list twenty books that, regardless of subject matter or period, should be required reading for anyone interested in Brazilian culture. Of the over 150 titles listed, twenty-two appeared on anywhere from four to fifteen lists; and these, in turn, were designated by *Véja* as constituting the canon.¹

For the most part, the twenty-two titles were predictable; for example, Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)* was the top choice with fifteen votes, while Machado de Assis was the only author to have two books shortlisted (his novels *Dom Casmurro* and *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas [Epitaph of a Small Winner]*). Even among the more than 100 titles mentioned only once, the surprises were relatively few. Among the more unusual selections was a book about Brazilian birds, a study of the penal code, and an autobiography by architect Oscar Niemeyer. Perhaps the most startling item was a multi-volume study by a literary critic, who had listed his own work as essential reading.

The publication of the *Véja* 'canon' was especially timely for me, because it appeared at the very moment when I was teaching a graduate seminar on feminist literary theory and criticism at the Federal University of Pernambuco in Recife. Although the article generated surprisingly little discussion among my colleagues in the literature and linguistics department, it struck a dissonant chord among the group of women and men in my seminar. Unlike the academic community at large, these students were disturbed that out of the fifteen intellectuals interviewed, not one was a woman. They also commented on the fact that of the more than 150 titles mentioned in the article, only four were authored by women, and of those four, two were by Clarice Lispector.

1 See Rinaldo Gama, 'Biblioteca Nacional', *Véja*, 23 Nov. 1994, 108-112.

Response was equally intense and angry at a December conference in Santa Catarina, in the southern part of Brazil, where the theme under discussion was 'Fazendo Gênero' (Making/Doing Gender). The article made clear to all those present that, despite the myriad critical essays, journals, and books that had appeared on women's literature in Brazil (not to mention the vast numbers of works by Brazilian women writers themselves), little had changed in the country with regard to the representation of women in the popular media or in the scholarly community at large.

From a North American feminist's point of view, the situation with regard to women's studies in Brazil is a fascinating mixture of the old and the new. A considerable portion of the work being done in the country by academic feminists is reminiscent of the late 1960s in the United States, when literary critics like Kate Millett and Mary Ellmann were challenging male critics and deconstructing the canon. There is also a great deal of recuperative work going on - especially in the area of journalism, where the prolific contributions of women writers have long been forgotten or neglected. At the same time, however, there is a significant number of feminist academics, located mostly in the central and southern parts of Brazil, whose writings are as theoretically current and engaged as those in France, England, and the United States. In other words, what we in the United States think of as two distinct historical periods of scholarship have emerged simultaneously in Brazil, one type of work harking back to a revolutionary/revisionary feminism, and the other having more in common with what we nowadays regard as theory. Meanwhile, the public at large (if *Véja* is any indication) remains largely unaware and unenlightened.

There is no doubt that had *Newsweek* or *Time* magazine in the United States published an article like *Véja's*, there would have been an outcry from feminists, the academic community in general, and perhaps even the larger readership. The difference can probably be explained by the simple fact that the United States is a much more prosperous and 'modern' country with a long history of women's movements. Over the years, feminism has become part of the nation's fabric to the extent that middle-class women have greater visibility in academia and the public world, and their writings are now a regular part of the academic curriculum as well as the canon.

By contrast, the great majority of women in Brazil are not middle class. Feminism as a social and cultural phenomenon has little significance for the community in general - at least if by feminism one means the middle-class struggle for women's equality in the workplace, or for the representation of women writers in the canon. Where the relatively narrow issue of literary studies is concerned, it should also be understood that Brazilian institutions are more strict and intractable in their approach to curricular matters, so that modifications to current offerings have to pass through considerable bureaucracy

in order to be approved. In Recife, the courses in literature were based on highly conservative canons, be they in English, French, or Portuguese. The few exceptions were special courses like my own, which was arranged at the urgings of interested faculty and students, and which was also supported by the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, a U. S. funded institution that works in tandem with the Fulbright Commission.

My particular teaching assignment under the Fulbright auspices was to provide an overview of the major critical and theoretical writings on women's literature and feminist literary studies from the United States. I was especially interested in the issues of race and class that have been discussed in the writings of materialist feminists, radical women of colour, and post-colonial feminists. My seminar consisted of students and faculty from various fields, including American, French, Spanish American, and Brazilian literatures; translation studies; sociology; and linguistics. The individuals with the greatest knowledge of the general field of women's studies were the sociologists, who were teaching and working with women's groups within the city of Recife. They were keenly interested in learning more about the different theories and approaches utilized in the United States, and they were specifically concerned with texts that addressed issues of social class. The literature and linguistics specialists were perhaps the least informed about the field; nevertheless, several of them were part of a small nucleus of faculty and students dedicated to the study of women's works. Two of the founders of this group were faculty members working toward the completion of their doctorates on women's topics; one was in France, studying at the Sorbonne, and the other was taking courses at the University of São Paulo, which has a significant number of women's studies specialists.

Given the wealth of material in the field, I sought to provide students with as broad an overview as possible while representing specific concerns within recent feminist literary critique. Two problems immediately surfaced, however, when I arrived and began teaching. The majority of students could read little or no English, and the texts I had selected for study were invariably not available in Portuguese translation. In fact, relatively little feminist writing in English has been translated in Brazil. Given this lack of basic material, it was interesting, if not depressingly symptomatic, to note that the writings of Camille Paglia were everywhere available in bookstores. More than a best-selling author, Paglia was also a celebrity figure of sorts, who attended high-society receptions, and whose picture appeared on the front page of *O Globo*, one of the two main newspapers in Rio.

To a certain extent, the dearth of translations of feminist literature in English was offset by works in French on feminist topics, which require little or no translation. France has always held a prominent place in Brazil's intellectual life, and until the latter part of this century, French was the official language in

primary and secondary schools. This explains why Brazilian feminist writing is in one sense more engaged with post-structuralism, discourse theory, and *écriture féminine* than with issues rising out of post-colonialism or current discussions of race and class in the United States and Britain. One must also be aware that it was a French intellectual, H el ene Cixous, who brought international feminist attention to Clarice Lispector. Cixous's numerous essays about Lispector, as well as her tributes to her in other writings, have probably contributed to Cixous's own prominence in Brazilian intellectual life and in feminist and literary studies in particular.

As someone who has studied Brazilian literature and culture for many years, I was both eager and anxious when I was given an opportunity to teach a feminist course in Northeastern Brazil. On the one hand, this would give me the chance to share with a group of Brazilians a set of important critical writings that had affected my own thinking and writing. On the other hand, I was keenly aware of the inherent problems that come with the dissemination of ideas from one culture to another. My problems would be exacerbated because I was teaching faculty and students from one of the most culturally rich yet economically impoverished areas in all Brazil. Recife, once the cultural centre of the nation, is the capital of the Northeast, whose once booming economic system, founded on slave labor and latifundiaria, is reminiscent of the pre-Civil War plantation society in the southern United States. Some of Brazil's wealthiest families live in this area, yet the majority of the population, which is racially darker as a result of the importation of Africans to work the plantations, live in dire poverty. Like most of the major coastal capitals in Brazil, Recife is a city of stark contrasts: it has pristine beachfronts, five-star hotels, and a booming tourist industry, but at the same time it has large slum settlements, dump sites littered with human remains, and health problems that include cholera and dengue. Hunger forces children into the streets to beg or rob from the tourists, while local prostitution of black and mulatto women is promoted to largely white, working-class foreigners, who come to Recife in droves on pre-arranged package deals.

And yet, despite the inequities that are everywhere apparent in Recife and elsewhere, issues of race and social class have figured very little in the scholarship of literary feminists in Brazil. This is perhaps not surprising if one considers that the primary models for such a scholarship are authors like Cixous in France and the more traditional wing of academic feminists in the United States. I was therefore determined that my students, who are surrounded by the stark realities of Brazilian economic life, should be exposed to heretofore neglected readings about feminism and race from the United States. (Until quite recently, of course, such readings were marginal even to mainstream feminism in the United States.) Not surprisingly, the authors who most effectively engaged

my seminar students were those who were writing from a materialist (socialist) feminist and/or minority (African-American/U.S. Latino) point of view. Three works from three quite different genres had particular impact on the group: Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*; Paul Lauter's essay, 'Caste, Class and Canon'; and bell hooks's unclassifiable theoretical book, *Talking Back*. In the following pages, I want to comment on the lessons my students derived from each of these texts, showing how our discussions of the Brazilian canon were affected when the topic of 'women' was joined with other important matters.

To readers in the United States, the introductory pages of *Sula* (1973) may seem like fantasy or 'magical realism', but for a Brazilian audience they describe a quite specific reality. In these pages, Morrison narrates the history of a place called Medallion, where the whites lived in the fertile valley lands, and where the freed slaves were given a piece of the 'Bottom' in the hills above the valley. The tricky semantics of the word 'Bottom' are revealed in a brief exchange between a master and a slave, which also shows how the master has the complete power to determine meaning:

The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, 'Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile'.

'But it's high up in the hills', said the slave.

'High up from us', said the master, 'but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven - best land there is'.

So the slave pressed his master to try to get some. He preferred it to the valley. And it was done. The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seed, and where the wind lingered all through the winter.

Which accounted for the fact that white people lived on the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio, and the blacks populated the hills above it, taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks.²

Anyone familiar with Brazil will see the similarity between Morrison's 'Bottom' and the hillside *favelas* in places like Rio, where a largely poor and black community looks down upon wealthy valley properties. But the similarities do not end there: Morrison's novel explains that after many years, the 'Bottom' was

2 Toni Morrison, *Sula*, New York, Plume, 1982, 5.

finally razed and transformed into a suburb for the wealthy, replete with a country club and a golf course. Although the Brazilian government cannot possibly raze the *favelas*, there are at the moment numerous projects to resettle the poor outside the city limits, far from the tourists and beachfronts, where many of them work as day labourers in hotels and restaurants.

Sula's plot focuses on a life-long relationship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace. However, unlike many contemporary novels about women's coming to awareness, *Sula* never forgets the economic and racial-specific context from which these women's lives emerged, and from which their relationships were forged. For this reason, the world described in *Sula* seemed both unexpected and familiar to my class. Unexpected in the sense that the small town life described in the novel had little if anything in common with the white, middle-class image of America that they associated with literature, movies, and television; familiar in the sense that, although race is not a topic of daily discussion in Brazil, the relationship between skin color and social class is everywhere evident. In *Sula*, Morrison has created a topographic and social world quite analogous to the situation in Brazil: the fertile valley occupied by the rich white folks is equivalent to the southern part of Brazil, which is both whiter and wealthier because of European immigration and industrialization; the poorer and darker 'Bottom' is the equivalent of the Northeast, with its struggling one-crop economy and a population whose descendants were also immigrants but, in this case, slaves.

There is no question that, in comparison to central and southern parts of Brazil, the Northeast is socially and culturally more traditional as a result of a plantation economy that enlisted the services of the church to help maintain order among the slaves (as well as the wives and daughters of the plantation owners). Hence, many citizens of the south regard the Northeast as the last vestige of the 'true' Brazil - in other words, a quaint, provincial region that is almost mystical in its religious fervor. By contrast, Northeasterners sometimes feel inferior. (Once, after I had returned to Recife from a trip to Rio, one of my seminar students asked if I didn't find Recife backward compared with the cosmopolitan south.) *Sula's* narrative captures exactly this cultural ambivalence, which is especially typical of middle-class women in the Northeast. Like the solid citizen Nel Wright, these women are imbued with a sense of tradition based on matriarchal pride and responsibility; and yet, like the rebellious Sula Peace, they desire greater independence from the family. The conflicts rising out of an inner struggle between tradition and emancipation are still channeled for many through religious faith. The church becomes the mediator for feelings of dissatisfaction over wifedom and motherhood, and a new sort of religious feminism, of the order of liberation theology, has enabled a number of women to feel greater freedom and control by sublimating their more radical forms of protest through prayer groups that include activities such as the laying on of

hands. Occasionally, the new religion enters the classroom. For example, at a special conference arranged by my students to showcase their research, one of the organizers, a French professor who was uneasy with discussions that focused on race and social class, invited a local woman theologian to speak on the subject of feminism.

I found that Morrison's novel opened up student discussions of purely secular issues in ways that few 'theoretical' essays did. If anyone felt more caught up in the exchanges over this novel than I myself, it may have been a young black graduate student, who, in one of her rare comments in class, remarked that this was the first time in her experience as a student that a *black* author had been included on a reading list. Why was that? Were there no black Brazilian writers worthy of study? Such observations and questions led to a broader theoretical discussion of the canon, enabling me to confront academic scholarship in a more direct and useful fashion.

Paul Lauter's 1981 essay 'Caste, Class and Canon' (revised in 1987), provided the class with helpful insights into the formation of literary canons, but it also suggested a relationship between canons and everyday critical practice. The questions Lauter poses at the beginning of this essay are especially provocative: why do feminists tend to privilege white, middle-class women writers as opposed to working women or women of colour; and if feminist studies are about difference, why do feminist critics frequently adopt formalist or New Critical techniques? Is not the practice of close formal analysis in most classrooms a product of the same white male culture that produced the traditional canon? This last question was especially intriguing because a standard classroom procedure in Brazil is a form of fifties-style New Criticism that looks at images, metaphors, and similes, without considering the politics and historical context of literary texts. Not surprisingly, those students who were most adept at the method were also specialists in American or English literature, who tended to cite writers such as Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich (Rich's poetry happened to be the focus of a discussion group Lauter himself attended, which inspired him to write his essay-critique). Perhaps significantly, few of the skilled new critics had been exposed to Toni Morrison, even though her works are available in Portuguese.

In Brazil, as we have seen, only a few women writers are canonized, and none of them are 'of colour' or working class. In fact, most of them tend to be from what one of my Brasília colleagues disparagingly called the 'Elizabeth Arden circuit', or the central-south of Brazil, where Rio and São Paulo are located. The only woman of colour whose name is widely known is Carolina Maria de Jesus, a *favelada* whose diary about slum life was a bestseller but never

part of the literary discourse.³ The situation in Brazil therefore resembles the United States in the 1980s, as described by Lauter. There is considerable irony in the Brazilian neglect of black literature, however, since the country's African heritage figures prominently in all attempts to create a national identity. Even the very few male writers in the Brazilian canon who are black or mulatto have been traditionally treated as white. Among these is the nineteenth-century black symbolist poet João da Cruz e Sousa, for whom blackness was not only a theme but also a stylistic determinant.⁴

To some extent, the work Lauter describes as the necessary initial task of feminist criticism - 'the recovery of lost work by women, and the restoration of the value of disdained genres' in order to 'broaden the "text milieu"',⁵ - is already underway in Brazil. Certain lost or ignored women writers have been rediscovered, and magazine literature and newspaper *crônicas* (chronicles) which women wrote in significant numbers, have been revalued. But Lauter's call to bring minority women and working class writing from the margins to the centre is a much more difficult task. One reason why is that in Brazil, race as a concept does not 'translate', except in terms of a supposedly neutral description of appearance (skin colour, facial features, etc.). The country is tolerant of intermarriage and proud to be known as a racially mixed society. It by no means follows, however, that a writer (or anyone else) who looks black will identify him/herself as black. This situation is of course not unique to Brazil, but in the United States, unless a writer (Anatole Broyard, for example) can 'pass' as white, she or he is described as a person of color. Brazil likes to think of itself as a kind of racial paradise where such distinctions have no important meaning. The only place where blackness clearly becomes part of identity politics is in certain protest literature of the 1930s; in the black experimental theater of Abdias do Nascimento; or in popular forms such as the *literatura de cordel* (chapbooks), which are largely male-authored and generally negative in their representation of blacks.

Lauter's essay brought the problem of colour to the surface of theory. It also resonated for students who were trained in formalist approaches, and for whom critical practice was always perceived as value-free. The students were especially impressed with the idea that social class and race were formative issues

3 See her *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, trans. David St. Clair, New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1962.

4 For a detailed commentary on this subject, see Heitor Martins, 'White on Black in Cruz e Sousa' in *New Perspectives in Brazilian Literary Studies: Symbolism Today*, ed. Darlene J. Sadlier, Bloomington, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 1984, 7-17.

5 Paul Lauter, 'Caste, Class, and Canon' in *Feminisms*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diana Price Herndl, New Jersey, Rutgers UP, 242.

that could be discussed alongside gender. Some of them had already questioned the absence of Brazilian women and black women in particular from their literary studies; and the idea that absences might be somehow linked with a particular critical approach was even more compelling. What struck them most forcefully was that a narrowly formalist treatment of literature might help to ensure the 'invisibility' of race, and therefore obscure certain traditional hierarchies.

Bell hooks's *Talking Back* engaged the class in still broader discussions of theory and pedagogy, and at the same time enabled students to consider the relevance of unexplored feminist perspectives that might be brought to bear on the local situation. One of the reasons hooks was so interesting to my students was that she derives a considerable part of her approach from the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator. Freire's widely acclaimed book, *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (1970) (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), is an attempt to formulate a theory that will enable teachers to transform illiterate individuals, who are submerged in a 'culture of silence', into participatory or speaking subjects.⁶ Throughout her book, hooks tries to do similar work. She affirms her solidarity with the cause of feminist liberation, but she is wary of academics who presume to speak for the 'other' or who question the validity of the personal testimony: 'It is our responsibility collectively and individually to distinguish between mere speaking that is about self-aggrandizement, exploitation of the exotic 'other,' and that coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle'.⁷ Hooks wants to develop a pedagogy that will reach large numbers of adults outside the university, and her aim is very much in keeping with certain non-academic feminists in Brazil, where the majority of the population is poor and working class. For hooks, the personal is unproblematically political, and 'talking back' becomes a way for those women who never previously had a public voice in society or within the feminist movement to move from object to subject. Her emphasis on the word 'talking' revealed to my class that, for certain groups in the United States, literacy is not a given. If change is to occur among these groups, then feminism and feminist theory needs to expand to include oral narratives and multiple theories 'emerging from diverse perspectives in a variety of styles' (37).

Even more significant than hooks's actual writing was the fact that a Brazilian - a Northeasterner, in fact, a Recife - was the inspiration for the theory and praxis of a North American feminist who, although clearly outside

6 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, New York, Continuum, 1993.

7 Bell hooks, *Talking Back*, Boston, South End Press, 1989, 18.

the tradition associated with feminist literary critique, was known and respected in the United States. Freire and hooks's emphasis on the relationship between education and liberation, and hooks's critique of seminal studies like *The Feminine Mystique*, which fails to consider the mediating factors of race and class among women, were especially persuasive for the students. But the class was excited most of all by the idea that within Brazil there were already certain theoretical writings capable of serving the needs of feminist practice, even if these writings did not privilege the role of women in society (as is the case of Freire, whose language is male-oriented).

The degree to which women's studies in Brazil has transformed the society at large is negligible, because the feminist movement is contained within the university and tends to follow an imported theoretical (white, middle-class) model which is relatively complacent when it comes to issues of race and class. Feminism in the United States has been more successful, if only because of the greater size of the middle-class population; but the era of political engagement, when theoretical books actually provoked a significant percentage of the population toward 'conscientization' (Freire's *conscientização*) or, in hooks's words, toward an ability 'to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's circumstances',⁸ seems long past. In Brazil, that historical moment has yet to come. Despite her unproblematic view of personal testimonial literature and autobiography, hooks provided my students with a very different look at feminist critique in the United States. For them, hooks's attribution of her own early *conscientização* and her understanding of the relationship of theory and praxis to the Brazilian Freire was liberatory in and of itself. Perhaps the most profound impact that hooks had on the students, however, was the realization that theory (and not only feminist theory) was *not* the property of the 'other', and that within the boundaries of Brazil was a theoretical source so powerful that it reached out and influenced a prominent scholar in the United States.

The question remains whether feminists within Brazil will look to local sources for new approaches to literature and other disciplines, or will continue what the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz once described as his country's propensity toward 'copy' or 'imitation'. The imitative tradition is certainly rich in possibilities, but it forever elides the socio-political and economic reality of areas such as the Brazilian Northeast, which, in Freire, has a model all its own. In my own view, what is needed in both Brazil and the United States is a style of pedagogy that brings literary study and feminist theory into productive conflict with the socio-economic conditions of local communities, who can then shape their own canons.

8 Bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York Routledge, 1994, 47.