



# UNPREDICTABLE AMERICAS: RESIGNIFYING AMERICANESS UNDER A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

*Just as the constellations were  
projected into the heavens, similar  
Figures were projected into legends...  
Carl Jung*

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## VISIONS OF AMERICA

The iconography allegorically representing America as a savage, nude woman is abundantly known by all of us. I go back to these images to remind you of painters such as Marten de Vos (Fig. 1 and 2), Jan van der Straet (Fig. 3) and Philippe (or Philips) Galle (Fig. 4), on one side representing Europe as a woman richly dressed, while on the other America is represented by a lack–of vests, ornaments and emblems of wisdom and power beyond the scenery where she is placed.



Fig. 1. *America*. 1551–1600. Marten de Vos (drawing) and Adriaen Collaert (engraving). Source: <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marten\\_de\\_Vos\\_Adriaen\\_Collaert\\_America.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marten_de_Vos_Adriaen_Collaert_America.jpg)>.



Fig. 2. *Europa*. 1551-1600. Marten de Vos (drawing) and Adriaen Collaert (engraving). Source: <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marten\\_de\\_Vos\\_Adriaen\\_Collaert\\_Europa.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marten_de_Vos_Adriaen_Collaert_Europa.jpg)>.



Fig.3. *America*. 1575-1580. Jan van der Straet (drawing). Source: <<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/exhibiciones/historia-natural-politica/hnp-01.html>>.



Fig. 4. *Allegory of America*, 1547-1612. Philippe Galle (engraving). Source: <<http://iberoamericasocial.com/de-monstruo-alegoria-de-america-las-amazonas>>.

While Europe inhabits a cultivated garden (grapes, flowers) and is surrounded by domesticated animals, America is surrounded by uncultivated land, wild animals and even scenes of cannibalism. Therefore, from the first representations of America, a hierarchy of cultures is established to the detriment of American culture, intimidating and characterized by a lack of vests, laws, and faith, and associated with barbaric practices such as cannibalism. Nevertheless, we have to consider that nudity was often a predominant in Renaissance painting, the period when these images were created, and nudes could be representations of innocence and eroticism inspired by a paradisiacal nature, and the unavoidable fact that many American tribes wore little or no clothing (Ziebell, 2002). It is also necessary to remember that most of the painters had never been in the New World, basing their work on travel narratives, mainly those of André Thévet, Hans Staden and Amerigo Vespucci.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, there is an ambivalent character in these visions of America, which at the same time produced fear and wonder in Europeans. In travel narratives written by its “conquerors” or through iconography, images of America are marked by exoticism, by a superficial vision of an America as yet unknown, or known only by its coastline. It would be necessary to penetrate further inland to deconstruct this initial stereotyped, superficial vision associating the Americas with primitivism, wild nature, wide spaces, anti-intellectualism and, moreover, with “l’expérience d’une privation et l’angoisse du vide,” to quote the Quebec theoretician Pierre Nepveu.<sup>2</sup>

Thereby, from the first contact a mystified representation of America inscribes itself in the social discourse and in the collective memory of several generations—after all, it was constructed from forged ideas and translated into preconceived images. In this sense, the whole history of literary ideas in the Americas is a history of reappropriation, of attempts to take the reins of a foundational narrative that will be, at the same time, a narrative of deconstruction of the ste-

1. A. Thévet (1516–1590); H. Staden (1525–1579); A. Vespucci (1454–1512).

2. “[...] the experience of deprivation and the anguish of emptiness [...]” Pierre Nepveu (1998: 7–11).

reotypes and clichés which molded the first American profile as it was revealed to the world.

#### RECENTERING AND THE FIRST TRANSCULTURAL PRACTICES

During the first five hundred years since the “discovery” of America we have been invested in deconstructing this feeling of supposed cultural dependency that makes us look far away (at Europe) in search of a *tertium comparationis*. The most successful strategy has been to search for a long memory, not in Europe any longer, but in the autochthonous cultures. The awareness of recentering points to transcultural practices initiated in the first centuries after the conquest, when the Guarani reproduce models from the European baroque with altered skin color, eye format and indigenous adornments added to sculptures that should merely replicate European models.

The sculpture speaks for itself: between 1710 and 1735, The Seven Peoples of the Missions situated at the South of South America, in territories occupied today by Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay, lived their manifest apogee through architecture, music and sculpture. The Jesuits offered the Indians models from the European baroque, slowly subverted by the autochthones who introduced elements from their own reality and created the first copies of composite and transcultural art. In this image of Saint Michael the Archangel (Fig. 5), one notices the substitution of the dragon—



Fig. 5. Mission Art, image of Saint Michael Archangel, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Source: <<http://elmissioneiro.blogspot.com.br>>.

traditional in the European model—with the image of a “bandeirante” [flag bearer], the name given to the Portuguese men who hunted Indians for slavery. Though the model comes from traditional sources, “The indigenous hand broke the aesthetic blockage imposed by imported patterns, in the saint’s face—Saint Michael presents the features of the Guarani ethnicity—and in the substitution of the dragon for his predator” (Trevيسان, n.d.).

In *Los passos perdidos* (1953), Alejo Carpentier helps us see the occurrence of the same phenomenon in a Mexican chapel on whose frontispiece there is the sculpture of an angel (a model from the European baroque) playing *maracas* (or rattle), in an obvious imbrication of sacred European art (the angel) linked to popular, profane American culture (*maracas*). Here, it is evident that the processes of the hybridization of cultures have just begun.

These examples from the visual arts make evident the phenomenon of material hybridization and the subversion of ritualized models that gave shape to the art of the New World from its onset. In this sense the theories which defended the thesis of Latin American cultural dependency were groundless. The subversion of models and the introduction of American “impurity,” present from the first moments of our cultural formation, emphasize the tendency in American art of constituting itself “in-between” (Europe and America), to use Silvia Spitta’s expression. These examples mark the beginning of what we today call “Americanness,” or the equivalent of turning our eyes to what is near us (the Americas), nourishing the imagination of our artists as an alternative source of inspiration (mostly sought on the other side of the Atlantic, in Europe).

#### CULTURAL ANTHROPOPHAGY AND CREOLIZATION

When he launched *The Cannibal Manifest* (1928) within Brazilian modernism (1922), Oswald de Andrade pointed to the need to the search for our cultural ancestry among the Tupinambá. When Édouard Glissant referred to the supremacy of “archipelago” thinking (autochthonous, *pensée d’archipel* in French) over system thinking (European rationality, *pensée de système en français*) in advocating the creolization of cultures, he was walking in the same direction, of the searching for our long memory in the heart of America itself (1990: 34). When he identifies himself with anthropophagy as a Tupinambá practice at the time

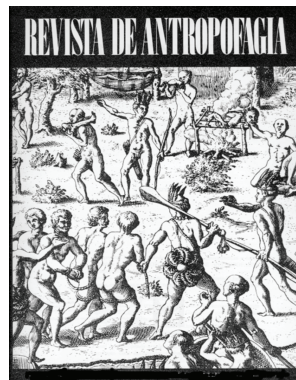


Fig. 6. *Revista de Antropofagia*, 1.1, May de 1928.

of the arrival of our “discoverers,” Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) is making a turn towards practices from before the European presence on American soil. *The Cannibal Manifesto* advocates that cultural formation in the Americas should be inspired by anthropophagic practice, which foresaw the “devouring” only of courageous enemies so that through the digestive process they could absorb their virtues. Thus, anthropophagy was not practiced in Brazil only to satisfy hunger, but as a ritual to be imitated in the sense of absorbing the cultures we admire (European, Indigenous, African) as a conscious and selective process which passes through digestion. What matters is transformed into vital energy and what does not matter is eliminated. Such a proposal from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remains surprisingly current for it implies the surpassing of a reductive and binary vision (Europe vs. America), since it is founded on a complex process of identitary interactions and negotiations. Cultural anthropophagy comprises a proposal for the construction of a Brazilian cultural identity grounded on heterogeneity, in transcultural passages among the diverse cultural heritages absorbed and in the acceptance of a necessarily hybrid character in American culture. “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question” (Andrade, 1928).

In the multiethnic and pluricultural Caribbean region, the tendency to essentialism which characterized Negritude will be substituted by Creolization, defined as “un agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et levantins, que le joug de l’Histoire a réunit sur le même sol,” “an interactional aggregate (of reciprocal influences) or transactional (reciprocal concessions) of Caribbean, European, African, Asian and Levantine sources united by the game of history on the same soil” (Bernabé et al, 1989: 26). Hence it is the fruit of a *maelstrom* of signifiers in one signified. The authors of *Éloge de la créolité*, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, distinguish Americanness, Antillanité and Creolité as concepts that could, at their limit, cover the same realities. The processes of Americanization and the feeling of Americanness resulting from them are useful to describe different stages in the negotiations and adjustments among populations from different ethnic origins to the New World.

In the wake of *Éloge de la créolité*, Édouard Glissant theorizes about diversity and relation in his *Poetics of Relation* (*Poétique de la relation*, 1990) and recommends transcultural encounters in the Caribbean under a relational perspective, underlying constant transformations operating between one culture and another. By embodying cultural plurality in the Caribbean, the author postulates cross-cultural understanding as the necessary ground of an increase in inter-and trans-American relationships. These relationships do not imply loss or imitation since they originate something new in the scope of inter-hemispheric mobilities (Benessaïeh, 2010: 235).

#### AMERICANNES AND TRANSCULTURAL MOBILITIES

Far from proposing the existence of a large, homogeneous narrative, the notion of Americanness (*Americanité* in French, *Americanidad* in Spanish, *Americanidade* in Portuguese), seeks to analyze displacements and re-semantizations of myths throughout the three Americas and points to the work of reappropriation that characterizes American cultures beyond the narrow notions of nationality. To think of Americanness today as a heterogeneous construct implies leaving aside binarisms such as civilization/barbarism; and center/periphery, which have been characteristic of most American studies until virtually the end of the twentieth century in favor of including the Diverse and the excluded third, and which did not free us from the fixation on European cultures.

During the nineteenth century, American countries were so committed to defining their national identities that they forgot their shared condition of belonging in America and stopped calling themselves Americans. Perhaps this is because the United States took the appellation “American” for itself, in a self-evaluatory metonymy designed only for “US Americans.” Speaking of Americanness nowadays is, in a certain way, the awareness of belonging to America and of proclaiming ourselves Americans, despite the heterogeneity characteristic of our continent. In *Reinventing the Americas*, Bell Galé Chavigny and Gari Laguardia assert that the “reinvention of the Americas must begin with exposure of the rhetorical incoherence we commit each time we designate the United States by the sign America, a name that belongs

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by rights to the hemisphere [...]” (Laroche, 1992: 195). When we talk about Americanness we need also to reference Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallersteins’ 1992 article “Americanity as a Concept or the Americas in the Modern World-System.” For them, Americanness or Americanity corresponds to the definition of America’s identity.

Americanness in Latin America begins with the processes of transculturation and hybridization, with the added value of unpredictability. When speaking about Latin America, Gérard Bouchard speaks of unfinished Americanness, or *Américanité inachevée* (2000: 202). We believe incompleteness is an advantage since identification processes are in a permanent state of becoming: the conclusion of the process is not exactly what matters, but the fact that exchanges, interpenetrations and de-hierarchization processes continue to happen and the idea of a shared Americanness between North and South may create conditions for the relation(ship) to which Glissant refers (1990: 23).

Maybe it is in the framework of the American mythical imaginary that we are going to find the codes to decipher and reinvent Americanness. It will be necessary, as Mignolo points out, to wait for the emergence of new *loci* of enunciation to bring to the surface that knowledge which was considered subaltern during colonization (2000: 3–45). To rediscover in orality, in popular wisdom and in border *gnosis* new ways of inhabiting the Americas and of defining our belonging to them may be a way to access Americanness as resistance and as recovery of colonial difference.

The definition of Americanness is, then, linked to the originality of our cultural experience, “through a continental history that takes us to the knowledge of our own selves,” as specified by Jean-François Côté (2008: 36).

#### RECONSTELLATING AMERICAS

In this last section, I would like to discuss the validity of the concept proposed in the framework of this meeting—that of constellations—to go beyond the concept of transnationalisms. Let us examine, then, the polysemy and the avatars of the expression. To begin with, constellation, from the Latin *constellatio*, points to a set of stars, and at first was used in astrology. In current astronomy



it points to “an area around an asterism in the celestial sphere, that is, a pattern recognized as that of stars.”<sup>3</sup>

Seen from earth the stars in a constellation seem close together but they may in fact be light years away from each other. To see formations such as the Southern Cross or The Big Dipper, we have to demarcate a constellation with frontier lines that delimit the Figure it names. Constellations may also slowly change configuration until they disappear.

The term “constellation” was used more than once as a scientific metaphor. We will mention two examples, Carl Jung and Gilbert Durand. To Jung, the collective unconscious seems to consist of mythological motives or images. Thus, mythology may be taken as a sort of collective unconscious projection. We can see it more clearly if we look at celestial constellations where original chaotic forms were organized through the projection of images. That explains the influence of stars as proposed by astrologists. These influences are nothing more than unconscious, introspective perceptions of the collective unconscious’ activity. As constellations projected in the sky, similar Figures are projected into legends and fairy tales or in historical characters. Constellation is, then, a Jungian term referring to the “activation of a psychic personal complex or an archetypal content.”<sup>4</sup>

Gilbert Durand, in *Champs de l’imaginaire*, called constellations, or “semantic basins” (*bassins sémantiques*), the images belonging to the same semantic field “identified by specific imaginary regimes and privileged myths” (Durand, 165). In light of this idea, we can understand that constellation may be used as a metaphor concerning certain syntaxes of the American collective imaginary. In that sense we would be close to Patrick Imbert’s proposal in his latest work, *Comparer le Canada et les Amériques; des racines aux réseaux transculturels* (2014). In it he talks about social networks (*réseautage*) from the perspective that culture should favor the encounter of individuals through sharing, for “it allows the exchange and management of knowledges in globalization processes of networking (*réseautage/network*)” (238).

3. Source: Wikipedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constellation>>.

4. *A Glossary of Jungian Terms* <<http://www.terrapsych.com/jungdefs.html>>.

Constellations have a bi-dimensional character, for the celestial sphere is perceived as flat, but, considering the distance of stars from each other, they can be imagined as a solid image, where each star would be a vortex and, in that sense, tridimensional. The concept of networks (as neural networks, for example) is also tridimensional and both can be used as metaphors for the tridimensional character of transliterary relations. According to computer scientist Pierre Lévy:

Networks allow us to share our memories, our competences, our imaginations, our projects, our ideas, and to make our differences, and singularities reflect on each other, become complementary, in synergy. (Lévy 1998)<sup>5</sup>

Lévy even discusses the formation of communities of knowledge (*communautés de savoir*) and wonders about the possibility of these communities to merge into a “universal conscience” (*conscience universelle*)—a “connected intelligence,” to quote Derrick De Kerckhove, who created this expression: “thought is no longer hierarchic today, but interactive.”<sup>6</sup> Most probably, neither the choice of the “constellation” metaphor, nor that of “connected intelligence” will be final solutions for scholars of literatures of the Americas. It is of interest, however, to point to the current need for reconfiguration, since nowadays “migrant and transnational” taxonomies have stopped contemplating a whole range of writings that go beyond certain conventions and boundaries.

Studies of the Americas under a comparative perspective that tries to identify points of convergence and to observe the diverse trajectories of founding myths that will constitute different constellations in their migrations through the Americas, are relatively recent and have given origin to this new terminology: Americanness, creolization, transculturation, migrancy (migrant literatures) and transnationality (transnational literatures). These

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5. “Les réseaux permettent de mettre en commun nos mémoires, nos compétences, nos imaginations, nos projets, nos idées, et de faire en sorte que toutes les différences, les singularités se relancent les unes les autres, entrent en complémentarité, en synergie” (Lévy, 1998).

6. Source: Wikipedia <[http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligence\\_collective\\_sur\\_Internet#Internet.2C\\_le\\_r.C3.A9seau\\_.C3.A9r.C3.A9bral\\_plan.C3.A9taire](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intelligence_collective_sur_Internet#Internet.2C_le_r.C3.A9seau_.C3.A9r.C3.A9bral_plan.C3.A9taire)>.

concepts emerge when we start to understand the precariousness and the insufficiency of the concept of national literatures to describe the cultural mobilities characteristic of the American continent. Spatial, temporal, migrant, transnational and nomadic mobilities of all kinds rendered useless the limiting practices usually associating literature and culture to national space.

It has been very important to think in terms of passages, transcultural movements and their reciprocal fertilizations that gave origin to new cultural products outside traditional classifications, as those based on the concept of nation. These literatures came to be called migrant (mainly in the francophone space) and transnational (mainly in the Anglophone space) and call attention to dislocations, to cultural hybridization and to the fact of having originated in contact zones.

American literatures originating from the friction between two or more cultures constitute new cultural facts that no longer belong to the cultural horizon of the country of origin or to the cultural horizon of the host country, engendering original and challenging cultural landscapes. The cultural mobilities of late modernity challenge us to take our reflections beyond transnationalisms and to propose new terminologies able to span the variables of a globalized world. Pierre Ouellet, Quebec writer and theoretician, and Kenneth White, a Scottish poet and essayist who lives between Brittany (*La Bretagne*) and Montreal, have recently published respectively *The Migrant Spirit* (*L'esprit migrant*, 2005) and *The Nomad Spirit* (*L'esprit nomade*, 1987), in which they claim for non-migrant and non-transnational writers—that is, for those who have been born and are writing inside the same territory—the condition of intellectual migrants or spiritual nomads for having the freedom to choose their intellectual ancestry and to dialogue—without leaving their offices—with cultures farther away and more diverse.

I wish to stress that if we are all migrants in this globalized and “googelized” world, the concepts of “migrant” and or “transnational literatures” rest emptied and lose their meaning. Thus, the proposal of this conference of thinking *beyond transnationalism* is timely and provocative in a meeting of Americanists. To think in terms of constellations may be enriching in the sense of moving

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away, in a more definite way, from the concept of nation, for even when we talk about transnationalism, we are still stuck to the idea of nation, although we are apparently breaking with it. To speak of constellations and or connected intelligence or knowledge communities may correspond to a more radical change, since it allows us to imagine a projection of “families” or “communities” of authors and/or works that share a common memorial stock, that is, communities of authors inside which works constitute similar forms of organizing and of ordering the American collective imaginary.

As I move to my conclusion, I would like to introduce Pierre Ouellet’s concept of “memory communities” (*communautés de mémoire*) proposed by the author in his 2012 work, *Testaments: Le témoignage et le sacré (Testimony and the Sacred)*.

The author believes that in the current context of constant cultural mobilities, more important than to speak of national, or even transnational identities, is to speak of “communities of memory.” This concept takes into account—in addition to the memory of the founding peoples—the newly-arrived cultures in a certain country, and the exchanges with them that compose a multiple memory, which he calls a “community of memory”:

It is not about a common (or collective) memory—because it belongs to several traditions with different histories, developed in different places—but about the fact that all this people [immigrants from different origins] participate in Québécois or French Canadian society now, and that makes us live in a community of memories (Ouellet, 2015: 229–240).<sup>7</sup>

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7. Interview with Pierre Ouellet by Ana M. Lisboa de Mello, Zilá Bernd and Marie Hélène Parret Passos. Revista *Letras de Hoje*, PUCRS, 50.2, abril-junho, 2015: 229–240. The Portuguese version of the quotation translated above reads: “Não se trata de uma memória comum (ou coletiva) porque ela pertence a várias tradições, com diferentes histórias, desenvolvidas em diversos lugares, mas o fato de que pessoas de diferentes origens participem agora da sociedade quebequense, faz com que vivamos em uma comunidade de memórias.” (Fr. “Ce n’est pas une mémoire commune (ou collective) parce qu’elle appartient à plusieurs traditions, plusieurs histoires différentes, plusieurs lieux où elle s’est développée, mais le fait que tous ces gens (immigrants de différentes origines), maintenant, participent de la société québécoise, ou canadienne française, fait en sorte que l’on vit dans la communauté de mémoires.”).

Today, to speak of literatures from the Americas would be to speak not of a common narrative/discourse, *d'un grand récit des Amériques*, not even about an American collective memory, in the sense of Maurice Halbwachs, but of different communities of memory (Ouellet) or communities of knowledge (Lévy) that adopt and share different memories/ in a true anthropophagic feast.

#### WRITING BEYOND NATIONAL FRONTIERS

I want to mention Dany Laferrière,<sup>8</sup> who is one of the main authors of the so-called migrant literature in Quebec, and the winner of many literary prizes, even in France. He is one of the most read francophone authors of our day, who published, in 2008, a book entitled *I Am a Japanese Writer* (*Je suis un écrivain japonais*). The novel begins with the narrator, who lives in Montreal and is a frequent reader of Mishima and Basho, telling Japanese journalists that he will write a book following the style of the Japanese masters. With his ironic and humorous style, Laferrière once more discusses the labels critics and literary historians stick to writers. He refuses to be considered a Québécois, Haitian or even migrant writer. He prefers to say he is an American writer (in the large sense of designating the three Americas) who writes in French.

In answer to the question posed by journalists about whether he considers himself a Haitian, Caribbean or francophone writer, he answers that he assumes the nationality of his reader: “[...] it depends on the nationality of my reader. That is to say that when a Japanese reads me, I immediately become a Japanese writer.” (Laferrière, 2008: 30).<sup>9</sup>

It is time to think beyond transnationalisms, to think about exchanges and sharing. It is not exactly that the Americas that are in suspension (West, 2009) or unfinished (Bouchard, 2000); it is the processes of Americanness that needs to be reinvented in terms of interactivity and complementarities, producing the synergies

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8. Born in Haiti on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1953; he is a writer and a journalist and lives in Montreal (Canada).

9. “Êtes vous un écrivain haïtien, caribéen ou francophone? Je répondis que je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un japonais me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais.” (Laferrière, 2008: 30).

of which Pierre Lévy speaks. To share knowledges and experiences in the space of the Americas corresponds to resignifying Americanness in a transversal and relational perspective. This is our challenge for the years to come.

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