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TRANSCULTURAL AMERICA

Patrick Imbert

Organizer of the 2nd IASA World Congress,
University of Ottawa, August 18-20 2005

Pico Iyer emphasizes in *The Global Soul* that we are 'on our way to somewhere else' (Iyer, 2000: 44). The Canadian writer Douglas Coupland explores the modalities of the new legitimacy of displacement through rituals pertaining to the X generation and its link to media discourses, as well as the consequences of that new legitimacy for the public sphere. This means that in a quarter century, the Canadian perspective has changed from one that demonstrated a consensus based on protecting its own identity to one that privileges an expansive dynamic promoting its multiple self-images in a transnational context. This transformation is linked to the project of globalization and to a new awareness that displacements open manifold opportunities, particularly in the context of the Americas and of the expansion of the knowledge-based society.

This new frontier leading to new contextualization, as Néstor García Canclini emphasizes (Canclini, 1999), is potentially full of win-win situations that closely intertwine social, economic and cultural dynamics. In a world of permanent transitions and of productions of significance whose combined impact does not originate in their origins but rises from their shared consequences, American Studies has become the study of the Americas from the North to the South pole. Moreover, American Studies concerns the whole planet's population, which for centuries has dreamed of this continent where many immigrants and their children have accomplished and still accomplish their goals and fulfill their worldly potential. This is clearly demonstrated by Jean-Robert Cadet, an immigrant to the USA from Had'ti, in his book entitled *Restavec: enfant esclave en Had'ti*. All this indicates that the perspectives on the Americas vary greatly depending on the geographic, social or symbolic locations of the writers and researchers who invent their own Americas.

In this context where territorialized identities have become relational self-images shared by individuals and groups from very different backgrounds, Canada, with its multicultural policies, its official French/English bilingualism and its free Medicare system, is at the forefront of helping people invent new lives in evolving cultures that are open to a democratic future. This future allows for the possibility to combine social-democratic perspectives within a liberal economy fostering cultural and economic innovations and the creation of new wealth.

Having the 2nd IASA World Congress take place in August 2005 at the University of Ottawa, one of the biggest bilingual universities in the Americas, has stimulated a reconsideration of American Studies as a transnational field constantly being reinvented by writers and researchers from across the planet. At the Conference, participants not only were allowed to communicate in the three widely spoken languages of the Americas (English, French, and Spanish); they also had access to such personalities as the President (speaking in Cree and in English) of a very successful company (Air Creebec) controlled by the Cree community. Hence, the public was able to surpass stereotypical images of problematic indigenous issues that are constantly being disseminated by superficial media discourse.

This possibility to bypass media stereotypes, as well as traditional canonical and bureaucratic-nationalistic conceptions of American Studies, is what permits us to go beyond established conflictive positions and to reevaluate the Americas in the context of contemporary economic and cultural shifts; a feat which provides the opportunity to set new parameters for what is acceptable or not acceptable in democratic, free-from-fear multicultural societies based on the desire to foster the development of individuals.

Thus, as Pico Iyer underlines: 'America's great and lasting significance is its existence in the mind' (Iyer, 2000: 229). However, this time the mind projection is not based on a Manifest Destiny linked to a single nation. It is connected to a dream of being able to cooperate with others in order to build a decent life for all through the access to democratic knowledge-based societies. These societies put together the 'know-what' (capitalization of information) and the 'know-how' (tacit knowledge) in order to have a positive impact on human and natural environments. As highlighted in 2003 by Carl Raschke in *The digital revolution and the coming of the postmodern university*, the human environment is linked to the expansion of 'digital intelligence [that] feeds on the explosion of heterogeneity' (Raschke, 2003: 83).

The challenge of cultural as well as scientific and theoretical heterogeneity involves new opportunities related to efficient multidimensional democracies, which is something already attempted in different constellations by Lincoln in the USA, Sarmiento in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Trudeau in Canada. This new semiotic dynamic is now operative in the Americas, which should result in the creation of new hyper-textual links between scientific, cultural, socio-economic, pedagogic, media, ethical and spiritual discourses. Hence the need of various and complex perspectives on the future of the whole continent.

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