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## Inventory of differences from a south-american perspective

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## INVENTORY OF DIFFERENCES FROM A SOUTH-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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When we deal with the Western hemisphere, it is imperative to bear in mind that its economic, political, and cultural history has been marked by the hegemony of the USA. Thus, it is difficult to admit the implementation of any study that, at some moment, does not take a stand in respect of the impact of this North-American State on the hemisphere. On the other side, the history of the USA also stands for values that go hand in hand with the history of social and popular struggles on both American continents. For this reason, the responses to the experience of the USA in the Americas are fraught with contradictions, and this is something we have to reckon with to get a grip on the problems involved.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that reflection about the role of the USA on the Western hemisphere is strongly marked by meanings affirmed in the USA. Thus, probably the major source of ill feeling between the USA and the other countries of the Americas is the fact that the American ideal and the American identity have been shaped in the USA. The fact that the word 'unitedstatesian' sounds strange in the English language shows how self-representation in the USA is mingled with the idea of being 'American'. But even from the Latin-American perspective, it is hard not to consider the word 'American' as an attribute of the USA. There are numerous ways of going round this ill feeling, but practically all of them are insufficient. To fall back, for instance, on negative characterizations, such as 'gringo' and 'yankee', may reinforce existing prejudices and the ideological denouncement discourse, but they are no help for a good relationship among the peoples, nor for a critical reflection. In the politically correct South-American discourse, the word 'North-American' is gaining ground to identify the USA. But this usage confuses the perception of geography, by creating other ill feelings when installing a scheme that does not contemplate Canada or Mexico. Furthermore, nowadays, the idea of the Anglophonic or the non-Hispanophonic USA

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<sup>1</sup>The reflections in this text are mainly the result of my collaboration with Sonia Torres, with whom I edit *Transit Circle*—*Revista Brasileira de Estudos Americanos/Brazilian Journal of American Studies*. I equally want to thank IASA colleagues Patrick Imbert, Djelal Kadir, and Helmbrecht Breinig, who at some point helped me to develop my thoughts. It should be clear, however, that I alone am responsible for the ideas presented in this paper.



(as well as an image of Canada homogenized by the Anglo's) has become anachronistic, which further complicates the old cultural differences that have separated the USA from Latin America.

From a hemispheric perspective this tableau established the definition of the senses of Americanness as a central problematic. Well, the idea of America is at its origin a European construction that served to conceive of the New World as a generic counterpoint space of the European Old World. The idea of America, however, was reprocessed by the founding fathers in the USA to outline the exceptionalist belief that history had favored the creation of the first democratic nation. Yet, one cannot help but notice that, once more, it was the counterpoint with the Old World monarchies that justified this 'American' ideal. This time, however, this ideal was appropriate to demarcate a precise national territory—the USA.

The problem of the historical meaning of America does not only question the definition of a US identity, but interrogates the identity of all of the peoples of the Western hemisphere and creates another level of problems for their self-image. History evidences, however, that the hemispheric integration discourse has always had to face the difficulty of confronting a continental reality of non-homogeneous identities and of diverse interests that are not complementary, which shows not only in conflicts between North and South, but also in latent subregional conflicts in several directions. Thus, the belief in Americanness is always maintained in suspense as a counterpoint to the world we live in. The general consequence is that, in light of the huge caldron of the American hemispheric differences, the criticism of the exclusiveness of US conceptualizations of the American identity often fails to consider its own complicity in the establishment of such exclusive conceptualizations.

The 'us/them' paradigm within the Inter-American context becomes highly problematic, insofar as the traditional parameters of the hemispheric boundaries reveal themselves as insufficient, particularly in the debate about the USA. The study of the concept 'America' requires an approach that must deal with the hemispheric differences—as Sonia Torres has already pointed out (2003)—and also with non-US representations of the USA.

Such representations constitute the sources for debate about the production of the senses of Americanness in diverse contexts. This program could definitely be defined as an inventory of the differences between various representations of 'America'. Nevertheless, from the comparison surely emerges a relational problematization resulting from the fact that understanding the 'other' leads to a better understanding of oneself. This relational reflection seems to distinguish the transnational approach from the search for de-contextualized universalisms, disclosing crossed histories marked by the production of meanings that have to do with specific contexts. And, lastly, there is the inescapable fact that the theme of the differences among the American societies brings up a more profound issue: the social transformation challenge. And maybe this is the kind of response that the reflection about 'America' demands more broadly on both continents.

Finally, it seems relevant not to mix up American Studies with the study of the USA. This distinction challenges the foundations of American Studies as a discipline and, at the same time, implies a double move, which endeavors on the one hand to redefine the object of study and, on the other, to advance toward new study subjects, admitting multiple views and angles. Lastly, however, it is paramount to acknowledge that the history of the disciplinary institutionalization of American Studies programs and the construction of their objects of study reflect a US-centered perspective on 'America'. To disclose other knowledge subjects means acknowledging also other reflection trajectories about the USA that characterize an enlarged field of study about 'America'.

## **WORKS CITED:**

— Torres, S. (2003) 'US Americans and "Us" Americans: South American Perspectives on Comparative Studies', *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 1 (1): 9–17.