A Challenge to Post-National American Studies: George Yúdice's The Expediency of Culture

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In the pages of ALH and other major journals dedicated to U.S. culture, calls for reorganizing the field of American literary study along post-national lines have sounded for more than ten years. The authors of these position statements have most often imagined a new critical project organized around a) a postcolonial approach to works written by US citizens, b) a comparative literature or area studies revival of attention to the writings of immigrants and other border-crossers, c) a political critique of the investment of literary works in ideologies of American nationalism, especially as they intersect with U.S. imperial projects, or d) the production of new non-national geographical categories—e.g., ecological regions or urban centers—that can serve as parameters for literary study. They have sought to import critical methods from neighboring disciplines and to expand the range of primary materials in order stimulate scholarship that redirects the critical gaze outward, rather than reinforcing the triply centripetal focus of American-based scholars explicating the works of US writers reflecting on a domestic scene.
Oddly independent of these methodological challenges, however, are the same scholars' assessments of their incorporation into the field of American studies generally. Roughly contemporaneously, some consider the post-national project as being well under way, while others see it as still in its infancy and hope for its future expansion and institutionalization, and third group attacks the premises of such a shift in the discipline and denounces the emptiness of yet another fashionable professional piety (for representative statements see Jay, Adams, and Dirlik, respectively). In this fast-moving scholarly economy, the post-national position appears to have been evacuated, at least by some, before it was populated—a situation that seems to confirm critics and allows a second wave of entrants into the field (e.g., some of Dimock and Buell's contributors) to approach the topic as if it were virgin ground. In short, as a meta-critical challenge to the discipline of American literary studies, the post-national thesis has been the victim of its own success—generating a buzz of discussion that is not yet strongly attached to a concrete program for scholarship or pedagogy. The post-national position in American literary studies threatens, for this reason, to become an approach within the discipline as already constituted, rather than transforming actually existing institutional boundaries as its strongest proponents have hoped to do.

This is not, however, to say that no scholarship with a post-national focus has been published. To the contrary, a host of specific studies of mobile authors, regional ecologies, cosmopolitan aesthetics and the like have appeared, some of which are quite excellent on their own terms, and all of which are plausibly understood as working in a non-national (if not always entirely post-national) frame of reference. Many of these works are discussed in the same review essays that articulate position statements urging
more post-national work be written; I mention just a few more of these promising projects at the end of this piece. What has not appeared, though, is a central text that combines a clear a disciplinary call to arms with an exemplary version of its execution. There is as yet no widely accepted book-length work demonstrating the merits of a post-national approach to American literary study.

What is most needed, in my view, is a clearly written, strongly polemical, brief and brilliant study that does something like what Dipesh Chakrabarty's Provincializing Europe has done for its subject. That is, a major reframing of the problem of literary study from, as it were, the "outside" would be enormously useful to those hoping to develop a strong form of post-national American studies. In what follows, I am not going to argue that George Yúdice's The Expediency of Culture fully satisfies this need, since this promising book is not primarily conceived as a contribution to American studies, understood as study of the US, but I do want to explore nonetheless some of the powerful theses and imaginative methodological forays that organize Yúdice's provocative work as they pertain to the possibility of a post-national American literary studies. It is, I will contend, by rising to the kind of challenge that Yúdice makes that American literary study might become genuinely post-national in practice, rather than merely rhetorically so.

In a lengthy and necessarily caustic chapter on the cultural effects of free trade in the Americas, Yúdice asks what is for our purposes a vital question: "how can the new American studies be postnational when so inordinately much of its epistemological framework does not easily incorporate or at least enter into dialogue, tension, and debate with other views from other societies, without at the same time imagining that they
confirm American diversity or that they are somehow related to the way ethnoracial minorities are situated in the United States?" That is, how can American studies be postnational when its efforts to become so involve the export of specifically American categories, especially on the topic of race? Yúdice's answer is that it cannot; in his view, scholarship or other forms of cultural work that extrapolate outwards from U.S. conceptions of culture will not only misconstrue other societies but will also misunderstand the character and extent of domestic cultural conflict. Yúdice urges instead "a direct engagement with the way the U.S. university systems collude in the underdevelopment of university systems elsewhere" (263). That is, in line with the case for institutional analyses that unifies his study as a whole, Yúdice here asserts that the most pressing issue for Americanists is not how to "include" representatives of other national cultures in considerations of the US but rather how to measure the effects of existing institutions of culture as they cross political boundaries with the US. For example, he argues that study of the brain drain created by American universities and the conversion of popular culture (in the Latin American sense of people's culture) into intellectual property and social capital should take priority over hermeneutic approaches focused on the "meaning" of culture in celebrated works such as those created by middle-class artists claiming to speak for dispossessed migrant workers at the US/Mexican border. It is to the concrete circuits of exchange, resource extraction, and institutional consolidation that cultural critics should attend rather than to individual works that claim to represent these processes, Yúdice asserts.

Because this observation on the limitations of postnational American studies as it is often imagined from within a US frame is a small piece of Yúdice's densely layered
consideration of US and Latin American (especially Mexican and Brazilian) cultural activism, its implications could be easily missed. The point, however, is a profound one, and it derives from the central argument of Yúdice's book. The Expediency of Culture is, as the title aptly indicates, primarily devoted to asserting that a new Foucauldian episteme has arrived, one characterized by the predominance of arguments that assume the expedient character of culture—i.e., that value culture to the extent that it "does" something, whether advancing the interests of poorest inhabitants of the favelas or furthering the project of NAFTA-style deregulation of state industries. Analyzing a wide range of arguments about culture—from UNESCO documents to the catalogue texts of curators and musicians' co-ops—, Yúdice demonstrates that arguments on the basis of expediency make possible new sorts of cultural activism, because they unite the agendas of parties that may have quite opposed views of the content of culture. For example, self-proclaimed radical border artists and the less adventurous Bank of Mexico can participate in the same project while making quite different assessments of its significance because both share the view that something that does not inhere in the work is being accomplished. The results of such expedient alliances are often, in Yúdice's non-dogmatic version of Foucauldian pragmatism, interestingly unpredictable.

Yúdice distinguishes these versions of expediency from what he sees as Adorno's analysis of the instrumentalization of culture by means of the commodity form, and for related reasons he advances institutional analysis, rather than Adorno's immanent analyses of the politics of form, as the most pertinent form of political reason for the present. That is, Yúdice both asserts and demonstrates the utility of attending to the nested and overlapping institutions within which any particular artwork appears, rather
than focusing primarily on the interpretation of content and generalizing from an implicitly American framework to the significance of a particular work originating elsewhere. It is crucial to the originality of Yúdice's argument that this attention to institutions does not rest with their self-descriptions but incorporates vernacular skepticism about them as well. For example, he makes a strong case for attending to the varying role of the law in the societies of the Americas, since, as he astutely observes, the US multicultural agenda relies on a faith in impartial judicial review that is often not operative in Latin American contexts where the law is widely understood as a system of favor and patronage. To attend to the effects of institutions, then, means taking seriously the variable character of institutions in different locations. For this reason, the law is no more a constant throughout the Americas than race might be, for Yúdice. His version of a Foucauldian institutional analysis would have us rely on a range of texts and expressions by different kinds of local informants to build up thick descriptions of the circulation and therefore the effects of cultural work.

Yúdice's own descriptive work involves as a central example a balanced assessment of what he calls the transbarrio aesthetic of Rio funk, a musical style borrowing from African-American and Latino sounds and strongly associated with urban class and racial conflict in the Brazilian context. Yúdice textures his account of the cultural politics of funk with portraits of the Rio club scene and city politics, analysis of the dynamics of cooptation in the Brazilian music industry, and readings of the role played by international NGOs that have taken up funk collectives as their pet projects. This imaginative case study, along with an equally fruitful account of curatorial practice and the construction of questionable concepts of community in border arts exhibits,
amply illustrates the kind of work Yúdice has in mind when he articulates his two axioms: "there is no outside of institutionality" and "labor stands at the heart of culture" (317, 330). For Yúdice, in these case studies and in the accompanying theoretical provocations, the labor of reproducing institutions has become the work of culture, whether the institutions are "alternative" in the American sense or have some other mission. Thus, the project of recognizing that labor and making it legible, especially when it operates across national borders or flows through regional circuits, grounds his critical project.

A number of consequences significant for Americanists follow from these axioms, as well as from the methodological example Yúdice offers. In addition to the delicate task he has undertaken in this book—detailing what he describes as the national specificity of American versions of multiculturalism and detaching his critique from affirmation of other equally ideological versions of U.S. race thinking—is the broader challenge of treating the cultural work of other nations as serious sites of investigation. Yúdice's study models a very unusual degree of engagement with the scholars working in the nations he describes; rather than assuming, as far too many Americanists do, that no autochthonous interpretations of works of so-called world literature exist (and thus assigning to themselves the task of creating a critical framework for such works from scratch), Yúdice's institutional focus extends the project of "worlding" from the collection of primary sources out to consideration of the intellectual, political, and institutional context for such works—usually in their original language.

In this respect, Yúdice's project harmonizes with some of the other initiatives that have characterized the post-national turn—especially Sollors' emphasis on
multilingualism and the charge made by Dirlik and Schueller, among others, to deepen analysis of the role of economy and inequity in so-called American relations to the rest of the world. This materialist tendency stresses engagement with the cultural work and effects of globalization rather than cataloguing of representations of global or transnational culture. Instead of recreating an intellectual history of cultural conflict or neo-imperialism as such topics appear within completed literary texts, the materialist position generated by Yúdice stresses the production of the artistic world by emerging systems whose shape has yet to be documented. It is a project that takes seriously the active and innovative creative potential of culture without presuming the finished character of the text; it keeps the partial and in-process character of the text in view and undertakes the demanding task of producing new narratives from social phenomena. The materialist position exemplified by Yúdice, in short, provides criticism with the important task of actively creating new knowledge rather than reflecting on or archiving knowledge on the verge of being lost as a Benjaminian antiquarian might do; in an affirmative version of expediency, it uses the "free labor" of cultural work to contribute to social struggle, rather than supposedly neutrally meditating upon it.

Although the characteristics of an Americanist scholarship that fully takes up the challenges offered by Yúdice's project are yet to be discovered, we can, I think, predict a few of the elements that might typify such work, if or when it is produced. First, such work will take seriously the metacritical impulse that launched the post-national thesis in the first place and thus start from a clear perception of the limitations of a strictly national vision. Second, focusing on the production of culture, rather than its reception, it will not necessarily be limited to strictly verbal texts as this category is normally understood in
the humanities. Third, investigating the layers of institutions through which cultural work circulates, a new materialist and postnational literary studies of the Americas may verge on the sociology of literature, but to the empiricist habits that can characterize that approach, it will add a critical edge and an attention to interpretive nuance. Fourth and finally, a materialist version of post-national American literary study will not deduce its readings of cultural work from context any more than it will presume the supposedly subversive or transgressive character of a particular practice based on the creator's own rhetoric of opposition; instead, the direction of such work will be to establish the pattern of shifts and recalibrations that occur in concrete and varying circumstances.

This materialist program is challenging but not impossible—as very recent studies in this direction suggest. For example, we might understand Inderpal Grewal's Transnational America or, differently, Brian Edwards Morocco Bound as affiliates of the Yúdice position. Recreating the commercial circuits that have produced sari-wearing Barbies or the multigenerational expatriate community of North Africa, respectively, Grewal and Edwards recode, as Yúdice urges, domestic US narratives about the effects of engaging with specific and concretely known sites abroad. Both work within a frame of critical self-reflection about their received categories, and they generate an archive rather than presuming it. This is very labor-intensive scholarship, but the rewards are potentially high. Taken together, as pieces of a materialist post-nationalism, Edwards, Grewal's and Yúdice's moves to the east, west, and south of the continental US arguably have the salutary effect of provincializing Anglo-America at the same time that they intensify the actuality of other locations for the rather large number of readers, says Yúdice, who begin with a primarily mythic sense of the world exterior to "America."
Such projects, however, only have a significant effect if they are themselves incorporated into the institutions of literary study. It is for this reason that, having been largely persuaded by Yúdice's ambitious book, that I have elected to write about it here and recommend it to others as an as-yet-underappreciated polemic for a new form of activist knowledge production. I offer it here as a strong example of the kind of scholarship with which Americanists should be engaging if we are to take seriously the project of documenting the character and effects of U.S. culture in a global scene. It may not be a neglected work itself so much as a challenge to move past the multicultural ethics of neglect, care and inclusion that, on Yúdice's account, themselves work to foreclose engaged scholarly comprehension of the world beyond the US borders.
Bibliography

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