



## BUILDING A COUNTERARCHIVE

A Response to Cristina Iuli's

“Trans-Atlantic American Studies  
and the Transatlantic Pedagogies:

Some Methodological Perspectives and Questions”

Cristina Iuli's paper “Figuring Atlantic Legacies” is a well-documented, comprehensive analysis of the theoretical, philosophical and critical debate that has steadily been growing around the subject of Transatlantic Studies in the past twenty years or so. In her systematic reconstruction of the various articulations that such a comprehensive field of research has so far experienced, the author has not merely limited herself to account for its major transformations and to explore their specific impact upon the international scholarly scene, but in so doing, she has also traced her own personal route by singling out, among the large variety of critical views currently available, a number of inspiring references to guide her safely in her own Transatlantic crossing. This has resulted in a spirited intertextual dialogue with some of the best known, seminal works that have helped opening entirely new perspectives to students of the Atlantic world—a rich exchange of critical hypotheses and opinions that are here combined in a particularly lively—and certainly very useful—fashion. From the innovative outlook of Black and Neo-Atlanticism, to Roach's and Baucom's Circum-Atlantic perspective and on to the global view of Trans-Atlantic studies, all of the most relevant stages of the decolonization process that has inspired the evolution of transnational American studies are followed closely in their numerous and subsequent variations.

As the author makes clear since the opening paragraphs of her essay, the emergence of an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective, and the disposal of both the “colonial difference,”

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and its powerful, Western-centered rhetorical constructs, cannot be fully evaluated without taking into account the construction and management of a neo-Atlantic archive. This latter point becomes indeed the pivotal question underlying Luli's analysis, as she draws from a variety of sources as different as Paul Gilroy's early intimation of the necessity to redefine, both spatially and temporally, the limited outlook of an Atlantic archive entirely based on the US experience, and Franco Moretti's recent re-definition of the term in the light of the new possibilities opened up by digital technology, particularly in terms of the unprecedented flow and variety of published literature now made available. Crucial, in this respect, is the discussion she dedicates to the notion itself of a Trans-Atlantic archive, and to the inevitable consequences connected to the technical management, and the political control of such a colossal, volatile mass of information. A particularly compelling question among the various, delicate issues raised by the potential use of that new plenitude of documents, quite obviously concerns the discretionary use, not to speak of the possible manipulation, of the materials *collected*—but *dispersed* could be another way to put it, depending on how we look at it—within the archive itself. Nor does that question invest merely the technical details of the matter, for, as the author repeatedly emphasizes through a variety of references, the core of the entire debate is essentially of a philosophical nature.

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In a way, it is as if the old question that over twenty years ago Jacques Derrida brilliantly addressed in his crucial essay, "Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression," which Cristina Luli appropriately recalls, were still very much at stake today. The riddle confronting contemporary researchers, in fact, appears to be somehow similar to that raised by the French philosopher—that is, how to envision and manage an entity that, like the archive, is originally intended as a closed, orderly, system, while it appears evident that its very renewal, and ultimately its survival, depend upon its being open to external, largely disorderly influences. According to the author of the essay, a possible answer to bridge the gaps created by the many oppositions deriving from that fundamental paradox (i.e.: order vs. disorder / collection vs. dispersion / recollection vs. forgetfulness), lays in the construction of a counterarchive

intended to challenge the silence provoked by white Western amnesia and reticence. Indeed, the central part of Luli's essay is centered around the various possibilities envisaged by contemporary Trans/Atlantic critics and thinkers to eliminate those "gaps in the archive," or, as it were, to transform those silent, missing segments into narrations or representations of the past, aimed at erasing the last vestiges of "colonial difference." The author's major references for this crucial step in the process of building up a counterarchive made of textual and performative material are mostly thinkers of French extraction—among them Édouard Glissant, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur—each of whom supplies his won piece of wisdom—Glissant by advocating the need to address two matrixes of modernity such as the slaveship and the plantation; Derrida by calling attention upon the ambivalence of the archive as a device of memory but also of silence; and Ricoeur by drawing a subtle distinction between the notion of witnessing (or the substantial *freedom* of a deposition) and the archive (or the repository of written, archival documents).

Taking the lead from the different theories developed by a number of scholars actively engaged in the decolonial debate (Broeck and Rice, but also Baucom, Lifshy, Taylor), Luli sums up her own conviction that thanks to the vital inclusion into the archive of documents that are the product of the literary imagination and of the performative tradition, the gaps of silence still existing in Western historiography can be finally turned into new narrations, essential to the affirmation and strengthening of a circum-Atlantic perspective. Finally acquiring a long denied visibility, the impact of this wealth of counter-memories (whether historical explanations, performative statements, or imaginative narrations) will directly serve the purpose to make tangible the violent process of erasure they have undergone at the hands of the old Atlantic historical tradition, while at the same time making explicit the ultimate significance of the circum-Atlantic philosophy. In this light, the final part of Luli's paper is dedicated to a series of "literary counter-memories" that deconstruct, and delegitimize some of the fundamental narratives and paradigmatic writing models upon which the North Atlantic modernity has thrived. Borrowing from Lifshy's definition of "spectral," and from M. R. Trouillot's

notion of a “geography of the imagination,” Columbus’/Las Casas’ diaries of the conquest, John Smith’s *General History*, and more recent literary works by Whitman, London and Faulkner, all punctuated by scenes with “inaugural scenarios,” are discussed as products of a logic inherent to the Modern tradition of colonial violence. In this respect, it would have been very interesting to read also some comments concerning *Benito Cereno*, since, particularly through Babo’s silence and the narrator’s comments on the manipulation of the trial’s documents, Melville seems to proceed to a dramatic *mise en scène* of that very process of erasure of possible counter-memories perpetrated by the Atlantic colonial tradition.

Finally, the many questions that luli’s raises in her conclusion concerning the possible methodologies for a future, comprehensive literary history of the Atlantic, lead her to envision what she calls “a poetics of the archive” in which the production of a new counter-memorial knowledge is finally capable to annul once and for all the authority of the Western Atlantic traditional narrative. In her opinion—a view that can largely be shared—literature seems to be the best “technology” to affect that task, thanks to its high potentialities to displace inherited cultural hierarchies, and substitute them with new counter-memories that are deeply aware of their intrinsic impermanence—a suggestive conclusion for a highly engaging paper.