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Cultural Studies Questionnaire

[William Rowe](#)

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The people I find myself going back to are Eric Mottram (*Blood on the Nash Ambassador* and many other essays), Marshall McLuhan (*The Mechanical Bride*), Robert Duncan (*The HD Book*), and ways of working I particularly admire include those of Josefina Ludmer, Yolanda Salas, Julio Ortega, Alberto Flores Galindo, Jesús Martín-Barbero. One of the things that brought me to cultural studies is the necessity of finding out where one is, that that involves investigating a large field of information. The sensation of entering a big process of discovery - I think I first got the sense of that reading *Eliot's The Waste Land* at school. It wasn't on the syllabus and I don't remember how I heard about it. Pound I first heard of reading the *Sunday Times* - in around 1960: you won't find major modern poets there now! At school I read Thompson's *Aeschylus and Athens* and was fascinated by how one could discover a deep relationship between the form of literature (e.g. how many actors there were on the stage in Greek tragedy) and major changes in the society. Over time, Pound's sense of learning how to navigate different cultures (he used the word *periplum*) became important to me.

Teaching in Peru for two years in the 1960s was crucial: to understand that environment meant getting hold of new types of explanation (Marxism and also the work of younger Peruvian poets, such as Pablo Guevara and Antonio Cisneros, who I started to translate). At that time I also began to find out about anthropology - later I studied Andean song, and did some fieldwork. Anthropologists in Peru, like Alejandro Ortiz and Juan Ossio, introduced me to new ways of understanding the culture.

Back in the UK, I did a PhD on José María Arguedas, with Jean Franco as my supervisor, so the challenge was always to read literature alongside social and political urgencies! Some classes she gave on César Vallejo affected me a lot: we were discussing those prison poems in *Trilce* and how they are a type of modern - condensed and fragmented - epic.

I have always felt the necessity to work out the relation between forms and history. At first I found it very difficult and did a lot of short-circuiting - collapsing differences (which Pound calls making 'a series of indefinite middles') so as to produce sentences, because it's in the writing that the problem became tangible. I have found Angel Rama, Roberto Schwarz, Julio Ortega very useful for this, all of them in different ways, of course. But I would also say it's the works of literature that often help one most to begin to move through a large and complex

field: I am thinking here of say *La casa verde* or *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo*. I am giving a paper in Bogota in two months time, at the Conference on Cultural Studies in Latin America organized by Carlos Rincón, on the place of the literary work and the problem of intellectual disciplines in cultural studies, because that's one of the issues that most preoccupies me: not a *sociology* of literature or culture or a subordination of literature to some type of 'theory' or ideology, but literature as an action of discovery alongside other actions - and how to talk about that, i.e. how to get together the tools one needs, and the language. Eric Mottram's work, still very little known, is seminal in that sense. Raymond Williams is the name everyone thinks of, and *Culture and Society* is undoubtedly a key book. But I would say that William Empson and Marshall McLuhan, both of whom were in Cambridge, convey more of the excitement of an open field of investigation - which includes the discovery of how forms resonate across space and time - or, if you like, compose timespaces, as in Gertrude Stein's essay, 'Composition as Explanation'. 'A sentence is a space-time structure', as Mottram used to insist. And that, of course, includes the sentences of the investigator of cultures.

I am working on three things at the moment: a book on Latin American poetry since the 1950s, which looks at how poets explore changes in the language and at what has changed in the type of reading required by recent poets. A study of the 1930s in Peru, which is a type of cultural history centred on language through the whole social/cultural/political field, but which takes the work of certain poets (Vallejo, Westphalen) as a useful hermeneutic. And a book on non-hermeneutic reading, which is an experiment in non-academic reading, centred various recent Latin American and American poets (Creeley, O'Hara, Gola, Zurita, etc). The idea is to see what happens if you give up having any institutional handle on the poems - if that makes sense - not, in the actual act of reading, reaching out for interpretative powers granted by academy or marketing, but trusting what the poems are able to do. I guess that's not cultural studies, but part of it will be the question what happens to reading now, at the edge of the future, when electronic media have expanded vastly the possibilities of cutting and recombining - what happens to imagination *then*? To study the arts without taking imagination seriously is useless to my mind. But most people shudder or reach for marketing securities when they hear the word. In academic circles, imagination is felt as problematic - if you detach it from the Romantic, 19c idea of creative imagination then it just means coming up with new ideas and we're back in marketing. Or what is actually submission to the market and the erotic thrill of that. So one of my preoccupations is what are the resources for a study of the cultural field which includes imagination? The names I would mention in that connection are the Peruvian poet and visual artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson, the Chilean poets Diego Maquieira and Raúl Zurita, the Argentinian poet Néstor Perlongher, or the British poet Gilbert Adair, author of *Jazz Rim*, who uses the work of Neruda and Zurita in order to investigate the relationships between language and an environment formed by the electronic media. And, saying that, the work of William Burroughs would need mentioning, e.g. the extraordinary essay *Electronic Revolution*.

Adair's work exposes how any act of writing rests upon continuities which lie outside the frame at hand (the frame that makes it readable, which of course includes the fact of the book) and explores what happens if you start to make that outside visible and audible.

What's outside the enclosure, to investigate that, seems a good definition of cultural studies. Certainly, that is what Raymond Williams was doing: I get the sense that what he was concerned with has been distorted a bit by over-emphasising the business of wresting literature away from a particular class-based elite. Yes, that was necessary and exciting, but it's very restrictive if you start subordinating your relationship with literature or any art form to pre-given narratives about the society. You're getting into another enclosure in that case. Williams is also, among another things, about finding ways to enter the cultural field that won't reduce it to any one discipline or practice.

One of the problems in that connection is that you have people moving from literature into cultural studies by starting to research or teach say film or popular culture, so that cultural studies gets defined by the object of study (it could be football, popular music, etc.). The same thing happens with the study of popular culture, where there is still this idea that the popular is defined by particular objects or practices and not by a set of relationships which cannot be totalized. This kind of thing is not, to my mind, cultural studies, which is something that became possible in the twentieth century because of new ways of assembling large fields of information: I'm thinking of, say, the idea of field in physics, or of field work in ethnography, or the use of collage in painting and writing or of montage in cinema, or the idea in chaos theory that a culture might be a complex adaptive system; and also of the fact of the compacting of times and places through technologies of travel and communication. These are changes that include the effect of technologies upon the range and quality of perception available, something which Néstor García Canclini explores very interestingly. In all this there's the question of methods, and the issue of disciplines has to be thought out carefully. It's no use adding a bit of one to a bit of another and so on. I get the sense that what's now called cultural studies is no longer radical. As Jesús Martín-Barbero says in a recent interview, cultural studies is something people had been doing in Latin America long before that label appeared. It's vital to avoid facile labelling and to actually examine the intellectual traditions one has inherited. I prefer to call what I am doing poetics or cultural history. That seems more accurate.

On the relationship between cultural studies and politics, I entirely agree with Josefina Ludmer's handling of this issue (see *Travesía* Vol. ***No. ***). Her conclusion is very important: we have to repoliticise culture. From where, though? That is a particular difficulty. The bureaucratization of the university, its submission to the market, the institutionalization of intellectuals, all of this makes a new situation. Two particular projects I am involved in come out of a concern for alternatives. The first is Sur, Casa de Estudios del Socialismo, in Lima, a

project founded by Alberto Flores Galindo and others, which works alongside universities and other institutions, and seeks through seminars and publications to keep open the radical investigation of the whole culture and also to offer the resources for doing that: conversation, friendship, a library. The other is to set up an internet link between various European universities and Andean universities in Peru (Arequipa and Cusco in the first place) in order to overcome the obstacle of lack of resources (books, bibliographies, e.g.) and to develop new ways of learning.

I would say that culture has become a very difficult word. Earlier it was possible to use it to denote an expanding field and the challenge of making that multiplicity occur in writing or other investigative actions such as film. One of the difficulties now is that the word culture has come to be a synonym of control systems - and by that I don't mean that it has been 'vulgarized' or somehow misused but that some of the shifts in its use come from changes in the late twentieth century: the move from disciplinary societies to societies of control (in Burroughs's sense of the word), so that to talk about studying culture is no longer a way of urging oneself and others to move outside enclosure. Control no longer requires enclosure but, in Deleuze's phrase, continuous modulation. How does one respond to that? As far as I am concerned, it still has to be worked out. For example, the Orwellian hypothesis seems only partly valid. The development of technologies for massive information processing, the maths for which came out of the Second World War and the new logistical necessities that arose, is clearly crucial, but the question that matters is what is it in the possibilities offered by the technology that the society (which includes the language) meshes in with? There's no automatic impact of technology. Nelson Manrique has recently written an interesting book on the possibilities of information technology from a Peruvian perspective.

It would be pointless merely to try to come up with substitutive vocabularies. The point is how to find out where one is, not to get into reproducing control effects (which popular culture or cultural studies can be) but to work from the emergent, whatever one is studying.