Macalester International

Volume 5 *Landscape, Culture, and Globalization: Views from Brazil*

Article 15

Fall 12-31-1997

Brazil Between Mirrors

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BRAZIL BETWEEN MIRRORS

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I. Traveler Poet

It is not in vain that Roger Bastide, a French sociologist quoted by Brazilian scholars Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy and Francisco Foot Hardman, utilizes the concept of a "traveler poet" when encountered with that extraordinarily vast and hybrid nation named Brazil. Although Bastide directed his remarks mainly to sociologists, his concept could also be applied to any field and anyone who encounters Brazil for the first time. Bastide stated: "The sociologist who wants to understand Brazil not rarely needs to become a poet."[1] Along these lines, Professors Gitahy and Hardman suggest that becoming a "traveler poet" may be a requirement to better comprehend Brazil today.

> In order to gain a comprehensive, accurate, and up-to-date understanding of Brazil today, the travelers need to become poets. For it is only with a poet's eyes that we are able to reconcile such drastically different situations and experiences, from the lyric to the epic, from the tragicomic to the dramatic.[2]

In reflecting upon my encounter with Brazil, I find myself agreeing with these scholars' opinions and perceptions. In fact, I even wrote a poem in which I expressed what my eyes have seen and my senses have felt.

Inspired by the enchanting Brazilian landscape and its people, the poem, reproduced below, was written during a bus trip between São Paolo and Rio de Janeiro. I must emphasize that this is a very personal reflection and encounter with Brazil. Be

kind. Open your mind for a moment; share with me a view from Brazil.

Brasil	Brazil[3]
Tierra vasta, interminable; *espacio sensual,* *margen al sol,* *serpiente geniosa;* *ondulas tus caderas* *sabias de mar, montaña y llano.*	Vast expanse; Sensual space, Edge of the Sun, Genial serpent; Rolling hips wisdom of the sea, mountain, plain.
Verde-amarillo[4]	Yellow-green
Báñame con tu luz *Dame tu fuerza* *Ahógame en tu aliento* *de* guayaba, abacaxi y laranja.[5]	Spill your light on me Give your strength to me Drown me in your breath *guayaba, abacaxi, laranja*.
Verde-amarillo	Yellow-green
Cántame tu saudade[6] *antigua y nueva.*	Sing me *saudade* young and old.
Abriga al transeúnte, *consuela al inmigrante.* *Libérale al perenne esclavo* *de tu belleza.*	Cloak of travelers, solace to the immigrant. Free the perennial slave from your beauty.
Dame tus labios. *Sonríe.*	Kiss me. Hold me. Smile.
Verde-amarillo	Yellow-green

The poem was originally written in Spanish. My knowledge of Portuguese is insufficient and, I must confess, in no way could I feel complete confidence in writing in the illustrious language of Camões.

Why begin this essay with a poem? The principal themes expressed by the title of the faculty seminar shape the essence of my poem. The geographic vastness, the multiethnic and cultural diversity, the sensual flora and overwhelming fauna, the economic diversity, the modern consume-and-demand urban setting contrasting with the old colonial lifestyle, and the social and historical contradictions of Brazil are only the tip of the iceberg

to be discovered and experienced. The Brazil I viewed is like a vortex that pulls down and devours the observer's curiosity. It makes the observer react. My initial reaction was poetic.

Parallel to the "traveler poet" emerges the academic dimension of my experience, which also was extremely rewarding. For ten years, I have been teaching Latin American literature, or most precisely, Spanish American literature. Although I studied Luso-Brazilian literature in my formal training, I have never formally included the study of Brazilian literature in my research or course development. My participation in the faculty seminar in Brazil and the experience from this visit presented ample opportunities for me to expand my knowledge and understanding of this complex region of South America. In the following paragraphs, I would like to give you another image of a traveler: the "traveler-researcher."

II. Traveler-Researcher

For some time, I have been studying the destruction and construction of subject in Latin American narrative fiction, dealing with characters who represent marginalized groups: women living in poverty, homosexuals, Indians and Afro-Latin Americans living in urban settings, etc. Along these lines, my initial project for the seminar in Brazil allowed me to become acquainted with the most recent Brazilian narrative production that experiments with the disintegration of subject and text, which some literary critics perceive as a symptomatic characteristic of postmodernist aesthetics.[7]

Authors such as Edilberto Coutinho, Rubem Fonseca, Silviano Santiago, Zulmira Ribeiro Tavares, Roberto Drummond, and Silvia Escorel represent a generation of novelists concerned with closely examining the social conditions and personal struggles that modern-day Brazilians face in their daily life.[8] I even dare to say that the decade of the 1980s becomes a literary historical reference to study present-day Brazil for the overwhelming narrative production. Coutinho's *Maracana, Adeus* (1980), Sebastian Nunes's *Somos Todos Assassinos* (1980), Drummond's *Sangue de Coca-Cola* (1981), Escorel's *Um Teléfone é Muito Pouco* (1983), Ribeiro Tavares's *O Nome do Obispo* (1985), and Fonseca's *Bufo and Spallanzani* (1985),[9] among others, examine the images

and contradictions of the Brazilian peoples, culture, and history. These mainstream novelists and their works have become for the Brazilians "mirrors" in which they see themselves reflected. This diverse body of works seems to present an image of a "Brazil between mirrors," a Brazil in search of identity. Each author provides a partial or fragmented image of Brazil, and each attempts to explain the complexities of a multiracial, multicultural, multieconomic, very diverse society.

As a traveler-researcher, one must become promptly observant and react quickly to the circumstances. Also, one is constantly challenged by the restrictions of time. On my arrival to the University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and during my initial conversations with scholars such as Professor Hardman, who kindly introduced my colleagues and me to other members of the Department of Literatures and Languages at UNICAMP, I was informed that I neglected a great number of women writers, who belong to the group of novelists that I was interested in learning about. For the last two decades, women writers such as Helena Parente Cunha, Hilda Hilst, Lya Luft, and Nélida Piñon, among others, have been publishing original works that deal with the destruction or fragmentation of the subject as a means of examining social and cultural conditions of today's Brazilian women. One author, above all, became important and of special interest to my research: Helena Parente Cunha and her novel *Mulher no Espelho* (1983), which has been translated into English as *Woman Between Mirrors* (1989).[10] The title of her novel represents to me a metaphor that summarized my entire perception of what I understand to be present-day Brazil. Although the novel deals specifically with the personal struggle of an upper-class Bahian woman who confronts her cultural and social status quo, it also questions "the enduring patriarchal order, and the deep residual forms of a slavery-based society."[11] I took this opportunity to plunge into an exciting intellectual journey for the last two weeks of our seminar.

I was not able to meet personally with Helena Parente Cunha in Rio de Janeiro, where she teaches at the Federal University; however, throughout the rest of my travels from Rio de Janeiro to Salvador, Professor Parente Cunha and her generation of women writers became the focus of my investigation. What fol-

lows outlines my findings and summarizes my experience as a traveler-researcher.

III. Women between Mirrors: An Image of Brazil in Search of Identity?

If Campinas was a point of departure for my topic of research, Rio de Janeiro offered the needed resources to complete the experience of a traveler-researcher. In the second week of the seminar, a colleague and I were able to meet another group of three Brazilian scholars whose fields of study range from Spanish American literature to Afro-Brazilian literary studies. Professor Bella Josef, founder and coordinator of the Permanent Seminar of Hispanic American Literary Studies and professor at the College of Letters of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; Professor Mariluci Guberman, professor of Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; and Professor Carmen Lucia Tindó Secco, professor of Afro-Brazilian Literary Studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro kindly shared with us bibliographical references, published materials, and their own personal assessment on the seminar topics of research. Their generous gesture could only add more incentive to our quest for learning. A collection of articles, titled *Femenino Singular*,[12] a gift from Professor Josef, served as an invaluable resource for understanding the background I needed to place the works of Helena Parente Cunha chronologically and generationally. This book and other materials provided me with the notion that there exists at present a strong and steady feminine/feminist literary movement within the Brazilian letters. In fact, Professor Josef indicated that it is not a mere coincidence that the new president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters is the internationally and well-known woman scholar and novelist Nélida Piñon (1937–).[13] Women writers, in spite of opposition to their intellectual development, have made an indelible mark on a once male-dominated field. Professor Tindó Secco asserted that women writers such as Hilda Hilst and Parente Cunha provide through their writings a more daring treatment of taboo topics, such as female sexuality and racism against Afro-Brazilians and indigenous communities of the tropical forest. She also indicated to me that women novelists and poets offered a more

critical approach to the moral illnesses that plague Brazilian society (political corruption, violence, economic disparities, poverty, etc.); these writers shattered the mirrors used by the complacent patriarchal system, which is content with maintaining an illusory image of Brazil and Brazilians.

Taking the comments of Professor Tindó Secco one step further, one can say that Parente Cunha's novel *Woman Between Mirrors* is a metaphor for Brazil and its complexities. The novel describes the process of a search for identity that troubles a Brazilian woman, in particular, and all Brazilians, in general.

The novel deals with a nameless heroine, "I," who is the product of an upper-middle-class upbringing. The product of a Bahian patriarchal order, the nameless heroine shatters the images of the submissive daughter of an all-powerful father, the lenient mother, the complacent sister who defends the irresponsible actions of her brother, and the naive virgin. In reflecting on her ambiguous success as a mother and wife, the forty-five-year-old heroine confronts her solitude, and she is forced to rework the terms of her life. The heroine is determined to see herself in her entirety and she stands between facing mirrors. Throughout the novel, the nameless heroine reflects upon her situation, considering the multiple images that serve her as other versions of herself. Together with the multiple visual images she creates of herself, she attains an alter ego, or counterpart, who competes with her for authorship of a novel (the personal history of the heroine) that is in the process of creation. Thus, the counterpart, called "the woman who writes me," is a novelist who is determined to write the heroine as a figure of female oppression.[14] But perhaps the most relevant part of the novel for my purposes is the intellectual preoccupation that Parente Cunha transmits to her heroine with the recognition and interpretation of Brazil's debt to Africa. There are specific references and characters that point out this matter. The heroine is from Bahia. The state of Bahia and the city of Salvador formed the center of the Portuguese empire's slave trade. Bahia still maintains a strong flavor of Afro-Brazilian folkways. The *Candomblé* religion cult of Yoruba origin helps the heroine to recognize that she is not all "White" after all. It helps her to recognize that her physical traits and her habits of mind represent the Brazilian process of healing. The Afro-Brazilian myths are continuously bombarding the

heroine. The African presence in the culture of modern-day Brazil is a conspicuous historical reality that cannot be ignored. It is the other mirror where a partial reflection of the heroine's identity, or of any Brazilian's identity, becomes complete. Responding to her own doubts regarding her own identity as a woman (and a Brazilian), the heroine responds to herself:

> Primitive rhythm slips off my ancient bonds, releases me from earlier prisons. Little by little, I've been untying a knot, loosening a noose, unmeshing a net, finally there's nothing to tie me down. My limitless liberated body rushes out in unimaginable rivers, hurtles over barriers I'd never known were there. Where is my place? . . . [A]t my father's house, it was nasty to talk about, nasty to think about *candomblé*, something a white person should steer clear of. But Daddy, I'm not all that white, I'm dark. Hush up, girl.[15]

The end of the novel is the most significant moment in the life of the heroine and, by extension, of the Brazilian solution to the fragmentation of her identity. Finally, she accepts the truth of her own reality. The multiple mirrors (contradictions, prejudices, guilts, etc.) are shattered into a million pieces to give way to the construction of the new heroine's identity:

> The mirrors multiply our images ad infinitum. But our guilt brings us together. . . . My face in the mirror is her face. I'm her. She's me. We are one. . . . The intersection of me-with-her turned into me-with-me. We are one. Me and *me*. Me. ME. Dead center. . . . The storm. The open mirrors. The open window. Suddenly a lightning bolt streaks across the dark sky. The mirrors shatter into a thousand pieces. On the floor, shards of mirror wet with blood. . . . I see an entire face in a shard of glass. A single face. . . . The face. Me.[16]

By accepting the strengths and weaknesses that shape Brazilian society, a true process of healing and growth will begin. However, Brazil and Brazilians must reexamine their own shattered images to find their own "true selves." Brazil must survive its present existence and changes between mirrors.

IV. The Future: Brazilian Women Writers Breaking with Their Mirrors

The future of Brazilian women's literary production seems quite bright. Following in the footsteps of Clarice Lispector (1925–77) and Lygia Fagundes Telles (1925–), a long list of women writers have challenged the traditional parameters of realist or naturalist writing that was practiced at the beginning of the century. Lispector insisted on the effacement of the subject and also in the establishment of a close relationship between physical space (her body) and the psychoanalytic notion of perpetual rebirth or rediscovery of oneself. Lispector's 1973 *Agua Viva* (The Stream of Life) became a definite new alternative to writing for Brazilian women novelists.

In the same vein, Hilda Hilst (1930–), for instance, experiments with narrative techniques such as introspective writing in the first person, the discontinuity in the use of discourse, and the absence of truth or objective reality. Hilst's novel *Fluxo-Floema* (1970), for example, subverts the canon, the logic of the traditional linear narrative. Hilst enjoys setting her characters in ambiguous and nonfamiliar environments, and places a conscious effort in giving the word a unique value. Traditional themes of love and other relationships between men and women are treated so as to provoke frustration and anguish. She questions the preconceived values and ideas that rule any Brazilian woman's life: marriage, motherhood, love, education, economic status, work, sex, etc.

Other Brazilian women writers, such as Sonia Coutinho, (1939–), Lya Luft (1938–), and Marina Colassanti (1937–), are concerned with narrating the absurdity of the everyday urban life, the degradation of the human conditions of women who live in the *favelas* (slums), the loss and frustration of the liberated woman who has lost her authenticity as woman, among other topics. Perhaps Luft's main character, Rainha Exilada (Exiled Queen) from her 1988 novel *Exílio* (Exile), best summarizes the pessimism and anguish that Brazilians suffer in their daily life as descendants of immigrants who are in constant search of identity in the new land. The Exiled Queen says,

> Life is like this Red House: in its bulge rotted by time, inhabited by moments (instances) and infected by anguish, an entire race of exiles wastes away. With his/her own deep homesickness, his/her own insatiable thirst, he/she attempts to adapt himself/herself to it as much as he/she can. Some of them will never succeed.[17]

All these women's voices have been present as independent voices for the last two decades. At the present moment, I was told by Professor Guberman, there is a vibrant interest by these women writers in taking their voices beyond the boundaries of Brazil. Some of the aforementioned writers, such as Helena Parente Cunha, have been invited to participate in conferences in the United States and Europe; Parente Cunha has visited the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Her novel *Woman Between Mirrors* now reaches a wider audience outside of Brazil. It is my hope that in years to come, experts in the field of Brazilian studies and Latin American studies will expand their interest and pay closer attention to this generation of Brazilian writers who are carefully redefining themselves and their roles in Brazilian society.

V. Final Reflections

As I stated in my introductory remarks, my visit to Brazil has impacted me on three fronts: personally, as a scholar, and pedagogically. At the immediate level, it has made me reflect upon my own search for identity. Having been born into hybrid societies, Brazilians, as the rest of Latin Americans, struggle with the notion of who they are. In the United States, immigrants like me struggle with the same question, with the added question of where we belong. In a way we are forced to see ourselves in divided mirrors; each mirror gives us a different angle, a different face. Our responsibility is to consolidate the images reflected in the mirrors. One way of doing this is through teaching others to look more critically at their own realities and existences, and then to look at other peoples and cultures.

My visit to Brazil and participation in the faculty seminar has awakened in me more enthusiasm to expand my knowledge of Brazilian literature. Because of my limited knowledge of Por-

tuguese, in my interactions with scholars and commonfolk in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Bahia, I felt that I was missing important details about the host nation. Nevertheless, this experience has made me a more complete Latin Americanist. I have crossed the boundaries of regionalism that rooted me as an Ecuadorian dealing with another nation of South America.

Another asset gained from my visit to Brazil is the immediate application to teaching and to my ongoing research projects. I envision incorporating the research I began in Brazil into my courses. The First Year Seminar, for example, will benefit from studying Parente Cunhas's and Lispector's novels.

I also would like to integrate my initial findings into a more global context if not in a comparative study of women's literary production from the various regions of Latin America. The preoccupations that move Brazilian writers are the same as the ones found in Ecuadorian women writers Alicia Yánez Cossío and Natasha Salguero, and Mexican women writers Rosario Castellanos, Carmen Boullosa, and Angela Mastreta, to cite a few. These novelists and their works are "mirrors" for women across the Americas; a multiplicity of mirrors that reflect the enormous variety of cultures and societies and the struggle to redefine oneself within those constraints. These are mirrors to which we can all look for a reflection of our existence today.

Notes

1. Maria Lucia Caira Gitahy and Francisco Foot Hardman, "Brazil in the Global World: Five Centuries of Lost Memories" (paper presented at UNICAMP, Campinas, Brazil, June 1997), 2. The paper, part of the list of readings for the Macalester College Faculty Development International Seminar, Summer 1997, is found in this issue of *Macalester International*.

2. Ibid., 76.

3. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Leland Guyer for his generous effort in helping me to translate the poem.

4. *Verde-amarillo* (Spanish), *verde-amarelo* (Portuguese), green-yellow, along with a blue sphere symbolizing the heavens, are the official colors of the Brazilian flag. Green-yellow refers to the nationalist Verde-Amarelo group of intellectuals from the *modernista* literary movement of São Paulo that was founded in 1926. The important figures among the Modernists were Menotti del Picchia, Plínio Salgado, Cândido Mota Filho, and Cassiano Ricardo. The *verdeamarelos* rejected Futurism, and as a group they expressed an active interest in current political and social developments. They also supported opposition to foreign influences that threatened the Brazilian political scene. Consult

Jean Franco's *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970), 293–94, and Giovanni Pontiero's introduction to *An Anthology of Brazilian Modernist Poetry* (Oxford: Pergammon Press, 1968), 11–12.

5. Fruits native to the Americas: guava, pineapple, and orange.

6. The dictionary translates this word as "longing, nostalgia, homesickness." Consult Maria Isabel Abreu and Cléa Rameh's, *Português Contemporâneo*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University School of Languages and Linguistics, 1973), 342. However, *saudade* also refers to the traditional poetic theme used by Portuguese and Luso-Brazilian writers.

7. See Bobby J. Chamberlain, "Pós-modernidade e a ficçâo brasileira dos anos 70 e 80" in *Revista Iberoamericana* 59, no. 164–65 (July–December 1993): 598–99.

8. Ibid., 599–600.

9. I have not seen the English translations of these works; therefore, the translations for these titles are my own: Coutinho's *Good-bye, Maracana*, Sebastian Nunes's *We All Are Murderers*, Drummond's *Coca-Cola's Blood*, Escorel's *A Telephone Is Far Too Little*, Ribeiro Tavares's *The Name of the Bishop*, and Fonseca's *Kill Bufo and Spallanzani*.

10. Helena Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). The following citation comes from this edition. Cunha was born in Salvador, Bahia, northeast Brazil, in 1929. She has lived in Rio De Janeiro since 1958. She has served as the dean of the College of Letters at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Dr. Parente Cunha is a professor of Romance-Language literatures at the Federal University. Among other interests, she teaches courses in Italian literature and literary theory in the College of Letters. Besides her novel *Woman Between Mirrors*, Professor Parente Cunha has published various collections of short stories and poetry. Most recent publications are *Os Provisórios* (1990) and *A Casa e As Casas* (1996), not yet translated into English.

11. Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors*, v.

12. Nelly Novaes Coelho et al., *Femenino Singular: A partipaçâo da mulher na literatura brasileira contemporânea* (Sâo Paulo, Brazil: Ediçôes GRD; Rio Claro, SP: Archivo Municipal, 1989). It is an excellent reference for scholars interested in the recent developments of Brazilian feminine literary production.

13. Consult the article that appeared in *Veja* (11 December 1996): 124.

14. Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors*, vi–vii.

15. Ibid., 109–10.

16. Ibid., 132.

17. Lya Luft, *Exílio*, 5th ed. (São Paulo, Brazil: Editora Siciliano, 1991), 47. The translation is mine.