

UN/FAITHFUL COMPANIONS: NORTH-AMERICAN AUTHORS CONSTRUING THE AMAZON THROUGH THEIR BRAZILIAN COUNTERPARTS

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Resumo: Este estudo discute de forma comparativa a representação do Brasil e, mais especificamente da Amazônia, na literatura norte-americana, avaliando as diferentes formas como Ann Patchett, Candice Millard, John Updike, Karen Yamashita e William James descrevem um país significativo em tamanho, recursos naturais e complexidades sociais e raciais. Analisa o conceito do “exótico” como definido por Moacyr Scliar, Elizabeth Bishop, Judith Butler, Roger Célestin e Renata Wasserman e examina as várias maneiras com que essa concepção se manifesta nos textos, principalmente quando os personagens mergulham no mundo do desconhecido e do dissimilar. Esses autores norte-americanos mencionam escritores brasileiros que lhes serviram de inspiração ou expressam sua admiração por elementos da cultura brasileira com os quais se familiarizaram durante visitas ao País ou quando moraram no Brasil. Enquanto a maioria dos textos explora a estética da violência como uma forma de exotismo, as narrativas em que os autores têm um conhecimento mais profundo do Brasil apresentam personagens que questionam e subvertem o conceito do exótico. O resultado é uma “viagem” literária de muitos percursos e várias configurações.

Palavras-chave: Literatura norte-americana; Representações do Brasil; Exotismo; Amazônia.

In June 2010, Moacyr Scliar stated that the decline in translated publications of Brazilian literature in the United States owes much to the fact that, culturally speaking, Brazil has become remarkably similar

to the United States. In his view, Brazilian literature has lost the aura of exoticism publishers and readers sought in texts such as Jorge Amado's novels (which exude an erotic and exotic quality, and describe a mestizo Brazil, marked by religious syncretism and a purported racial harmony), and, thus, it no longer yields the same attention it did in mid-twentieth century. Scliar also credited the success of the worldwide translation of Amado's books to the fact that some of his novels were thematically supportive of the Communist Party's principles and beliefs which had extensive appeal in Europe. Additionally, he commented on his candid conversation with Paulo Coelho about his commercial achievements at home and abroad. Coelho's stories and autobiographical accounts seem to fulfill the need of a reading public eager for tales dealing with metaphysical traditions, motivational psychology, occultism, self-discovery, and spiritual journey, and thus address the "exotic" and dissimilar (Scliar, *Brasa x*).

Scliar further conceived that US-based publishers have invested cautiously in translations of modern or contemporary "non-colorful" Brazilian fiction for fear, perhaps, that it is not exotic enough to guarantee a large reading public. The core of Scliar's thesis was that more sophisticatedly written fictional works, those most likely to be included in scholarly anthologies or cited in academic studies, and which characterize a large portion of Brazilian literature from the second half of the twentieth-century to now, do not sell millions of books worldwide. He also asserted that, in general, this contemporary literature is less likely to present the foreign reader with a glamorous and colorful experience that a dissimilar world can fashion (*Brasa x*).

Scliar's analysis of the craving for literary exoticism can be associated with Judith Butler's concept of desire. According to her, desire is a "metonymic dislocation" that produces the magnetism of the "mimetic reflex," and involves a sequence of substitutions in

which a libidinal investment reinforces the urgencies and imperatives of a specific discourse, establishing a fascination with what is desired because it is different (379-380). Scliar's talk also resonates with Roger Célestin's discussion that the exotic can be described as what is "... very different from me and my culture, and is identifiable as such" (217). In this same line of thinking, Renata Wasserman contends that, as a mediating sign, exoticism is the complementary and acceptable side of the other which awakens in the non-exotic the desire to have or be that which he/she is not or has not (13-14). In the fast and highly connected pace of our contemporary world, the exotic has also acquired a gloomier dimension. It is also associated with elements of violence and/or with dire poverty, which may explain the rise of *poorism* worldwide, as Eric Weiner defines slum voyeurism, and/or the success of books/films such as Paulo Lins's *City of God* in the United States.

In respect to what he perceives to be a decline in publication of Brazilian literature in translation in the United States, Scliar's thesis is debatable. It is true, however, that foreign publishers still crave a colorful and intriguing "otherness" in foreign fiction because the average reading public seems to yearn for exceptional stories about unconventional places and daring adventures. Scliar himself resorted to magic realism in many of his texts (as in *The Centaur in the Garden*, and in many short texts published in *The Collected Stories*). Even if such a literary category may not compare, point by point, with Amado's local color or Coelho's esoteric texts, it still offers the reader the satisfaction of delving into something mysterious and fanciful. In addition, it should be considered that, although authors welcome translations of their texts because they can enlarge a readership and accrue fame, prizes, and popularity, most contemporary Brazilians writers have a home-based target audience, and write for a reading public that is usually familiar with the diversity of the country. Accordingly, rarely would a present-day Brazilian author

choose to write about the local color of Bahia, for instance, as the purported “uncommon” or “unfamiliar” feature of the country as Amado did in the 1950s. It is also a fact that, in our contemporary life, tourism, television, and the web have, in many cases, replaced books in presenting the exoticism of foreign lands.

Regardless of the critical position taken, it is a fact that there is always a public yearning for exceptional stories of intrepid adventures in remote places. Readers still demand what Elizabeth Bishop qualified in her poem “Arrival at Santos” as “immodest demands for a different world” (3-4). As she depicts her feelings and recollects the first impressions of her port of entry in Brazil, looking at the land from the deck of the ship, she also expresses her unfamiliarity with the Brazilian flag, and her skepticism about a nation of which she knew hardly anything. But, at the same time, her poetic persona exercises self-criticism, analyzing her lack of knowledge or cultural understanding of the country she was about to see, during the ship’s stopover in Santos, on her way to Rio de Janeiro to visit her friend Mary Stearns Morse. She presents herself as an oblivious visitor who displays a raw arrogance and a blatant disregard for the unfamiliar territory. Ironically, what was planned as a short visit became a twenty-year stay because a severe allergic reaction to the cashew fruit kept her bedridden for a while and caused her to miss her ship’s departure. In addition, during that period, she developed a romantic involvement with the architect Maria Carlota de Macedo Soares (Lota) which led her to prologue her stay, live in Rio de Janeiro and Ouro Preto for two decades, and take an interest in Brazilian literature. (She edited, with Emanuel Brasil, *An Anthology of Twentieth Century Brazilian Poetry*, and translated, with an “Introduction,” *The Diary of Helena Morley*.)

In *The More I Owe You*, a biographical novel about Bishop’s romantic involvement with Soares, Michael Sledge reveals how and

why she was able to overturn that sense of longing for the different “other” in her poetry. This unique quality of Bishop’s poems, as Benjamin Moser notices, did not resurface in her book *Brazil* (a collection of journalistic writing she did for *Time Life Books*). Following the line of thought that George Monteiro develops in his book about Bishop in Brazil and after, Moser maintains, that “for a nuanced and occasionally inflammatory writing on Brazil, we should look to Bishop’s poetry and correspondence” (3). He argues that her *Brazil* lacks a refined knowledge of politics and cultural issues and criticizes her for her callow familiarity with the Portuguese language, despite the fact that she lived in Brazil for so long and translated Brazilian literature (3). Even though Moser harshly criticizes her amateurish view of Brazil in that book, he counterbalances it by considering that “every writer accepts bureaucratic assignments,” and she was no exception; she wrote what *Life* commissioned her to write, in the manner they chose to publish/edit the text (3). Therefore the timely self-inflicted censure found in her poetry differs from the uncouth attitude, unconcealed indifference, and/or sense of superiority that supercilious travelers (including herself) can exhibit when visiting “exotic” lands, or encountering racially diverse peoples for the first time.

The desire for an exotic Brazil still entices the imagination of authors in the United States who seek, in the Amazon region, a ruthless and challenging reality. As it did since the first Europeans traveled to the Americas, the long-lived fascination with the human yearning to dominate and conquer nature finds in the Amazon the prime location for such excursionists and expansionist literary projects. The forest, the rivers, the ecosystems, and the indigenous people have, throughout the centuries, spellbound writers, travelers, explorers, and/or scientists who are attracted to the beauty and potential of the exotic region, but often fear it because they find themselves trapped in what they perceive to be

a treacherous place. Conventionally, jungles exert fascination not only because they offer a great bio-diversity and appeal to the senses, but also because they exemplify the unexpected, becoming synonymous with survival and/or thriving in dangerous *loci*. In the case of the Amazon forest, regardless of the genre chosen to describe it, anthropologists, historians, fiction writers, journalists, travelers, bloggers, and the media quite often personify and define it as the space *par excellence* where fear, fright, suspense, and danger are most likely to happen because the forest cannot be “conquered” peacefully by common human beings. Most of those texts are populated with situations and choices of language that instill fear, and present the Amazon as a place for excitement and suspense, but also as a vengeful and unforgiving space, a stage for life and death.

In these texts, the jungle is presented as an inhospitable environment that threatens and destroys outsiders. The Amazon forest evokes, in Pedro Maligo’s account of Brazilian literature, an “aesthetic of contrasts” (40) in which a discourse of utopias and dystopias become common place. In this case, upheavals and calamities are synonymous with the exotic, and the writer/reporter/filmmaker maps unfamiliar territories, examines losses, and surveys the different types of violence provoked by destructive encounters or the clash of culture and nature. Those accounts also naturalize the indigenous people by depicting them as dangerous and “primitive” elements of the landscape. Narrative becomes the discursive foundation and the symbolic mediator that can bring to the readers uncommon worlds of estranged others, and therefore, plays a significant part in the conceptualization and dissemination of the “exotic.”

There is currently, in the United States, a new surge of biographical accounts, collections of stories, memoirs, novels, and travelogues, addressing the Amazon Region or people who have been

associated with it. Henry Ford's abortive project in the Amazon (Fordlandia), life stories or travel adventures of Brazilian and American celebrities (Euclides da Cunha, Cândido Mariano Rondon, Theodore Roosevelt, and William James are some of the latest ones). In addition to biographical accounts, epistolary narratives and novels thematically grounded on the Amazon have also reached the reading public. For instance, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, John Updike's *Brazil*, and Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* depict the Amazon's awe-inspiring sense of both a cruel reality and an exciting fantasy.

In some ways, contemporary American writers, historians, and anthropologists continue to replicate the travel accounts and stories told by the first adventurers, chroniclers, and colonizers who wrote about the land they occupied, and/or the people they encountered, establishing some myths that are still in vogue nowadays as described by Alex Shoumatoff and Candace Slater. In many instances, when outlining the Amazon Region, they also replicate Euclides da Cunha's memorable and extensively quoted metaphors, which describe the region as "an opulent disorder" (99-100) and "a diabolic paradise" (109). Historical chronicles and biographies that read like novels (*The River of Doubt* by Candice Millard is a good example), or anthropological accounts have rendered images of cataclysmic dimensions to the forest and the people of the region. Scott Wallace's *The Unconquered*, for instance, is a narrative organized from the notes he took during his journey through the Brazilian Amazon to collect information about a secluded indigenous group (Arrow People), without directly contacting them. To effect that he teamed up with Sydney Ferreira Possuelo, a Brazilian explorer, social activist, and ethnographer who is regarded as a leading authority on Brazil's isolated tribes. While Wallace's narrative has received a substantial amount of positive media coverage (possibly because he explores and exploits the exotic aspects of expedition), the

whole project appears to be a quixotic attempt to replicate the Rondon/Roosevelt's life threatening experience in the region and, in terms of its narrative accomplishments, turns out to be a meagre and timid shadow of the suspense narrative Candice Millard renders in *The River of Doubt*.

William James's personal observations during his travels and research in Brazil when he joined the Thayer Expedition (1865-1866), organized by the Harvard Professor Louis Agassiz, offer a different perception of the land and the people. In those accounts, he describes the time he spent in the forest and with the natives as genuinely pleasant (he mostly complains about mosquitoes), probably because of his open-mindedness, adaptability to the regional climate, and learning of the Portuguese language. In the preface to a bilingual edition of James' letters, travel notes, and diaries, Maria Helena Machado details the negotiations, diplomatic initiatives, ideological positions, and the critical distance that James adopted, in an attempt to dissociate himself from the arrogance and feeling of superiority of the members of the expedition.

During the eight months that he spent in Brazil (mostly in the Amazon region), the twenty-three-year-old medical student presented his family and friends with a balanced view that "expresses not only a critical consciousness but also a moral distance from the colonialist intellectual enterprise that also guided the expedition" (Machado 40). James questioned Agassiz's devious ethnographic practices, flawed creationism, and disdainful attitude toward the mestizo race, marveled at his own ability to "speak Portuguese like a book" and to be "ready to converse for hours on any subject" (Machado 48). While collecting species for the expedition in the Solimões River, James befriended the local peasants, and gradually came to realize that, even the most uneducated Brazilian he met, displayed a refined "urbane" sophistication and manners: "Is it race or is it circumstance that makes these people so refined and well bred? No gentleman of Europe has better manners and yet these are

peasants” he pondered in a journal entry (Machado 90), and considered that time “one of the best spent portions of [his] life” (Machado 84). Banking on the information she gathered from his letters and diaries, Machado criticizes James’s biographers for “underestimating the impact of the Brazilian experience” in his writing (42). Following Daniel Bjork’s work on the topic, she arguably establishes the connection between James’ descriptions of the intricate patterns of the Amazonian fluvial system and his development of theories related to some of his philosophical standpoints: “While these questions appeared in more elaborate form only much later, as in his famous text, *The Stream of Thought* (1890), early manifestations show up in his travel notes during the Brazil expedition of 1865” (Machado 32).

Diametrically opposed to James’ description of the Amazon Region, Ann Patchett’s contemporary novel, *State of Wonder* projects a morbid reality and a remarkable sense of doom. While it addresses timely questions related to pharmaceutical use of the Amazonian potential, and explores the moral dimension of using native Amazonians as guinea-pigs and the forest as a laboratory for large international biotechnical companies, the book places too much emphasis on the exotic/erotic and catastrophic nature of the region. The story revolves around Dr. Marina Singh, a 42-year-old pharmacologist who is assigned by her US-based laboratory to travel to the Amazon to find out what happened to her colleague Anders Eckman, and to visit Dr. Annick Swenson (an ethnobiologist/immunologist and her former medical professor). Swenson is fiercely protective of her research lab in the heart of the Amazon Region in which she is developing a new fertility drug that defies childbirth age and is testing it on the Lakashi tribe (the scientist herself gets pregnant at the age of seventy-three). This thrilling narrative emulates travel guide brochures in describing the touristic underpinnings of Manaus, the encounter of the waters of Rio Negro and Solimões, insects, anacondas, even the countless different species

of birds in the forest. In addition, the novel lacks a denser criticism of the social and gender issues Patchett intended to address and misses the chance of presenting the emotional complexities of the characters. She dwells on the hair-raising aspects of this jungle adventure for too long, and the result is a clichéd view of an exotically dangerous Amazon. In her review of the book, regarding characterization, Janet Maslin notes some similarities of *State of Wonder* with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and H.G. Well's *Island of Dr. Moreau*. She also believes "Patchett delivers a homage to the film *Fitzcarraldo* and its director, Werner Herzog, the patron saint of all thrilling ill-considered voyages into the unknown" (2). Even so, the result is a book that bestows upon the reader a sense of awe, confusion, and an undeveloped analysis of the characters' interior voyage and, consequently, does not stand up to the masters of fiction and film on whose works she may have found inspiration.

Similar to Patchett's novel, Candace Millard's *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey* is crowded with disquieting moments and the dreadful anxiety that fear of the unknown can convey, as it describes the insects, reptiles, fishes, cougars, and indigenous people as part of the "ruthless efficiency" of the jungle (185). Millard's beautifully crafted prose paints an exaggerated impression of the jungle and its living creatures, describing the "eerie absence of sound" (142) and how it impacts or heightens emotion on the expedition. However, Millard's narrative accomplishes what *State of Wonder* does not, working as a catalyst for an emotional downpour, and arresting the senses without overpowering the reader's imagination. It also establishes a poetic of excess, so-to-speak, that matches the jungles' own surplus of colors, sounds, rainstorms, growth, interactive systems, and fierce competition of the species. In her ostensible descriptions of the forest's inhospitality, she also judiciously captures the supreme irony of people nearly starving in an environment of spellbinding life-giving resources.

Millard's narrative blurs disciplinary genres and reads like an historical novel as it offers a detailed description of Roosevelt's 1914 co-expedition with Rondon to chart an unknown river in the Amazon region. To set the stage for the dangers of Roosevelt/Rondon's expedition, Millard resorts to the history of previous conquerors and travelers, presenting the forest as a vengeful and unforgiving character. She accomplishes that by insistently reminding the reader of the danger they face, how hungry they are, and the perils they encounter in a fierce battlefield for survival. In this gripping narrative, the ominous members of the Cinta Larga nation, who lived on the banks of the river, become the ubiquitous shadows that follow the members of the expedition. Similar to Patchett's description of the cannibal inhabitants of the forest, Millard details the members of the expedition's relentless fear of an imminent attack from native tribes by picturing them as "primitive," "violent," and "blood-thirsty" exotic "others" (Millard 178, 185, 219, 220-231, 325, 327-329, 349-340). Millard also allows her own voice to seep into the story to offer information about the fierce nature of the indigenous people the Rondon/Roosevelt expedition encountered (based on her field and archive research in Brazil and in the United States). That type of authorial intrusion is intended not only to add credibility to her story, but also to heighten the sense of danger and eminent catastrophe of the expedition. Millard deserves credit, however, for questioning her own line of reasoning by reminding the readers of the slaughter of native peoples of the New World at the hands of 15th and 16th century colonizers (177-179). She also accomplishes that by changing the point of view, as she writes that "Roosevelt and his men may have regarded themselves as explorers, but the Indians would know them as invaders" (124).

Millard both dramatizes and questions the romantic notion of the exotic as something attractive and glamorous in the passages in which she reports/analyzes the shortcomings of both Theodore Roosevelt and his hopelessly wistful son, Kermit. To cope with the dangers and distress of the journey, Kermit immerses himself emotionally into his long-distance engagement with Belle and lives his love story by proxy, carrying books of poetry throughout the jungle at a time when, unable to navigate the river and weak from near-starvation, in order to continue the march through the forest, the members of the expedition had to sacrifice personal belongings far more important for their survival. In a similar vein, the Amazon adventure became for Theodore Roosevelt the apex of the grand drama with which he battled his whole life (including sickness, family deaths, escaping an attempted murder, and facing a significant political loss). He finds refuge by reading poetry as well and escaping into his personal Xanadu. (In a delirious state, he repeats verses from Samuel Coleridge Taylor's poem "Kluba Khan," when fighting an infection/high fever that almost cause him to lose his life.)

Although Millard's project is a biographical/historical account of the former American president, quite often she turns the narrative focus to the River of Doubt, personifying and describing it as an entity of hyperbolic dimensions, powers, or skills only matched by the indigenous people who inhabit the forest. Hers is not the first or the only account to endow rivers with human qualities. For centuries, explorers and writers have assigned mythical or human characteristics to elements of the Amazon region; however, what is unique in her narrative is the double role the river plays: it is at the same time protagonist and antagonist. The sense of doom and helplessness that all members of the expedition feel in the face of countless hardships, hunger, sickness, and death partially derives from the personification of the river, a tributary that, according to Millard, "twisted and turned so capriciously, curving 'literally toward every point of the compass'" (145).

When Millard describes Simplício's drowning in a vortex (a death indirectly caused by Kermit's arrogance and disobedience to Rondon's orders), she endows the river with such authority and determination that it seems as if it had plotted to kill the man. In the fourth part ("Iron Cruelty"), the river blinds, chokes, and pummels Kermit so badly that Millard concludes there is a "remorseless completion" in the Amazon (209). She has no qualms about the violent, unforgiving, and treacherous nature of the River of Doubt and other tributaries in the Amazon which "tear through the jungle like wounded animals" (130). Not only is the River of Doubt portrayed as a vengeful murderer, but it is also described as a very unreliable protagonist, becoming as narrow as the length of a rifle in some places, and as wide as the largest tributaries of the Amazon in other areas. It changes into towering waterfalls and life-claiming rapids without notice, has piranhas biting at the men, and is a hotbed for malaria-infested mosquitoes. Millard discusses the moody (but effective temperament of the river), contrasting it with the clumsy behavior of the expedition and its inadequate preparation for the journey.

The narrative techniques she uses include authorial intrusion, an ebb-and-flow movement of the story, the use of suspense, flashbacks and foreboding, as well as the interruption of the narrative proper to give the reader a "biographical" account of the region, namely, a lesson in geography and archeology. She also employs numerous rhetorical devices to create suspense and intrigue the reader. Her use of quotes (from original sources of published accounts, diaries, and letters from Roosevelt, Kermit, Cherrie, and Rondon and from her library and field research) gives her narrative a multi-layered facet. It also serves to reaffirm the individual perspectives, including those expressed by the workers (*camaradas*), the Cinta Larga warriors, and the personified river. By citing accounts of the members of the expedition, Millard also

introduces, ever so lightly, many other different literary genres in the travel narrative/biography she is detailing. In addition, they also serve to give more credibility to the facts she is presenting, reminding the reader it is a true story.

She uses the cinematic voice-over-narration technique, and implements changes in point-of-view to heighten the unnerving feeling of the expedition in the forest. She utilizes the technique of enticement to create suspense and reveal an impending sense of approaching catastrophe. Her narrative style also mimics the river's fluctuating mood and presents an extraordinary rendition of the jungle by repeatedly circling around the idea of danger. In that sense, Millard also creates a vortex in the narrative as the story-telling mimics the capricious whirlpools of the river and the swirl of emotions of the travelers. She often borrows scientific explanations to sanction the validity of her explanations, and to halt the frenetic rhythm of the narrative tension. Those pauses work as a narrative relief, and contribute to decompress emotions, as they break away from the tense, dangerous, and fearful moments of the impending tragedy foreshadowed in the text. The use of humor, explanation of trivial incidents, and the narration of the explorers' gossip, all contribute to create a mundane set of circumstances that provoke laughter and also demystify their journey.

Millard uses a system of checks and balances to establish a thought-provoking nuance in describing the members of the expedition. By always counterbalancing positive and negative personality traits, and analyzing the characters as individuals subject to the worst failures and mistakes, as well as to great accomplishments, priceless generosity, and sheer great human interaction, the text represents everyone in both a constructive and damaging light. By presenting droplets of information and pausing long enough for other descriptions, she forces the readers to piece together the stories of all the characters and immerse themselves in

the conflicting relationships the visitors establish with their surrounding space (which includes the personified river and indigenous peoples). She introduces a wavy narrative pattern that establishes dis/belief, uncertainty, a system of pros and cons, and calls into question the very possibility of defining truth. Unlike John Updike, John Barth, and Susan Sontag who openly acknowledged a literary debt to Machado de Assis, Millard does not list the Brazilian master as a stylistic source. However, her undulating storyline resembles the deconstructive narrative technique Machado de Assis used in *Dom Casmurro*.

Millard's text is artisanal, in the sense that writing becomes an exercise of weaving textual, historical, geographic, and cultural analyses, in a kind of ethnographic writing that blends a realist, a confessional, and an impressionistic style. The tragic lyricism of her historiographical account, her prose's sophistication and elegance, the use of multiple techniques to create suspense and retain the readers' attention found in Cunha's 1909 poetic essays – collected in *The Amazon: Land Without History* – a thematic counterpart and an original stylistic source. Even if she makes no reference to him or shows evidence of having read his works, their texts share an insightful use of poetic prose to showcase the Amazon's arresting and catastrophic lure. Even Millard's touch of elitism when describing the behavior of the Cinta Larga tribes echoes the occasional traces of racism which surface in Cunha's texts.

In the Afterword to *Brazil*, Updike asserts his debt to Joseph Bédier's *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* (after whom the protagonists, Tristão and Isabel, are named), some American authors, including Theodore Roosevelt, John Hemming, the editors of *Life* and Elizabeth Bishop (*Brazil*), and “two guidebooks to the country, in the Real Guide and Lonely Planet Series” (261). He also mentions Euclides da Cunha, Gilberto Freyre, Jorge Amado, Machado de Assis, Graciliano Ramos, Clarice Lispector, Rubem Fonseca, Ana Miranda, and Nélida Piñon

from whom he “took courage and local color” (261). The chaotic sense of disorderly conduct and devious relationships that emerge in *Brazil* may also have originated from the author’s personal impression of the mood of the country during his two-week visit in 1992. He may have captured the frenzied elements of the post-military dictatorship (1964-1985) and the extreme division of wealth that the “Economic Miracle” of the 1970s fomented under that iron-clad rule. Of all the Brazilian writers he mentions as his sources of inspiration to write *Brazil*, his prose style comes closer to the dark, violent, and sexually perverse content of some of Fonseca’s texts which reflect the reality of the country during that time. In the two decades that followed the end of the dictatorship, Brazil was steeped in an abysmal economic recession and, in that environment, serious social and economic problems that were previously repressed rose to the fore, and violence and poverty gained a special place in the country’s social profile.

As stated, in the Afterword, Updike also mentions Amado and Freyre as sources of local color and encouragement. His vision of Brazil, however, sharply contrasts with the emphasis on social/racial harmony and miscegenation those Brazilian authors presented in their texts. For the most part, Updike ignores social subtleties and ambivalences, or any mediating term that might describe the nuances of a place, the styles of social relations, as well as the concessions of daily life. His descriptions are highly exaggerated and his emphasis on the imagined duality of the country (rich/poor, black/white) does not allow any place for negotiations, intersections, meditations, ambiguities, or vicissitudes which are, in reality, a dominant part of everyday life in Brazil. If his intention was to criticize Brazil’s purported “racial democracy” and emphasize the ideology of “whitening” (especially in his characterization of Tristão and Isabel), Updike uses an unconvincing method. He misses the opportunity to analyze the twisted refinements

of Brazilian “cordial racism” (embedded in the concept of a national multiracial identity), to which historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have alluded. Instead, he bases his portrayal of Tristão and Isabel in a fixed bi-racial context, and presents a highly inflated stereotype of race conflict, class division, and aberrant sexuality in Brazil. In this instance, *Brazil* fails to engage the reader in an analytic discourse capable of interrogating, in a more meaningful way, the discourses of race and class that the author strives so hard to convey.

Even though Updike does not acknowledge a debt to Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaíma*, his characterization of Tristão bears striking similarities with Andrade’s protagonist. They both change race and display an irreverent and picaresque nature; they wander throughout the country in search of a racial and social identity, undergo extravagant adventures, and have sexual prowess. Tristão also shares with Macunaíma (and Eshu) turbulent and ambiguous relationships with their brothers, the search for/possession of an amulet, the magic components of the stories, and anything that is multiple and in movement. (For a step-by-step comparison between Macunaíma and Eshu, see Borges and Cunha.) While the racial metamorphosis and the travels and escapades that both Tristão and Isabel undergo, as well as the use of the *muriquitã* (the sought-after stone) are all reminiscent of *Macunaíma*, in Updike’s novel the hero without character does not retain the playfulness of Andrade’s anti-hero/picaresque protagonist. Even the end of the novel (when Tristão is killed at the beach by a kid who steals his Rolex, a child as poor and desperate as Tristão once was) does not work as an ironic inversion of this exotic violence; instead, it bears a vague, tentative, and slight resemblance to a tragic irony. It works, however, as a simulacrum of what it could have been, highlighting Updike’s missed opportunity to reach deep into the emotions of the characters and give a more realistic account of the country.

The novel begins in Rio de Janeiro, moves through São Paulo to the central plateau (Brasília) on its way to the jungle/mining area of Serra do Buraco, a large gold mine located south of the mouth of the Amazon River, which he details in the chapter “The Mine.” The author description of the men working in a giant open pit in search of gold resembles the chaotic lawlessness of Serra Pelada’s mining operation (with its estimate number of workers hovering above one hundred thousand). That chapter bears close resemblances to Sebastião Salgado’s photographic masterpieces of the Amazonian gold rush, and with the frontier life described in the documentary, *60 Minute Classic: Treasure of Serra Pelada*, aired in 1985, which renders a detailed and realistic portrayal of the area. It could still be a fictional rendition of Updike’s own insight of life and work in Serra Pelada, as he understood it, during his visit to the area, in 1992. According to Barbara Kingsolver, “His publisher there was bringing out all four Rabbit novels in a new translation, and invited him for interviews in São Paulo. Mr. Updike then ventured north, to Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia and a backwater 18th-century mining town. A few months later he set to work on Tristão and Isabel” (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/06/lifetimes/updike-brazil.html>). Whatever the inspirational source he used, he manages to convey that dismal reality unmistakably:

Under the onslaught of digging, what had been a mountain was becoming a giant hole; not hundreds but thousands of men, in a bowl a half-mile across, trundled sacks of mud and pickaxed rock up crude wooden ladders leaning against the cliffs hacked out in a quarry of descending terraces. Almost every day, loose rock and eroding earth slid down upon slaving men; every day, a *garimpeiro* or two died, of avalanche disease, exhaustion or knife-fight. Robbery and murder occurred right at the pit, as well as in the dozens of shack towns that had sprung up in the surrounding slopes. ... There were no bars; alcohol was forbidden in a ten-mile region around Serra do Buraco, or the mayhem would have been far worse (124-125).

In *Brazil*, both the jungle/mining area and the city bully human beings who, in turn, threaten the environment, and destroy each other. The characters are often moved by an utter disregard for human life, mirroring the author's perception of an absolute lawlessness in Brazilian politics, mining areas, city life, streets, and *favelas*. In that context, Updike's novel undermines the appearance of a carefree Rio de Janeiro by defining upper-class *cariocas* as elitist and racist and by focusing on violent crimes, the miserable lives of destitute street minors who swarm the streets, and the abject poverty of the *favelas* (in direct contrast with the multi-million-dollar penthouses of Ipanema, Leblon, and Copacabana beaches). He also describes São Paulo and Brasília as hotbeds of corruption and class struggle, and the highland of Mato Grosso as an unruly mining area. While there is an element of truth in his descriptions, for the most part, he establishes a catastrophic portrayal of Brazil by scathingly contrasting the interior/coastal areas, insistently presenting a social divide, highlighting extreme racial hatred, and describing the country as exceptionally corrupted and unlawful.

Updike offers no redemption to his disproportionately vicious, greedy, racist, classist, or aloof characters. As in the naturalist conventions of writing, his main characters are a product of their environment: for instance, Tristão can leave the *favela*, but the *favela* will never leave him; therefore even when he acquires a new skin color (becomes white) and an upper social status (he has an executive position in a large company), he is still subject to discrimination and is considered morally inferior. Regardless of age, race, or social status, the characters find themselves locked into uncontrollable laws of nature, are driven by sexual perversions, violence, and an extraordinary animalistic lust. An obsessive force drives the narrative as he describes a chain of human disasters, calamities, and disrespect for human interaction (in the setting of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Brasília, and in the mining area/forest).

He collapses everything under the unapologetic weight of the thrill and thrust of his emphasis on the exotic and erotic lure. Consequently, for the most part, he weakens the epistemological knowledge of the country by exploring blunt stereotypes and offering a shallow, vulgar, and demoralizing caricature of a despicably immoral Brazil, irreversibly set in a motion of extreme violence, destruction, corruption, and danger.

The author presents gut-wrenching descriptions of sexual abuse and other types of graphic violence to express both the depths of brutality that he wants to portray in the cities and in Serra do Buraco to which Tristão and Isabel escape in search of freedom to carry on their mixed-race love story and where, ironically, they become prisoners. The novel represents the excesses of a tropical life, and appeals to the senses in a grandiose manner, presenting a simmering brewing of erotic obsessions. Kingsolver presents a similar opinion in her review of the book:

Some readers will also, undoubtedly, grow tired of the onslaught of rape fantasy and racist imagery. The novel is thoroughly salted with phrases to make the politically sensitive reader cringe: in their fantastic journey across the Brazilian hinterlands, the lovers encounter innumerable varieties of so-called Indians who scowl and steal children or flee “with the unembarrassed cowardice of savages.” There are ubiquitous references to Tristão’s “yam,” the organ that arises (so to speak) as the book’s central character, and whose monstrous size is explicitly linked with Tristão’s African ancestry (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/06/lifetimes/updike-brazil.html>).

One of the redeeming qualities of the novel is that Updike experiments with forms, density of language, and narrative styles to convey the idea of a regionally diverse country (he uses different linguistic means to describe the distinctive places where Tristão and Isabel live). He manages to convey a sense of the diverse geographical areas and summarize the moods of the places through his stylistic/linguistic choices. For instance, to represent the artificiality and superciliousness he wants to convey about the Southern part (Zona Sul) of Rio de

Janeiro, Updike constructs phony and linguistically outdated dialogues that seem plucked from old travel books (perhaps, sentences and expressions he found in the travel guide series he mentions). In this part of the novel, the sentences are short, jargon and slang abound, the author drops names of fruit and other words in Portuguese into the narrative without contextualization, and the descriptions he offers of the people and places are superficial, soap-opera like. The part of the novel that takes place in São Paulo displays a language that reflects the pragmatism of the city. In Brasília, the characters replicate the language of politicians, university students, rock-and-roll musicians, and the excesses of a rationalist constructivism. As the text moves into the jungle, the prose becomes denser, the sentences are longer and more descriptive, and dialogues are scarce.

It could also be argued in Updike's favor that, to some extent, Brazil was, and still is, a land of contrasts, featuring great extensions of uninhabited lands in direct opposition to the overcrowded coastal cities. It could also be contended that large urban areas in Brazil are still peppered with violence and swarmed with crimes, the rural areas face land disputes, there is disregard for ecosystems in the forests and swamplands, and pristine landscapes, such as the Amazon, have become the lawless last frontier subject to unruly behavior and expansionism. It is also true that novels are not ethnographic or sociological studies and authors are entitled, and even encouraged, to give free reign to their imagination. Characters can be, and often are, immoral and despicable; empirical reality is often just a point of departure in fiction. It seems, however, that whatever the road map is, a novel named after a country automatically leads readers to expect a deeper understanding of a culture, a people, and its moral and national underpinnings.

As discussed regarding *State of Wonder*, and *The River of Doubt* (and to some extent about *Brazil*), fiction addressing the Amazon region usually depicts the forest as the prime space of hydric resources and a magnificent equatorial forest, but also stage it as a site of conflicting discourses and life-threatening experiences (including human attempt to control and/or destroy it). Karen Tei Yamashita's novel, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* is also thematically centered on destruction, violence, the desire to conquer, and the exoticism of the Amazon region. To her credit, as she presents the different layers of geography in Brazil, she also analyzes the international connections that globalization foments. Yamashita addresses the fierce and destructive pace of galloping capitalist practices that subject areas of the globe to its commercial interests. She discusses the impact such greedy maneuvers have on the region and the natives (who witness and partake in the rush to conquer and destroy the forest) and represents the exotic in terms of colorful birds, feathers, and *caboclos* (mixed-race natives). The text also presents foreigners (who show abnormal physical characteristics and uncanny personality traits) as exoticized others. Thus the Amazon region is a place where unusual people and striking things congregate to sustain mass production and exportation of exotic bird feathers, alternative medicine, and religious beliefs. In this instance, Yamashita's novel also dialogues with Patchett's text, which analyzes the Amazon forest as a pharmacological research laboratory, and with Updike's gold rush of Serra do Buraco, but her text goes beyond its counterparts as she emphatically criticizes the role international capital plays in the forest's destruction (represented in Yamashita's novel by the Japanese, American, and French nationals). The apocalyptic nature of the narrative resurfaces when all is destroyed by excessive greed, overpopulation of the Matacão, overuse of the forest's resources, overexposure to the exotic bird feathers, and the lack of proper hygienic procedures (which lead to a catastrophic typhus epidemic).

Yamashita expands the concept of the “exotic” in the Brazilian Amazonian region by endowing the illiterate and shoeless Mané Pena (who develops the theory of “featherology,” a cure to physical ailments by rubbing bird feathers on his ears) with wisdom to use the resources of the forest and by casting on him the weight of the “overnight celebrity” phenomenon. But she also describes him as a gullible *caboclo* who becomes defenseless and susceptible to an overexposure to mass communication programs and international commercial interests. Yamashita seems also to doubt the concept of “public intellectuals” by using the example of Mané Pena’s intelligence and professional endurance (he was conferred an honorary degree by Matakão University) to offer a light caricature of people whose learning, erudition, and critical thinking have earned them such title.

She also challenges the traditional concept of the exotic by describing how the *caboclos* find the physical appearance of foreigners and their outlandish behaviors quite colorful. To illustrate that, Yamashita describes the excess of professional efficiency that J. B. Tweep embodies (his three arms and the skyscraper his American company builds near Matakão), the eroticism that Michele (the three-breasted French ornithologist) represent, and the Japanese extreme emphasis on technological efficiency (characterized by Kazumasa’s third eye, the ball floating in front of his nose which is the novel’s self-conscious I-witness narrator). Chico Paco’s boyish and delicate features, his love for his childhood friend Gilberto, and his creation of the Chicolândia, all seem to blend with the foreigners to present a parody of Disneyland, Michael Jackson’s Neverland Ranch, and/or Peter Pan’s myth of eternal youth. Additionally, Yamashita parodies the notion of the “exotic” by relativizing it as she compares Matakão to several flamboyant, sterile, or peripheral places in the world, and examines the glitzy side of the United States as well. She describes Matakão as a sterile “strange place”

(77), comparable to Serra Pelada (43), Las Vegas (36), Silicon Valley (Part V), and described as “a solid plate of rock” (17), that exerted a very strong “magnetic force” (51). Matacão is also similar to the ruins of Fordlandia (Ford’s project in the Amazon).

By collapsing all these elements in Rondônia (83), a borderland state, located in the peripheral north-western part of the country, and named after Rondon, himself a *caboclo* of mythical stature, she challenges the concept of strange, different, foreign, and exotic. To accomplish that, she pokes fun at the tendency in American society to reward overachievement and to glorify extremes of efficiency (J. B.’s third arm and his workaholic behavior). She also mocks many Californian cultural aspects in vogue, such the New Age movement, Scientology, and “Trialectics” (as she titles chapter 24). In this aspect, Yamashita aligns the novel’s satirist framework with Henri Lefebvre’s argument that space is a social product, subject to the social construction established by a hegemonic class. But, at the same time it seems to offer a parody of Lefebvre’s concepts of space (“dialectics of triplicety”) developed in *The Production of Space*, and later re-examined by Edward W. Soja, in his description of the three types of spatiality (objective, represented, and lived), as described in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and Imaged Spaces*.

She questions a discourse that sublimates the exotic and sides with Edward Said, who argued in *Orientalism* that exoticism patronizes and misrepresents other cultures. She also posits what Homi Bhabha discusses as “the stereotype as fetish” (74) by presenting J.B.’s and Michelle’s freakish and grotesque representation as something as exotic as Mané Pena’s bird feathers or the volatile religious space of the Matacão. Hence, Yamashita subverts the discourse and the concept of the exotic by playing the familiar against the unfamiliar, and analyzing every context to reveal that what is deemed natural in one cultural

environment could be considered dissimilar or ex-centric in another cultural setting or location. She accomplishes that in part by granting the illiterate and simpleton Mané Pena the wisdom to analyze the moral, psychological, and physical disturbances of an overnight celebrity, the dangers of an insatiable hunger for power and material goods, and the intoxicating thrills of what is different, unusual, and imported.

Yamashita presents a careful cultural analysis as she discusses the Brazilian near-obsessions with *futebol*, *Carnaval*, religious pilgrimage, and cultural fads. Additionally, she pays homage and mocks the passion for *telenovelas* so frequent in Brazil. As she acknowledges, in the Author's Note, at the opening page of the book, she was inspired to write *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* by observing the cultural significance Brazilian *telenovelas* have:

The prime-time novela in Brazilian life is pervasive, reaching every Brazilian in some form or manner regardless of class, status, education or profession, excepting perhaps the Indians and the very isolated of the frontiers and rural backlands. ... The *novela's* story is completely changeable according to the whims of public psyche and approval, although most likely, the unhappy find happiness; the bad are punished; true love reigns; a popular actor is saved from death. Still the basic elements must remain the same. And what are these elements? Claude Levi-Strauss described it so well so many years ago: *Tristes Tropiques* – an idyll of striking innocence, boundless nostalgia and terrible ruthlessness.

The aesthetic of violence and danger seems to be prevalent in all texts mentioned in this study; however, Yamashita's book dialogues closely with Mark Anderson's argument (raised in another context) that in some sense "*disaster* and *nature* are socially constructed human concepts" (28). Similar to Updike's *Brazil*, her story seems to echo the political and social turbulence of the 1980s and 1990s in that country. Her book, however, chooses to address the chaotic and ever-expanding Brazil of post-military dictatorship through the viewpoint of a sympathetic Japanese immigrant who moved to Brazil because he was so different

(with his third eye/ball floating in front of his nose) that his mother believed he could be more easily accepted in a land of such cultural hybridity and racial miscegenation. Thus, unlike *Brazil, Through the Arc of the Rainforest* describes Brazilian nationals as people profoundly committed to crossing borders of race, ethnicity, religion, and age, although they sometimes get lost in the chaos that a lack of strict boundaries and firm structure can establish. Directly and indirectly, Yamashita's novel reveals that Brazil exudes sensuality and cordiality, and can offer visitors a wide range of positive cultural and artistic experiences. It emphasizes the resourcefulness and entrepreneurship of people in large cities and rural areas, and reveals a country diversely connected in its physical, social, and human geography. It shows a nation searching for effective practices of mass communication and undergoing economic, political, and social transformations. However, Yamashita is also careful to overturn truisms and stereotypes. For instance, when the narrative seems to reveal a sympathetic bias toward the connectedness of mind, body, and spirit, she highlights the extreme and disastrous implications that the excess of religious or spiritual zeal can bring, especially when it involves the manipulation of economically challenged individuals.

Rio de Janeiro's landscape and the Amazon's biodiversity have long been metonymic representations of Brazil, and still are the two most described, studied, and analyzed areas of the country, in works of fiction and non-fiction. As an outstanding symbol of Brazil, the Amazonian region continues to entice the imagination of fiction writers, scientists and travelers. Some find delight in the power of seduction of its natural habitat, and fall prey to the promise of adventures, aesthetic ecstasies, and pharmaceutical potential ("The Green Paradise"), whereas others take a diametrically different approach, charging the forest with despicable and undesirable qualities ("The Green Inferno"), contradictions that

Shoumatoff describes well in *Southern Light*. Therefore, tattooed on the travelers' descriptions of the forest are adjectives that render *her* mysterious, fertile, beautiful, and fascinating, but also dangerous, inhospitable, implacable, and unconquerable – as wicked as a female temptress or as dangerous as the warrior Amazon women from whom the region takes its name.

Anyone who is invested in describing a real or imagined Brazil faces the puzzling task of having to portray the complexities of a country, significant in size, resources, and diversity, but also summarized in terms of its erotic/exotic lure. Hence, most fiction written about Brazil in the United States offers the reading public stereotypical slices of a country, providing examples that meet the demands for a different and colorful world (as Bishop, Butler, Célestin, and Scliar would maintain). As the texts discussed in this study illustrate, in elaborating an image of Brazil, a number of American authors have described persons who subject themselves to the magnetism of what is different, hoping to control, conquer, or change that environment to conform it to their desires. As in a rite of passage, the characters dive deep into the world of the exotic, immerse themselves into the unknown, and either face catastrophic results (along the lines described in *Brazil*, *State of Wonder*, *The River of Doubt*, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*) or, they follow William James' paradigm. In that case, they learn to question and disempower the hierarchies that establish a distance between the exotic and the non-exotic, and accept the complementary side of the other, as Wasserman would contend.

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