

RETURNS OF THE NATIVE: NEO-REGIONALISM AND COUNTER-PASTORAL IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN NARRATIVE

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Resumo: Associando conceitos decorrentes da reavaliação de Raymond Williams da dicotomia campo-cidade à ecocrítica contemporânea, discute-se a atualização do regionalismo brasileiro e sua contrapartida ao gênero bucólico na ficção narrativa de autores como Adriana Lisboa, Conceição Evaristo, Ronaldo Correia de Brito, Carlos Herculano Lopes, Luiz Ruffato, Moacyr Scliar e Antonio Torres.

Palavras-chave: Neorregionalismo; gênero pastoral; ecocrítica; literatura brasileira contemporânea.

Cidade acaba com o sertão. Acaba?
[City's doing away with the countryside. Or is it?]

João Guimarães Rosa

In her review of two panoramic studies of contemporary Brazilian literature, Leila Lehen (2011) notes their substantial consensus in identifying the field's almost exclusively urban spatial, socio-cultural and thematic orientations. As Lehen notes of Karl Erik Schollhammer's *Ficção brasileira contemporânea* (2009), "The author takes the urban landscape as the springboard that allows him to identify specific themes ..." (205)

Similarly, Beatriz Rezende's *Contemporâneos: Expressões da literatura brasileira contemporânea no século XXI* (2008), as Lehnén notes, "identifies the cityscape as Brazil's foremost literary scenario" (205). Without dissenting from this view of the overwhelmingly urban turn to Brazilian literature, itself reflecting and responding to the intensive urbanization the country has undergone over the last half century, I would caution that it risks obscuring the persistence of rurality as a significant literary undercurrent. The rural has persisted in Brazilian narrative both as a direct object of literary figuration and, even if often only indirectly, in a discursive counterpoint with the urban. In this sense, studies of contemporary Brazilian literature might benefit from greater attention to the sustained dialectical tension between these two poles of the territorial imaginary: the city and the countryside. This essay is intended as a contribution to renewed critical awareness of the rural/urban counterpoint in Brazilian culture through a reading of recent fictions that reflect upon continuity and change in rural communities from the perspective of protagonists that migrate to cities and that later return either physically or through dream and memory to their places of origin.

Involving preliminary reference in this regard to works by Adriana Lisboa, Conceição Evaristo, Ronaldo Correia de Brito, Carlos Herculano Lopes, Luiz Ruffato, and Moacyr Scliar, along with a more substantially developed consideration of Antônio Torres' "Junco Trilogy", as I'll refer to it, our reading here works at the intersections between two critical dialogues: first, the reassessment of regionalism as a literary-critical designation in Brazil; second, renewed evaluations of pastoral from the perspective of post-colonial ecocriticism. Contributing to what we might designate a neo-regionalist undercurrent in Brazilian literature, the novels considered here reflexively delineate and cross borders between rural and urban place and identity. In doing so, one of their significant narrative features is the wavering between pastoral idealizations of traditional rural

life, as contrasted with urban modernity, and what Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) proposes as a counter-pastoral response to that idealization. This counter-pastoral mode is not simply an inversion of the pastoral judgment of rural against urban life and against dynamics of change in rural landscapes and communities. It is not what we might characterize as anti-pastoral, nor is it outside of pastoral. It is, as Williams proposes, a reflexive moment within pastoral discourse itself which fosters a self-consciousness about how pastoral idealization operates and can fail to account for historical dynamics of power and change as a permanent feature of rural place. As he argues in his study of the English pastoral tradition, while the countryside has always been dynamic, subject to dramatic transformations and dislocations, what has been constant across centuries has been the nostalgically idealizing pastoral response to this change:

[W]hat seems an old order, a “traditional’ society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates: in practice as an idea, to some extent based in experience, against which contemporary change can be measured. The structure of feeling within which this backward reference is to be understood is then not primarily a matter of historical explanation and analysis. What is really significant is this particular kind of reaction to the fact of change (35).

The counter-pastoral is proposed as another, more complex form of reaction to change. It is one in which the draw of the pastoral imagination – as an ideal against which change can be measured and by which rural and urban difference is articulated – is sustained while also subjected to a critically minded, historicizing interrogation, interrupting nostalgia for and idealization of timeless, “organic” rural life with an examination of the dynamics of change affecting the environment, social relations, imaginaries, and modes of production and consumption of a particular place and time.

This dynamic of ambivalence, the wavering between the pastoral register and counter-pastoral as a sort of internal critique, is among the features indirectly highlighted by a group of critics – including Lília

Chiappini (1994), Walnice Galvão (2004), and Juliana Santini (2009) – in their assessment of regionalism as a critical designation in discussions of contemporary Brazilian literature and culture. Chiappini notes the long-standing tendency to understand regionalism – paralleling a typically dismissive understanding of pastoral – as implying a qualitative deficit that, taken to its limit, invalidates the category itself. That is, regionalist works – those that translate regional or, above all, rural particularities – that meet a certain standard of quality and critical acclaim thus lose their regionalist designation, taking their place among the great works that compose a national canon. Chiappini argues for the continued validity of regionalism as a critical category in the sense originally proposed by Antonio Candido, as a literary response, whether conscious or unconscious, to the underdevelopment that characterizes the nation's experience with modernization and modernity. Synthesizing Candido's hypothesis, she writes: "as long as there is underdevelopment, there will be new appearances of this literary phenomenon that manifests, in its way, contradictions, resentments and inequalities expressed in other ways though political discourse and political struggles"¹ (699). Chiappini amplifies this hypothesis somewhat, noting that the continued relevance and force of meaning of regionalism may be linked to asymmetries and heterogeneities other than the socio-economic that stratify Brazilian society and territory.

Galvão, for her part, notes that literary regionalism continues to be practiced, though in a state of relative "dilution" given its loss of stature relative to urban and cosmopolitan turns in narrative fiction (391). It has, however, found relatively more sustained force in Brazilian film. In her reading of its cinematic manifestation in films from the 1990s and 2000s, Galvão identifies regionalism not precisely with nostalgia for some lost authenticity but instead with a forward looking critique of contemporary globalization and consumer society. In it, she finds

a decisive rejection of the values that govern the systems of capitalism. It is not exactly clear what is being sought out, but *something else* is being sought out: something beyond market fundamentalism and its volatile rules, something beyond consumerist idolatry, beyond the digital gospel that atomizes and isolates people by drawing them into the illusion of connection in an international or even intergalactic network of sociability (391).

Santini also argues for the need to revisit aspects of regionalist literature that have been dismissed as simply picturesque, nostalgic, or anachronistic, and she proposes a reading that might move beyond *Candido*'s socio-critical identification of regionalism with the awareness of underdevelopment. Santini proposes the existence of a "new regionalism" that invites readings attuned to its heightened reflexivity, its multi-temporality, and its exploration of ambiguous zones of intermediacy, hybridity, and transit, "in which part of the dualism that marked the interpretation of regionalism dissipates " (259). Specifically noting works by Milton Hatoum and Ronaldo Correia de Brito, Santini further characterizes this new regionalism:

This hybrid representation of regional space [...] marked by the coexistence of distinct temporalities is connected to the obsolescence of the center/margin duality [...] and the revision of the very notions of *sertão* and region used in sociology, which has come to reject the dualistic interpretation of Brazil in which the city, center of civilization and of the present, was opposed to the regional universe, representative of barbarism and of the past (260).

These reconsiderations of contemporary regionalism can be viewed as overlapping with the critical reassessment of pastoral as a literary mode, a reassessment that is presently taking shape through eco-criticism, most notably in its intersection with postcolonial studies. Here, there is interest in the multiple ideological valences of pastoral narratives and what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) term "traumas of pastoral disruption" (56). Huggan and Tiffin are critical of what they call "pastoral idyll" (110), and they call for "a more complex performance of ecological

mimesis in which the eco-populist paradigms of harmony and stability [...] are outstripped by systemic indeterminacy, cutting through the illusions connected to romantic ideals of self-sufficiency and the fixity of place” (71). They identify pastoral as a significant feature of White settler narratives that can elide deeper histories of colonial occupation and the violent dispossession of native peoples. In this sense, and in the sense of its naturalization of class relations in the countryside that Raymond Williams earlier detected, “Pastoral [...] is a spectral form, always aware of the suppressed violence that helped make its peaceful visions possible” (85). At the same time, they recognize the radical potential of pastoral as “the literary mode in which are most evidently expressed the tensions between affective perception of belonging and [...] legalistic, property rights” (82). That is, pastoral can express disjunctures between ownership and belonging that are often at the heart of environmental justice and conservation struggles.

In a similar vein, Rob Nixon (2011) is critical of what he sees as the pastoral foundations of much environmental writing and ecocriticism, in their tendency to represent the environment as a “*hortus conclusus*” or enclosed garden (245). He outlines the typical epistemological gaps between postcolonialism and pastoral-minded environmentalism and their respective modes of literary figuration. Whereas the Anglo-American environmental and nature writing privileged in the early formation of ecocriticism often emphasizes emplacement and purity, with history repressed or subordinated to the “pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature” (236), postcolonialism emphasizes displacement, hybridity, and the exploration of the marginalized past. However, Nixon also acknowledges the potentially radical valence of pastoral’s “place commitments,” and the value of updating Raymond William’s notion of “rooted settlements” or “natural communities,” in which “‘lived, worked, and placeable social identities’ provided anchorage against the dislocating effects of global capitalism” (242).

These are, broadly, the current theoretical discussions orienting the approach here. I see in them a mutual interest in how literature can activate and examine questions of environmental emplacement and belonging in the face of continuous dislocations and intensified socio-ecological changes that challenge typical conceptual divisions between rural and urban place and identity and, in a larger sense, between natural and cultural landscapes. Turning attention now to a grouping of recent novels that feature both physical and imagined crossings between city and countryside, we will consider them as manifesting variations on this tension between pastoral and counter-pastoral modes of articulating rural place and belonging, and as part of a neo-regionalist current in contemporary Brazilian literature that can be understood as both affirming regionalism as a literary tradition with continued force of meaning in Brazil today, and challenging some of what have been understood as its typical conventions and parameters.

Three widely acclaimed novels from the first decade of this century, beyond their locations and dislocations between city and countryside, coincide in their exploration of rural communities of origin as sites of formative traumas as well as sites for their potential transcendence. Adriana Lisboa's 2003 novel, *Sinfonia em Branco* [Symphony in White]² tells the story of a trauma of pastoral disruption suffered by two sisters during their childhood on a farm in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Patriarchal family dynamics, sexual violence, and their enduring legacies in the divergent lives of the two sisters are haltingly recounted through hints, ellipses, and fragments of memory that interrupt other, equally intense evocations of idyllic, pastoral childhood, complete with homemade sweets, the calls of guinea fowl, river-mud, and rope-swings. The recovery of the memory of that fleeting, childhood pastoral idyll is perceived as a means of recovering from the traumatic violence that abruptly brought it to an end. The narrative closes with a reunion of the adult sisters at the farm, an intimately detailed inventory of changes and continuities in its still vibrant

landscape, itself a repository of memory, and a flashback upon a scene of them together as girls, looking “down upon the world from the top of the guava tree. Unhurried, fearless” (221).

Also from 2003, Conceição Evaristo’s debut novel, *Ponciá Vicêncio*,³ traces the dislocation of an Afro-Brazilian family from their share-cropping community in Minas Gerais. There, they suffer economic marginalization and episodes of racist violence. However, they also share a richly meaningful and rooted sense of collective identity nourished by a combination of agrarian and religious cycles. With the move to metropolitan São Paulo, we witness the disintegration of the family as well as the growing fragility of the title character’s sense of identity. Ponciá, who was trained as a girl in her community’s practice of spiritually inspired, figurative, ceramic sculpture, suffers so intensely from her dislocation that her skin begins to physically itch and burn, a suffering that can only be relieved through renewed contact with the clay that is collected from the banks of the river that traverses her homeland. In both Lisboa’s and Evaristo’s novels, the return to the rural community of origins is conceived of as a means to recover family ties, reconnect with formative landscapes, exorcize traumas, and restore the sense of self that has eroded through a separation alternately perceived as escape, exile, diaspora and estrangement.

In a similar vein, *Galiléia*,⁴ the 2008 novel by Ronaldo Correia de Brito, tells of three cousins who have made their lives elsewhere – in Recife, São Paulo, and Norway. They journey together back to the family estate in the *sertão cearense* to visit their dying grandfather. It is a narrative that registers the transformative force of global culture and technology in the social milieu of the small towns but also continuity and reinvention of the region’s tragic-mythic past, religiosity, and the enduring shadow of the patriarchal family and its rigid codes of honor and enforcement of authority. The primary narrator, Adonias exalts in his reunion with the formative natural landscape and also painfully revisits the climate of fear

and repression imposed by the patriarchal order and uncertain memories of traumatic violence. He attempts to make sense of a set of hushed and proudly proclaimed tales of the family's formation and its vast rural estate, and he is forced to recognize the persistent tension in his own identity, located somewhere "in a no-man's land, some poorly defined space between countryside and city" (160).

If for Adonias, this in-betweenness is inescapable, and thus, tragic, for Carlinhos, the protagonist of Carlos Herculano Lopes' 2011 novel, *Poltrona 27* [Seat 27],⁵ it is the affirmation of opportunity and choice. Carlinhos, who left his rural community in northern Minas Gerais for the state capital decades before, during his early adolescence, has determined to rebuild the family farm, following the death of his father. To this end, he makes a monthly journey by bus between Belo Horizonte and Santa Marta, creating some sense of permanence in this constant dislocation between rural and urban place in always attempting to occupy the same seat. A series of these journeys gives structure to a widely ranging set of narratives of family history, dramatic tales told to him by fellow passengers on the bus, along with detailed accounts of Carlinhos's efforts to revive the land. These combine to provide a complex portrait of small town and rural Minas Gerais marked by mobility and striving rather than static, agrarian traditionality. Carlinhos closes his narrative with a simple affirmation, "I chose to risk living between two worlds" (155), yet there are also assertions of pastoral belonging rooted in the family and personal relationship with the land – presented as a reciprocal stewardship – by which his continued life in the city becomes for him simply a means of restoring that relationship. Carlinhos recalls the encouragement of his mother, "Your place is here, son. You grew up here. Caught birds here. Raised your lambs here, played with your friends and rode horses here. [...] Give up this foolishness of seeking out some other place, because it just won't work" (10).

Works by another two writers express more obliquely tensions between pastoral and counter-pastoral registers in narrating returns to rural origins. In Luiz Ruffato's quintiessentially urban, 2001 novel, *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* [They Were a Great Many Horses],⁶ a portrait in fragments of the city of São Paulo, the rural is invoked a number of times in jarring and interruptive contrast with scenes of intensely urban experience and ambience. Rural origins are evoked through registers of memory both nostalgic and painful as well as through physical journeys, visitors, and correspondence from beyond the confines of the city, subtly asserting rurality as a persistent presence and dimension of identity among the urban multitude. An early chapter presents a mother's anxious and uncomfortable journey by bus from Pernambuco to São Paulo, where her son and his family await her. Through various stream-of-consciousness registers, we hear the promises of her son, the noise of the bus, the voice of driver, and an exhaustive inventory of visible elements composing the landscape as it shifts from urban to suburban to rural to suburban to urban again:

... distinct landscapes are shuffled together, enooormous cities, tiny town that, zoom!, already passed by, *And the barbed-wire fences, the dry branches, the tall grass, the termite mounds, cattle carcasses, vultures, blue sky... banana trees, bicycles, little trees, trees, trees, trees* (18-19).

Another chapter takes the form of a letter from a mother in Guidoval, a small town in Minas, to her son in São Paulo, relating news of aging relatives, old friends, the family dog who no longer moves from below the mango tree, all urgently awaiting his visit. In "45: Partial View of the City," a woman crammed among fellow commuters on a city bus is described as never having become accustomed to "the traffic, the rush, the noise," which, as the scene unfolds, is interrupted by a memory that perfectly illustrates a counter-pastoral sensibility, ambiguously evoking both the sensual beauty and distinct harshness of rural life: "the rope sings on the pulley the bucket brings up a bit of brackish water the silence of the cattle grazing the dry earth cracking between the toes" (100).

Moacyr Scliar's *Éden-Brasil*⁷ published in 2002, is distinct in this grouping in that its protagonists attempt a return to rural origins that are more explicitly mythical and, in a variety of senses, fabricated. The protagonists include Rique, a young actor from Porto Alegre searching for a lifeline for his struggling career. His father, who died when Rique was a child, was an Indian from the Amazon, who met his mother while she was on a school trip. Rique meets Adamastor, a middle-aged, recently divorced bureaucrat, also from Porto Alegre, who is trying to reinvent some sense of purpose for his life with the help of a large inheritance. Many years before, he had left his authoritarian father's rural estate to half-heartedly study agronomy in the state capital, where he became active in land reform and environmentalist causes before settling into an unhappy marriage and clerical job. Together, and with the assistance of an Argentine ex-pat entrepreneur and showman, they create *Éden-Brasil*, an eco-tourism destination and nature reserve in a stunning swath of beach-lined, coastal rainforest in Santa Catarina. Inspired by the paradisiacal setting and the idea of providing visitors with the ultimate return to nature experience, they decide to stage the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, complete with Adam, Eve, snake, apple, and even the voice of God. Adamastor's grandiose vision of a transformative place where Brazilians will transcend their alienation from nature and begin to question their destructive, consumerist, urban-centered lifestyles, quickly plays out as little more than another roadside attraction. As they struggle to keep the project afloat and attract public attention, Adam, performed by Rique, is ultimately converted into a romanticized vision of Indianness straight out of an Alencar novel. There is a redemptive minor tone to Scliar's narrative in that Rique is able to reconnect with the memory of his father – and his father's exile from his land – and Adamastor, despite the failings of his project, is more modestly able to reinvent his life in that place. However, the major tone to the novel is rather caustically skeptical, as it develops

into a parable of environmentalist ideals clashing with and compromised by global consumer culture, local politics, and romantic imaginaries of nature and natural authenticity.

With the space remaining, I'd like to turn to specific, textual examples of the counter-pastoral mode from the trilogy of novels by the Bahian writer Antônio Torres, including *Essa Terra* [The Land] published in 1976, *O Cachorro e o Lobo* [The Dog and the Wolf], from 1997, and *Pelo Fundo da Agulha* [Through the Eye of the Needle], from 2006.⁸ The trilogy tells the story of Totonhim, his decision to leave his Bahian backland town, Junco, for São Paulo, and his later returns, both real and imaginary. Torres' trilogy presents a longitudinal reflection on rurality and urbanization in Brazil with its overall narrative arc paralleling the real passage of time between the appearance of the second and third volumes of the trilogy. Though each novel presents a narrative confined to a relatively compressed period of time, the trilogy as a whole involves both a representation of the changes in a rural community as observed and imagined by Totonhim over the course of his adult life, and a reflexive interrogation of his own changing responses to those changes. Complicating this chronological linearity across the trilogy, within each novel multi-temporalities emerge through interruptive transitions back and forth between registers of dream, imagination, memory, and even the memory of memory. Moreover, though Totonhim remains the primary narrator over the course of the trilogy, the singularity of his voice and psyche is also composed by way of momentary shifts of point of view to other family members and even to a collective voice of the community. Totonhim's changing vision of self, dislocation, and belonging is not contained within a linear, forward progression of his individual history but is also composed as a coexistence of multi-temporalities and a multiplicity of often contradictory voices and points of view. The ambiguities and ambivalences that result in Totonhim's story of transit between rural and urban place and identity convey in visceral form the qualities of counter-pastoral

discourse and neo-regionalist literary sensibility introduced above, and, in my estimation, thus present a richly complex view into the urban/rural counterpoint in contemporary Brazilian culture and society.

This ambivalence, intensified over the course of the trilogy, is forcefully introduced in the first novel, which is structured in four parts: “The Land Calls Me,” “The Land Casts Me Out,” “The Land Maddens Me,” and “The Land Takes Me Back.” The immediate story related in *Essa Terra* takes place in Junco over a period of a few days, during which Totonhim’s oldest brother returns after 20 years in São Paulo, hangs himself, and is mourned by those again left behind. The narrative, interspersed with fragments of memory and delirium, ends with the further dissolution of the family, with Totonhim taking his devastated mother to a mental hospital in a nearby city and then returning to tell his father that he too has decided to leave for São Paulo. Throughout the narrative, images present the rural community and landscape both as a source of comfort and nostalgia as well as the place of hardships that underlie a seemingly fated disintegration. This ambivalent sense of place and assessment of permanence and change can be noted in three passages. In the first, the narrator moves through metaphors for the hardships of place to comforting, pastoral imagery:

So it was that a place forgotten in time awoke from its stupor to make the sign of the cross. Junco: a scarlet bird called Suffer, which learned to sing the national anthem. A speckled hen called Suffering, which learned to hide her nests. An ox named Sufferer. Yoked: come winter, come summer. The most beautiful sunrise in the world and the longest sunset... The sound of hoes being sharpened, of cattle-drivers’ mournful calls along the road, of men scratching a living from the nourishing soil (4).⁹

Following this introduction to a place in a seemingly primordial state, we learn of the arrival of bankers offering loans for local farmers to plant sisal as a new cash crop for the region, a plan that goes terribly wrong for Totonhim’s family in two senses: with a failed crop and unable to repay the loan, they are forced to sell off their lands, and the oldest brother

Nelo, seduced by the sight of the bankers in their jeep and with their talk and clothes, begins to dream of leaving Junco. In a later passage, we find a historically situated denunciation of the disintegration of the community and the cultivated landscape, subjected to a dynamic of forces between urban center and rural periphery that resulted in intensified rural to urban and inter-regional migration over the course of Brazil's 20th century:

Was it the end he was seeing before his eyes? Houses closed, farms abandoned. Now the true owner of everything was the scrub brush that grew wildly between the rows of cacti with their green palm leaves and dry tassles, for lack of hands to cut them down. Where were those hands? In buses, on top of trucks. Traveling south. South of Alagoinhas, south of Feira de Santana, south of Salvador, Itabuna and Ilheus, south of São Paulo, of Paraná, of Marília, south of Londrina, going to the South of Brazil. Fortune was in the South, where they all went, where he was going (67-68).

In a third passage, however, through Nelo's voice, causality is shifted to natural forces determining the region's ecology, converted into signs of divinely ordered fate. Still though, he concludes by stating the difficulty of deciding how to respond to the set of push and pull factors that underlie migration out of the *sertão*.

We were born in a harsh land, where everything was already condemned from the beginning. Harsh sun. Harsh rain. The sun burns into our brains and the rain washes away the fences, leaving only the barbed wire, so that the men had to replace the fenceposts and staple up the same barbed wire. And as soon as they finish making the fence, they have to root out all the weeds, the strangling, spreading vegetation that has sprung up with the rain for which they prayed so hard to God.

He repeated all this to me in the morning. And he also said:

"That's why I don't know if I'm going back or staying." (96-97).

In the end, following Nelo's fateful decision to, in a sense, stay, Totonhim opts to leave, breaking the news to his father, who responds, in kind, with ambivalence:

"You're just like the others. You don't like it here. [...] Nobody likes it here. Nobody has any love for this land."

He did – I knew, everyone knew.

The sermon over, Papa's voice softened, more accepting, less displeased.

"You're doing the right thing," he said (135-136).

O Cachorro e o Lobo also takes place in Junco, this time over a roughly twenty-four hour period, during which Totonhim visits his father after his own twenty-year absence. The novel is centered on Totonhim's struggle with the memory of his brother's suicide and the fear that he is fated to the same end. He is also fearful of confrontation with his father, who has resisted efforts by the family to abandon Junco and move to a nearby city. Totonhim has found a career as a bank worker in São Paulo, thus representing a profession he knows his father despises as dishonest and parasitic and the cause the family's uprooting and dispersal from the land. Totonhim's fear of facing his father and of finding in his father's house the image of his brother's corpse is gradually displaced by other emotions and images. These include a sense of recovered peace and identity, a checked imagining of a return to an agrarian existence, and a nostalgic accounting for things lost. An early passage contrasts perceptions of his rural past and his present urban life, though with evident uncertainty as to what amounts to the fundamental difference between them:

Silence.

It's like a prize, a blessing, definitive proof that it was worth coming back to this world where it's no longer necessary to close my eyes to remember that I had a life before and that it wasn't the same as the one I have now, whatever it is that makes one different from the other, nervousness and exhaustion, hesitations, appointments, stress, who knows (34).

Toward the end of his brief visit to Junco, Totonhim contemplates a return to farming by those who left, as the last hope for a fading community. He then skeptically interrupts his own pastoral imaginary:

One final hope: that those that left, when they return, will still want to work their plots of land, like before. And what if nobody wants anything to do with farming? What use will these lands be? ... Without a single bean plant, what will this place survive on? [...] What I really want to see are rows and rows of beans and corn, pastures full of lush grass, [...] steers grazing and dairy cows being led into the corral. [...] Forget it, Totonhim. You don't live here anymore. And you don't know what you're talking about (134-135).

And his visit culminates with a search for his family's farm and an accounting of the absences in the present landscape:

I try to make out the outlines of the house. ... The dining room, my parents' bedroom, the girls' room, the hallway to the kitchen, the pantry, the bins for beans, corn, flour, and bananas, ... a papaya tree next to the window of the dining room, jujube, cashew, graviola, custard-apple, and sweetsop trees on the other side, surrounding the house, each producing more fruit than we could eat. Nothing. Nothing more than the grass that covered over all signs of our existence here. ... And my bed, where I dreamed of the city? Nothing (135-136).

The final novel, *Pelo Fundo da Agulha*, takes place over a few hours in Totonhim's São Paulo apartment. The outlines of Totonhim's life in the city are presented through fragments of memory, and we follow him on recalled and imagined journeys: back to Junco to see his father again, to Paris as the locus of a prior, utopian ideal of urban modernity, and to a stunningly beautiful rural landscape with his mother, a landscape that then morphs into a nightmare vision of desolation that she explains is a purgatory for suicides. Totonhim, retired from the bank, is alone in his apartment, suffering an acutely renewed crisis of identity. He guides us through terrains of memory and imagination in an attempt to reconcile himself with the divergent paths presented to him, his father stubbornly holding fast to an agrarian existence and his mother having moved to a slum in a nearby city in order for her children to have access to school and another life. Again, Totonhim repeatedly imagines, in contrast with the unfolding of his life in the city, a pastoral existence in tune with community

and cycles of nature, and, again, reflexively and skeptically interrupts that imaginary. Thus, the counter-pastoral register functions over the course of the narrative to articulate the particularities of rurality as measured against urbanity while also sustaining a skeptical awareness of the temptations of idealization. Ironically, Totonhim feels nostalgic for his rural childhood precisely because it was there that he dreamed of an urban future: “Were things really so great back then? At least it was a simpler time, when you could still dream about a world to come, not exactly this one here, from which you would flee if you could” (45). Meanwhile, his pastoral longing transforms his vision of his father, whom the rest of the family, separated but still geographically closer to their rural origins, consider a foolish drunk, stubbornly refusing to abandon the land, working a tiny, isolated plot where he raises vegetables and chickens:

His father was an old, lone wolf who drove everyone crazy, preferring to live alone in a lair on top of a mountain, [...] in an indecipherable conversation with nature, happy with life, [...] to the point of greeting each morning the trees, the birds, his chickens (67).

Finally, Totonhim is unable to affirm more than an awareness of his own continued sense of dissatisfaction and dislocation in the city, from which the pastoral imaginary serves as psychic refuge.

[H]e was thinking that São Paulo was no longer the place for him. He felt alone. That was why he had decided to go back to the place where it all began. And he asked himself if he ever should have left. Now he lived in the illusion that there it would be possible to find in those streets, because there were so few of them, recognizably human features, people with time to chat, to say good morning without wanting to sell you something.

Chimeras.

He would quickly find himself surrounded by people asking him to buy them a drink and then to buy them who knows what. And he would become hostage to petty intrigues. Whispers among distant relatives, sidewalk gossip, minor political disputes. Then he would really understand what loneliness was (214).

By the end of the trilogy, though we don't know his path forward, Totonhim appears to embrace this ambivalence and the fixity of his dislocation between city and countryside. His utopias of urban modernity and rural traditionality have been dismantled, interrogated against one another. Having taken inventory of what has been lost and gained, what has changed and what has persisted, Totonhim is, as written in the last lines of the novel, able to again "enter the timeless region of dream" (218).

It is an ambiguous ending. It points to the exhaustion of the idea of urban-centered modernization as progressive change as well as skepticism regarding the pastoral imaginary and the romanticized, back-to-the-land urges it inspires. Yet there is something modestly hopeful in Totonhim's state of anguished irresolution and conflicted sense of identity and belonging giving way, simply, to sleep. "The timeless region of dream," as Torres names it, could be understood as suspending the typically either/or, spatial/temporal counterpoint between rural and urban, representing its exhaustion and a present, urgent need for new imaginaries, realist and utopian, of city and countryside – in the dynamic complexities of their borders, intermediacies and interpenetrations – and new or reinvented senses of environmental belonging. As all the novels considered here demonstrate, in what we've proposed as their counter-pastoral articulations and neo-regionalist orientations, this is a challenge with which contemporary Brazilian literature remains engaged.

NOTES

¹ All translations from the Portuguese are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² Lisboa's novel, for which she was awarded the José Saramago prize, was translated into English by Sarah Greene and published in 2010. Certainly, the idea of approaching any work by Lisboa under the sign of regionalism or neo-regionalism may be regarded as counterintuitive. Lisboa's writing at large has been primarily considered in terms of its cosmopolitan urges, its narratives of transnational dislocation, its intertextuality with music, painting, and poetry, and its cultivation of a quiet, delicate sensibility as a counterpoint to the neo-naturalist narratives of violence and social anomie that mark much of contem-

porary culture in Brazil and beyond. That she is a *carioca* perhaps further complicates our approach to her novel. As Araújo (2006) reminds us, in his review of the divergent views upon regionalist literature of a group of Brazil's most influential 20th-century critics, while Afrânio Coutinho included Rio de Janeiro as a "sub-region" in a literary mapping of regionalism that includes "northern, northeastern, Bahian, central, *Paulista*, and *Gaucho*" (114), Candido notes the conventional usage of regionalism to designate literatures produced outside of Rio de Janeiro. Lisboa's work, in its detailed attention to the particularities of a rural place cast through both lyrically pastoral and realist modes, in my estimation helps us to re-define and stretch the parameters of regionalism beyond its typical territorial boundaries and landscapes (which have tended to include the tropical forests of the North, the Northeastern *sertão*, and the Southern *pampas* of a Southern region) so that they might include any work engaged with rurality or rural/urban alterity.

³ Evaristo's novel is also available in an English translation by Paloma Martínez-Cruz published in 2007. Beyond our categorization of the novel in terms of neo-regionalism and counter-pastoral, the novel has been received as a significant contribution to the Afro-Brazilian and Afro-diasporic literary canons and has been the subject of a good deal of critical attention in this regard.

⁴*Galiléia* was the winner of the 2009 Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura. It is yet to be translated into English. Among the writers considered so far, Brito is most intuitively categorized as regionalist given the connection between his literature and the Northeastern *sertão*. It is, as highlighted in promotional materials for his novel developed by its publisher, a designation that Brito responds to with pronounced ambivalence. On the one hand, "[...] Brito does not fear being labeled as regionalist, and he preempts critiques in this regard: 'My sertão is the landscape from which I interpret the world, the world of today, that is globalized and has broken with traditions. I'm interested in decadence and dissolution. My characters migrate, and suffer the shock of encounter with other cultures.'" (*Galiléia*) On the other hand, he acknowledges and criticizes the reductive critical view upon regionalism and the marginalizing effects upon works and writers who are thus categorized. Brito is quoted as stating:

I know that I've been the victim of prejudice because of this choice of landscape. [...] I deal with the questions of our time, with cultural conflicts, migrations, the dissolution of the traditional family. I put on the table the irresolvable conflicts between city and countryside. [...] If you develop a complexly neurotic character, one who is a feminist and with all the typical urban anxieties, and if you sit that woman down in a rawhide chair, looking at the desolate landscape of the sertão, there will be those that only see the setting and two or three characteristically local objects. (*ibid*)

⁵Lopes' novel was a finalist for the 2012 Portugal Telecom Prize. It was published with a substantial afterword by Silviano Santiago, "Entre dois mundos," in which Santiago reflects upon the novel in terms of its manifestation of *autoficção* as a hybrid genre and the bus journey as a structuring the narrative's parallel journeys through time, space, and memory.

⁶ Ruffato's novel was awarded the Prêmio Machado de Assis by the National Library Foundation as well as top prize by the Associação Paulista de Críticos de Arte. It has been a critical and popular success, meriting multiple editions, including a 2010 pocket edition, and it has been the subject of numerous critical studies, including a volume of essays exclusively dedicated to the novel, organized by Marguerite Itamar Harrison (2007). Unfortunately, this novel is still not available in English translation, though one chapter, translated by Alison Entrekin, is included in the anthology organized by Levitin (2010).

² Scliar's novel received little critical attention at the time of its publication. This is likely due to its somewhat odd classification as *literatura juvenil*, or young-adult fiction. I say odd in that the novel deals with adult characters and situations in a tone and style that largely matches his other works with which I'm familiar. I expect that in coming years this novel will, despite this classification, gain increased attention as environmental humanities and ecocriticism continue to take shape in Brazil. A reported film adaptation by João Daniel Tikhomiroff, if it comes to completion, should also draw renewed attention to this as one of Scliar's late novels.

⁸ Torres' trilogy has achieved significant popular success and critical attention. The first novel of the trilogy has remained in print, in more than fifteen editions, since its original publication over three decades ago. It has been translated and published in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Dutch, Hebrew, and, by Margaret Neves, English. Torres was awarded the 1999 *Hors-concours* award from the Brazilian Writers Union for *O Cachorro e o Lobo* and the Machado de Assis award for his collected work in 2000. The final volume of the trilogy was a third-place finalist for the Jabuti prize as well as a finalist for the Zaffari and Bourbon prize. Torres has been twice a candidate for entry into the Brazilian Academy of Letters, most recently in 2011, when he lost in a controversial decision favoring the journalist Merval Pereira.

⁹ Passages from *Essa Terra* are taken directly from Neves' published translation into English, with the exception of this passage, which I altered slightly to retain the clarity of the variations on suffering in the animal names. The translations of passages from the other two novels of the trilogy are my own.

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