

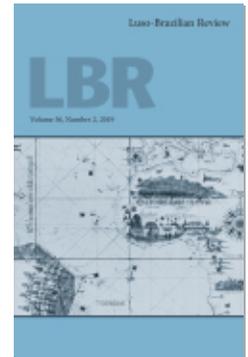


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Brazilian Literature as World Literature by Eduardo F.
Coutinho (review)

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Coutinho, Eduardo F. *Brazilian Literature as World Literature*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 364 pp.

The eighth volume in the new series on World Literature published by Bloomsbury under the general editorship of Thomas O. Beebee, *Brazilian Literature as World Literature* is a very welcome addition. Like other books in the series, this volume brings together a wide range of essays, written by some of the most senior scholars in the field, and it will prove extremely useful not only for students and teachers engaging with Brazilian studies, but also for others in comparative literature and related areas. World Literature has become one of the most dynamic areas within literary studies in the recent years and this volume represents the first concerted effort to map Brazilian literature in relation to World Literature.

It is a very balanced volume, with the high quality one could have expected from the roster of distinguished contributors and its editor, Eduardo F. Coutinho, one of the most well-known and prolific comparatists in Brazil. The volume's thirteen individual essays that follow the "Introduction," signed by Coutinho, treat discreet periods, authors or genres, allowing for wide coverage both in chronological as well as generic terms. The essays assume little or no previous knowledge of Brazil's history and literature and provide very useful and clear introductions to all who might be making their first foray into such matters; at the same time there is also sufficient detail and argument in each of the essays to engage more advanced readers. At the very outset, Eduardo F. Coutinho spells this out: "As the result of a long process of colonisation that lasted over three centuries, Brazilian literature has always been marked by a tension between the mere incorporation of a European tradition and the attempt to create a new one of a local or native coinage" (1).

The volume's organization is straightforward. Essays are arranged along a roughly chronological axis, starting with Dalma Nascimento's "Baroque Voices in the Primordial Voices of Brazilian Literature: Anchieta, Vieira, and Gregório," which could be seen as either focusing on a period or on those three key authors, and extending to Luiza Lobo's "Postmodern Brazilian Literature on the World Stage." In between we find other chapters that take a sweeping survey at a period or movement, such as Roberto Acízelo de Souza's "Indigenism and the Search for Brazilian Identity: European Influences and National Roots," Lucia Helena's "Brazilian Modernism and the Modern Art Week: The Influence of the European Twentieth-Century Vanguard" and Beatriz Resende's "The Brazilian Theater in the World: From Modern Dramaturgy to the Contemporary Post-Dramatic Scene."

Essays that focus specifically on one, highly canonical, author are José Luís Jobim's "The Multifaceted Works of Machado de Assis," Márcia Rios da Silva's "Jorge Amado: The International Projection of the Brazilian Writer," Eduardo F. Coutinho's "Regionalism vs. World Literature in João Guimarães Rosa," and

Rita Teresinha Schmidt's "Crossing Borders: Clarice Lispector and the Scene of Transnational Feminist Criticism." These categories are by no means tight and two of the best examples of flexibility are Jorge Fernandes da Silveira's "The Dialogue between Brazilian and World Poetry in the Twentieth Century" as well as the volume's concluding essay, by Benjamin Abdala Junior, on "Comparative Literature and Supranational Community Relations: The Administration of Difference, the Ways of Articulation, and the Hegemonies of Cultural Flows." In a way, this could also have been chosen to open the volume given its focus on reflecting on the discipline of Comparative Literature. Coming as it does at the end, it provides a useful coda to the volume as a whole.

The essays can all be read independently of each other. However, reading them in the order chosen can also give readers a firm idea of how one might present Brazilian literary history and perhaps that was also one of the volume's aims. After all, even though readers with a command of Portuguese can avail themselves of a number of more or less recent, more or less comprehensive, histories of Brazilian literature, the same does not apply to readers of English. Arguably the closest would be the third volume of the *Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, first published in 1996, which does have individual chapters by a number of equally prominent authors, and provides historical coverage of various genres, including the short story, popular fiction, and literary criticism.

The historical focus of the present volume is certainly one of its assets. However, one could see that too as a liability, inasmuch as it seems to preclude other forms of imagining the relationship of Brazilian texts to the universe of World Literature. Before turning to the questions raised, but not answered, by this volume, I still want to point to two strong points, besides others already mentioned. First of all, even if one of the aims of the series might be to provide materials for use in a variety of educational setting, there is a genuine intellectual tone to the various presentations. The discussions are erudite without ever becoming obscure and the way in which wide-sweeping comparisons can be made is both challenging and fruitful. Linking various poets from Brazil and Portugal to German and French ones, as Jorge Fernandes da Silveira does, is both an instructive way to understand them and also a welcome contribution to studies of modern World Literature, which often privilege prose narrative. Second, focusing on the literature produced in what one could term, following Immanuel Wallerstein, the semi-periphery, has the much-needed advantage of contributing to a challenge of the still all too-often normative and hegemonic privileging of a few European literatures such as English or French.

Given the book's manifold strengths and overall value it might appear unnecessarily churlish to discuss its flaws. Doing so, I hope, can be viewed rather from a heuristic perspective, since the failures of this volume are also excellent reminders of all that there is still to be done. The most basic flaw at the root of the volume is one inherited from the series's overall conception. Whereas I still see merit in discussing particular authors or specific movements and genres "as World Literature," I think that to treat a 'national' literature as 'World Literature'

is simply a fatal misunderstanding. The conceivable argument that given the still prevalent division of literature along national boundaries, taking such an approach enables an approximation, as if it were sort of a first step towards something not yet achievable, is also clearly faulty. There are ways of going beyond this. Unfortunately, the steps taken in this volume are simply too small.

One could say that another flaw concerns the way in which the majority of the essays seems undisturbed by theoretical reflection, and that when there is some it is either unclear or seems to send the reader back to a stage even the authors of the various essays take as having been overtaken by now. Throughout there are tantalizing references to various critical positions and well-known theorists, be it post-structuralism or feminist studies, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and others. But often the references are cursory. For instance, mentioning Machado de Assis and postcolonial criticism (102), would seem to open up the door to critically refer to, and dialogue with, questions having to do not only with race, but also with the canon and with the relative invisibility of certain forms of writing that, even if not entirely absent, are given but scant space. Yet this never happens. The same could be said regarding Fredric Jameson. Even though he does get mentioned three times (twice as Fredrick Jameson), there is never any serious engagement with any of his work. The passing reference to the controversial essay on “Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism” from 1986, is symptomatic of the missed opportunities to engage with critical theory, limited as it is to briefly citing one of Jameson’s critics, Aijaz Ahmad, without bothering to refer to what has been written on the subject since (271). And yet, that essay, on “The Brazilian Theater in the World” is the one that does attempt a consideration of the discussions that have been shaping the field of World Literature as carried out by Pascale Casanova and Franco Moretti, among others. Perhaps the essay tries to cover too much, especially as it also tries to briefly explain some of the theoretical shifts in our current understanding of performance studies.

This might also have affected the chapter on “Postmodern Brazilian Literature.” There is a laudable attempt to specify how the term “postmodern” is deployed, but we also get a large number of quick references to many works that, even though that in itself is very useful, leave a reader wanting to have a bit more attention given to at least some of the works mentioned. And yet, it is precisely this essay too that manages to bring in, however briefly, what it terms “minority writing,” including the work of Afro-Brazilian authors. Limited as that discussion here is conducted (taking at most three pages) it nonetheless does point out to the necessity to consider other forms of engaging Brazilian literature outside of the conventional literary historical ones. Whether one considers the relation of Afro-Brazilian literature to North-American literature or to African (Lusophone) literature, even just that would go beyond the binary Brazil-Europe that still haunts much of this volume, in spite of claims to the contrary. Although the relation of Brazilian literature to European literature remains an important consideration, its relation to other literatures, or its use of other forms, be it the

popular “literatura de cordel” or the essay, could help bring about a different view of texts produced in Brazil as part of World Literature.

One only wishes that the brief comments on Augusto Boal and his *Theater of the Oppressed* (284), had been more developed and even expanded to refer to other writers. In that sense, referring to Fredric Jameson might also have helped; not the Jameson of the 1986 essay already mentioned, but the Jameson who advanced the claim of a “singular modernity” in his book with that title from 2002. An advantage to considering modernity as singular would be that even though one would recognize the specific position Brazil occupies, and has occupied, in the world, one could let go of the sense, still palpable in these essays, that there is always a kind of belatedness to Brazilian literature.

Certainly, one could say that in some ways this book is a great example of how Comparative Literature as a discipline can open up groundwork. There is much need for a proper theorization of World Literature in the semi-periphery, and Brazil could be a very important case study. Even if this book does not do that, it points us in that direction and its usefulness depends as much on what it does as on what it does not do. For the moment, it will certainly be warmly embraced by many, challenging some to do what it still could not, while opening up the vast world of Brazilian literature for many.

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