

Brazilian feminisms

Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira and Judith Still (Eds.); The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 1999, The University of Nottingham Monographs in the Humanities, Vol. XII, pp. 190

In her Introduction, Judith Still describes her principal objective in this book, as the production of work reflecting the results of 'The Interface of Critical and Cultural Studies', a project sponsored by the British Council and the Brazilian Research Institute, CAPES, at the Universities of Minas Gerais and Nottingham. The authors themselves work at a wide range of institutions, from the Universities of Manchester (Judith Still), Nottingham (Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira) and Cambridge (Maria Manuel Lisboa), to Indiana (Darlene Sadlier), the State University of Rio de Janeiro (Heloisa Toller Gomes), and the University of São Paulo (Maria Elisa Cevasco), among others. The unity of the book was achieved by focusing on all the Brazilian literary works and issues discussed within it from a cultural standpoint. Clarice Lispector, the most celebrated Brazilian woman author in the 20th Century, is the subject of three of its 12 chapters. Still tells the reader the book attempts to achieve a fair partnership between the Old (first) World and the New (Third) World, in all its characteristic plurality and mobility (13–14). It is important to note, however, that comparisons are not always fair when the observer is influenced by a pre-determined or stereotype-driven frame of mind, which can distort perception of the object of study and produce unbalanced judgements, especially when considering a dominating Empire and its dominated ex-colony.

Insight on the 'other's' culture is noticeably flawed in the Introduction and even more so in Darlene J. Sadlier's article, 'Theory and Pedagogy in the Brazilian Northeast', in which the writer draws general conclusions from a single teaching experience. Furthermore, Sadlier tries to explain how and why women authors or Negro women authors, in particular, are excluded from the literary canon in Brazil, using, as her only source, an article about intellectuals being interviewed on the subject of a possible literary canon that appeared in 1994 in the weekly magazine *Veja* – a venue which expressly excludes these women authors. Such a source can barely sustain itself. The point missed is not due to a conservative ideology on the part of the scholars, but rather, to the economic drawback of a Latin, Roman-Catholic, illiterate, and underdeveloped country. Non-whites or subalterns have limited access to education, and without the help of an adequate public education system, it is impossible for them to write at all. There is not the same kind of racial confrontation or competition in Brazil, as there is in the US. These racial 'minorities' do express

their reaction to the system but in different ways, as through popular music, for example. It is also awkward to comment on the situation of subalterns in Brazil with reference to the situation of American slaves who coveted the more fertile valleys for agriculture when only mountainous lands were offered to them, as described by Toni Morrison in her novel, *Sula*. In Brazil, such people would have been happy to get any piece of land, even on mountains where climatic conditions allow the cultivation of oranges, manioc, coffee, etc. The problem here is access to any land at all. And slaves were employed all over the country with the sole exception of the Amazon, not only in the Northeast.

Racial issues in Brazil received enlightening attention from Jane-Marie Collins in her article, 'Slavery, Subversion and Subalternity: Gender and Violent Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Bahia'. She writes about Colonial prosecutions against women slaves who killed their women masters, showing strategies for reacting still used today, which are culture-specific, indeed, impossible in most other cultures. Another interesting contribution is a study of a period that has not been dwelt upon sufficiently of late in Luiz Carlos Villalta's 'Eve, Mary, and Magdalene: Stereotypes of Women in Seventeenth-Century Brazil'. This study of misogyny in the Catechists' literature by Manoel da Nóbrega and José de Anchieta can barely be considered a piece of feminist writing, but it is very informative. When extended to present-day Brazilian society, however, its conclusion is strikingly awkward: 'Women who live their sexuality freely, rather than accepting virginity or sex exclusively within the context of marriage, are often... stigmatized and demonized' (30). Once again one must ask, which particular Brazil is the author talking about, when and where does it exist?

Feminism proves to be extremely productive in this book when Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida employs Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose to present madness, hysteria, insanity and depression in a positive light, for instance, as a reaction to repressive male society in 'The Madness of Lispector's Writing'. Although Almeida values a form of literature that has been traditionally criticized for being too introspective, she does shed new light on women's ability to subvert and disrupt the 'rigidity of pragmatism' (113) and, ultimately, the 'pre-established binary dichotomies' of patriarchal society (114). Also along those lines, Maria Manuel Lisboa values the female figure of 'motherhood' and 'motherland' in 'Darkness Visible: Alternative Theology in Lygia Fagundes Telles'.

One drawback in the book is that cultural analysis of literature sometimes gives an impression that the author is trying to include too much in a single text. Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira's 'The Dry and the Wet: Cultural Configurations in Clarice Lispector's Novels' is a prime example. Her book *A barata e a crisálida* (1984) is a major interpretation of Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.*, but the 'cultural' approach encompasses so much, that it becomes weighty and difficult to grasp in a single literary object. The opposite happens in Ruth Silviano Brandão's 'Light, camera, fiction'. Her option to analyse objects in the media *par excellence*, such

as theatre and TV, seems to relegate written texts, or fiction, to an almost expendable category. Hilary Owen, on the other hand, presents a close and very well-documented reading of a novel by a modernist, communist writer from São Paulo in the 1930s in her piece, 'Dispensable Discourses' on Patricia Galvão's '*Parque Industrial*'. Using very precise quotations from the novel, Owen is able to draw acute conclusions and then proceed to general discussions of class, politics and society.

The reader will probably derive more pleasure from the essays exclusively about literature than from those that attempt a more ideological discussion of feminism, or of racial or political problems in Brazil. In the latter, it seems as if the Old or *First World* is always used as a ruler to measure works from the New or *Worst World*. There is a deplorable notion that Brazilians are incapable of reacting to these issues in particular, predetermined ways. Clearly, Hélène Cixous's insight that one can only understand an 'other's' culture by first achieving an adequate level of identification with it and its differences should be heeded here. An outward, objective, uncompromising look – based on Cartesian binaries – can never reveal the subtler tonalities that exist in between interracial colours.

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