



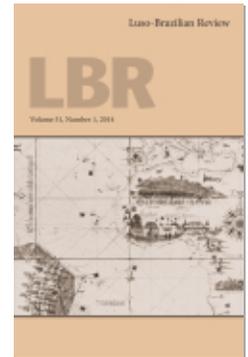
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Maranhão-Manhattan: Ensaios de literatura brasileira by Marília Librandi Rocha (review)

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employed torture and assassination against the regime's leftist opponents, an obscure chapter in the "dirty war." What was the real level of American involvement with the officers who encouraged and defended torture, leading Brazil's armed forces to the biggest disaster in their history?

This configuration vanished as the Jimmy Carter and Ernesto Geisel administrations took off in the mid-1970s. Geisel's government viewed Carter's policy of respect for human rights as undue external interference, which led to the severing of military agreements. Geisel aimed to transform Brazil into an atomic power by signing a nuclear agreement with West Germany without consulting Washington. Geisel also inaugurated a new cycle of independent foreign policy by establishing diplomatic relations with China and recognizing Marxist-oriented regimes in the former African-Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique.

As Brazil began its long transition to democracy these differences grew. America's share of Brazilian trade decreased in favor of China and partners from the European community. Simultaneously, barriers to Brazilian pig iron and agricultural commodities generated contention between commercial interests. Under such constraints, Brazil struggled to organize regional blocs, such as MERCOSUR, and rejected U.S. hemispheric proposals, such as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). By searching for new directions in diplomacy, Brazilian authorities "demonstrated that the country had successfully risen to a leading position in the region" (191). However, it would take time before U.S. officials would appreciate Brazil's emerging role as a democracy deeply committed to regional development.

This new offering in a series dedicated to "a broader understanding of political, economic, and especially cultural forces at issue that shaped the Western hemispheric experience" is particularly welcomed. The narrative goes beyond classic diplomatic history, reflecting on a long-term bilateral relationship and providing interesting hints for future research. Such an initiative is particularly important as both countries seem headed down different paths, and as China assumes a pivotal partnership in Latin American economies. Has the American century ended?

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Rocha, Marília Librandi. *Maranhão-Manhattan: Ensaio de literatura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2009. 188 pp.

In the titular essay of *Maranhão-Manhattan: Ensaio de literatura brasileira*, Marília Librandi Rocha references Roland Barthes's 1970 book *S/Z* to introduce an analogous consonantal dichotomy—*Brasil / Brazil*—which she views as representing the local and the universal, respectively. From her vantage point on the dividing line between them, she hopes to transcend their binary arrangement

much like Guimarães Rosa does in *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (where “tudo é e não é”) through a “perspectiva multiversal.” To accomplish this, she conceptualizes the space of her relationship to these ideas not as a border, but as something of a bridge “entre diferenças,” allowing both *Brasil* and *Brazil* to reach out and encompass the other.

In a way, Librandi Rocha’s position recalls that of Machado de Assis’s frustrated composer Sr. Pestana (from his short story “Um homem célebre”). Renowned for his brilliance in composing popular dance music while longing to compose in the tradition of Bach or Mozart, Pestana never overcomes his internal struggle with his mixed musical and genealogical ancestry. He is caught halfway on what José Miguel Wisnik calls “uma ponte impossível” between two worlds (56).¹ Librandi Rocha’s literary bridge between worlds, however, inverts Pestana’s, concerning itself not with the roots of *Brasil*, but with the *fruits* of what the relationship between *Brasil* and *Brazil* has produced—a bridge that is not only possible, but inevitable. To that end, the hyphenated title *Maranhão-Manhattan* is an inspired choice over Barthes’s divisive slash, more successfully evoking a bridge rather than a border and morphologically juxtaposing these worlds in such a way that they appear to flow together, much like the elegant line drawing on the cover which glides in a single, sweeping stroke between a Brazilian colonial cathedral and the Manhattan skyline (an excellent visual synopsis of the book). To cite Wisnik again, it illustrates the “permeabilidade” between worlds which Pestana tried so hard to escape and Librandi Rocha so deftly illuminates (56).

The five essays of Part I, “Ficção e filosofia,” which comprise more than three quarters of the book, provide a vibrant, captivating cross-section of Librandi Rocha’s literary multiverse. Throughout, her application of ideas from such varied sources as Derrida, Gorgias, Gumbrecht, and Lyotard to Brazilian texts is insightful and complex, yet well articulated enough to prevent the sophistication of her analyses from compromising their readability. In the aforementioned titular essay, her proposal of a multiversal perspective takes the odyssey of *O Guesa* by Sousândrade (“grande poeta, fracassado”) as its point of departure for exploring not various perspectives of a single reality, but multiple realities centering around Amerindian ideas of corporeality. Extended to literature, this entails taking fiction and poetry as seriously as we do science or philosophy. She invites us to suspend not disbelief, but literality, and “pensar a ficção e a poesia como agentes no mundo [. . .]” (49).

“Derivas a partir de Gumbrecht, Lyotard, e Murilo Mendes,” teases out the overlap between Lyotard’s aesthetic notion of *figure* and the phenomenon Gumbrecht terms *presence* through their shared qualities of intensity and ephemerality. The comparison culminates in a stirring interpretation of Murilo Mendes’s poem “Algo”—“intenso e surpreendentemente abreviado”—as an intersection of these ideas. The author equates the poem’s essence with Clarice Lispector’s “it” or, in a moment of astute self-awareness, “uma condensação poética” of her essay (78).

“Leminski *versus* Descartes. *Outras palavras*” explores Paulo Leminski’s experimental novel *Catatau* about a hypothetical Descartes in Pernambuco and the undoing of the *cogito*. Librandi Rocha reads it as an “ego trip” in the most literal sense—a guerrilla war against Cartesian thought, a desire to reverse the process of identity mapping of 19th-century Brazilian fiction in a sort of “autofagia da literatura que se devora a si mesma até desaparecer do mapa ou fazer desaparecer qualquer mapa” (91–92, 97). This (multiversal) decentralizing impulse continues in “Pirlimpisquice” e o teatro impossível de teatro,” which examines how Guimarães Rosa’s story of a school play veering ecstatically and spectacularly off-book exposes the limits of mimesis. Just as *Catatau* subverts the national *cogito*, Rosa’s text rejects the mapping influence of the author’s “palavra soprada” in favor of a voice from “não se sabe de onde,” simultaneously emerging from nowhere and many different wheres (113), an experience which the narrator can only describe with an onomatopoeic “Ooh” (recalling Murilo Mendes’s “Algo”).

“De Guimarães a Górgias. A trama do desejo em ‘Desenredo’” traces parallels between Rosa’s story “Desenredo,” Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen*, and the Book of Job. It delves into new, paradoxical realities through fiction, such as the cuckolding and cuckolded Jó Joaquim’s authored exoneration of his unfaithful partner: “Ao final, em Górgias ou em Rosa, a mulher é tanto culpada como inocente simultaneamente; não há uma verdade, mas um ser-e-não-ser concomitantes” [. . .] (137). This brings Part I full circle, showcasing the advantages and dangers of the concept of suspending our literality which Librandi Rocha proposes at its beginning.

The much briefer Part II contains three extended reviews / commentaries of *O Redemunho do horror: As margens do Ocidente* by Luiz Costa Lima (whose influence on Librandi Rocha’s work is evident throughout the book), João Adolfo Hansen’s *OO—A ficção da literatura em Grande Sertão: Veredas*, and *ReVisão de Sousândrade*, spearheaded by the brothers Campos. Though these texts are insightful in their own right, Librandi Rocha has, by this point, set the bar so high that, after the Rosean infinite loop begins to retrace itself in the analysis of “Desenredo,” these concluding efforts might strike the reader as a little tangential, despite (or perhaps because of) their clear connections to the previous essays—more like appendices or lengthy endnotes, albeit interesting ones. Nevertheless, this is not so much a fault of the essays themselves as of the expectations of the context, which, in a non-linear reading of the book—altogether likely in a collection of this type—would be inconsequential.

In spite of the book’s intermingled themes, however, Librandi Rocha has resisted the urge to bookend her essays with an introduction or conclusion to tie things up more neatly; rather, she allows the aesthetic to mirror the content and avoids over-unifying what is already satisfying in its multiplicity. Moreover, it is not unification that the constituents of *Maranhão-Manhattan* seek, but connection—focusing not on different worlds, but on the network of relationships, or bridges, between them. The result is a striking conceptualization of “o Brasil no exterior

de si mesmo, não como um estrangeiro pode vê-lo, mas como um nativo pode estranhá-lo [. . .]” (21), an *estranhamento* whose perceptive contribution to Brazilian literary criticism is most welcome.

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Note

1. José Miguel Wisnik, “Machado maxixe: O caso Pestana,” *Sem receita: Ensaios e canções* (São Paulo: Publifolha, 2004) 15–105.