

Rocha, Marília Librandi. *Maranhão-Manhattan: ensaios de literatura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: 7Letras, 2009. 192p.

The most remarkable voices speak not from places of victory, mastery, and centrality, but rather from locations of failure, hindrance, and marginalization. It is therefore fitting that the lion's share of innovative scholarly work to emerge within the past several years focuses on the latter. Marília Librandi Rocha's first book, *Maranhão-Manhattan: ensaios de literatura brasileira* deserves be counted among these, joining the ranks of such groundbreaking studies as Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Adam Lifshey's *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literatures* (2010), and Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).

A lucid, compact, and powerful defense of literature as (and at) the margins, Rocha's work is divided into two sections. Part I, entitled "Ficção e filosofia," is comprised of five essays which engage with texts by a range of authors from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Jean-François Lyotard to Guimarães Rosa, Leminski, and Sousândrade. Part II, "Entre livros," features reviews of Luiz Costa Lima's *O Redemunho do Horror: As margens do Ocidente*, João Adolfo Hansen's *OO — A ficção da literatura em Grande Sertão: Veredas*, and an expanded and revised edition of *ReVisão de Sousândrade*, by brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos. The two parts of the book, though distinct, flow together well, linked by Rocha's skillfully interwoven arguments about language and representation.

Maranhão-Manhattan opens with an ambitious chapter—the book’s strongest—which proposes a rethinking of Brazilian literature and culture. Noting the discursive erasure of indigenous peoples from the formation of Pan-American identities, Rocha proposes to examine that which “dentro do Brasil fica de fora” (23) via the reinstatement of two marginalized figures: the poet Joaquim de Sousândrade and the collective of Amazonian indigenous societies. Sousândrade is noteworthy both for being, in his own words, “um grande poeta, fracassado” (26), as well as “o primeiro indianista no Brasil a tratar do índio contemporâneo e não do índio morto idealizado” (33) in *O Guesa*.

Connections between Sousândrade and the indigenous collective transcend the thematic level of the poet’s work, since the subjugation of indigenous peoples by European colonizers can also be viewed as a “great failure” in that the absence of the indigenous paradoxically reveals itself as a *presence* that can never be fully obliterated through the imposition of Occidental culture.¹ Rocha foregrounds this presence in her book by way of a fascinating experiment. Building on the work of anthropologists including Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, she attempts, using concepts such as *perspectivist multinaturalism* (as opposed to relativist multiculturalism), to read Occidental literature through an indigenous lens.² In the process, the author argues that literature and indigenous thought occupy similarly marginal positions, with fiction being unfairly devalued in relation to philosophical and historical discourses.

According to *multinaturalism*, there is only one culture, which is human, but multiple “natures” or worlds, the representation of which depends on one’s individual embodiment and perspective. This worldview is non-anthropocentric

and takes into account non-human animals, spirits, and potentially other types of beings like fictional characters. *Multinaturalism* thus allows for the possibility of viewing fiction as a presence rather than an absence—as a world that *exists* rather than as a nonexistent world—in much the same way that foregrounding indigenous people reconfigures them not as absences (i.e. – mere specters haunting the Americas) but rather as presences fundamental in shaping Pan-American identities. This conclusion to Chapter 1 dovetails nicely with Chapter 2, which explores parallels and differences between the works of Lyotard and Gumbrecht by concentrating on the concepts “figural” and “presence.” Chapters 1 and 2 of *Maranhão-Manhattan*, taken together, articulate a theory of aesthetics that is deeply rooted in the physicality of the body, and bringing the body back to literature—favoring presence over hermeneutics—is yet another way of privileging the marginalized.

Returning to the idea of fiction as marginalized, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, which analyze Paulo Leminski’s *Catatau* and two of Guimarães Rosa’s short stories, “Pirlimpsiquice” from *Primeiras Estórias* and “Desenredo” from *Tutaméia* (*Terceiras Estórias*), give Rocha an opportunity to fortify her claims regarding the interplay between literary versus philosophical and historical narratives. The author maintains that fiction is superior to philosophy and history because fiction incorporates and yet transcends them both. Here, the chapters on Guimarães Rosa merit special recognition for their strength as comparative readings: Rocha advances a persuasive analysis of “Pirlimpsiquice” as a modern spin on Book III of Plato’s *Republic* and then elegantly pairs “Desenredo” with Gorgia’s *Encomium of Helen* for an interesting discussion of “redemptive mimesis.”

Maranhão-Manhattan is a crucial work because it places marginalized authors, texts, voices, and perspectives front and center, cogently demonstrating that there are insights to be found in what is typically overlooked and successes to be achieved in moments of apparent failure. As Rocha observes in the volume's conclusion, we are in the midst of a crisis in the Humanities and this crisis is directly related to the depreciation of fiction. If literature is to remain at the margins of academia—and it probably will—then we'd better start making our case as to why the margins matter. Marília Librandi Rocha's book is an excellent way to begin.

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Notes

¹ See pages 1-21 of Lifshy.

² Rocha's experiment is not entirely unproblematic. It relies on indigenous ideas that have been "translated" into "concepts" by Viveiros de Castro, leaving one to question how much does(n't) get lost in translation. Moreover, it appropriates these "indigenous concepts" in order to gain insight into non-indigenous texts. That's the whole point, of course, but in the process this exercise keeps the spotlight on objects produced by the dominant (Occidental) group—perhaps at the expense of those produced by marginalized (indigenous) groups—even as it seemingly takes for granted the prospect that Westerners might ever be able to read Occidental texts from a "truly native" perspective. Graham Huggan raises similar concerns in response to Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig's work, which Rocha cites as one of her influences. Rocha's wording suggests that she is cognizant of both the complexities and the limitations of her thought experiment, however, and there is no question that, from a methodological standpoint, it is worthy of praise.

Works Cited

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