

## RENATA WASSERMAN AND INTER-AMERICANISM

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### Abstract

This essay considers Prof. Wasserman as a practitioner of the field known, variously, as inter-American literary study, hemispheric literature, and the literature of the Americas. It also argues that she is a leader in this field because of her discerning critical observations but also because she proves the singular importance of Brazilian letters in this comparatively American perspective. My study especially celebrates her work on two Brazilian authors: José de Alencar and Mário de Andrade. Wasserman makes clear how these two writers make major contributions to our better understanding of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature in the Americas.

**Keywords:** American literature; Brazilian literature; José de Alencar; Mário de Andrade; Renata Wasserman

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Though I had long admired her work, I had not met Professor Wasserman until 2009, when Brown University hosted a superb symposium on this marvelous question: “Is Brazilian Literature an American Literature?” This was a topic in which both Renata and I had long been interested, and it afforded me an opportunity to finally make the acquaintance of this field’s most lucid and compelling voice. It would be like watching Pelé get a killer pass from Garrincha. And it was.

But how pleasant to meet someone who was both a great scholar and a delightful person! Greg Rabassa used to say that a kind word among academics was as rare as a Buick in a college town, but Renata is the exception to that rule. Smart, funny, and an imaginative researcher, Renata Wasserman is the kind of teacher and scholar we all want to be. Thank you, Renata, for all you’ve given us. As James Fenimore Cooper, one of your favorite writers, might say, you are truly a pathfinder! Bem feito! Well done!

Renata Wasserman has long been an Americanist of hemispheric scope and range. To my knowledge, she is the first member of a U.S. department of English to examine literary relations between the United States and Brazil. Samuel Putnam opened this door in 1948 with *Marvelous Journey* (1948), which, in the afterglow of World War II’s “Good Neighbor” policy, had cultivated better U.S./Brazil relations, but he was more of an independent scholar. While some U.S.-based researchers have shown an interest in Spanish America, which they tend to define as “Latin America” in its entirety, Wasserman calls our attention to the many connections that exist between the United States, Spanish America, and Brazil, whose writers have been described as giving rise to “the most independent, and perhaps most original, national literature in the New World” (González Echevarría, Pupo-Walker, and Haberly 1996, 1).

Thanks to Wasserman’s work, students, faculty, and interested readers who specialize in the literature, culture, and history of the United States can now see the importance of Brazil – on its own, as a critical part of Latin America, and as a vital and flourishing American literature, which it most certainly is.

Her beautifully crafted studies on the Indianist novel in Brazil and the United States, along with her illuminating insights concerning Cooper and José de Alencar, demonstrate how productive a comparative approach to the literatures of Brazil and the U.S. can be. And it does so by reminding its readers that Brazilian literature is not the same as Spanish American literature, and that it must not be elided, ignored, or given short shrift by those who think of “Latin America” as being synonymous with Spanish America. It is not, and Wasserman’s work makes this abundantly clear.

Wasserman’s talent for bringing Brazil and the United States together immediately put her in the upper echelons of the inter-American movement. As late as the 1970s, “American” literature meant, for a great many people, the literature of the United States. In the U.S., this was the prevailing attitude. Latin America, if it was thought of at all, did not include Brazil. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Spanish America defined Latin America in the popular imagination.

Even the so-called “Boom” in Latin American literature had been a function not of Brazilian writers but of those from Spanish America. After World War II, in which Brazil had been crucial to the Allied war effort, U.S. attention shifted from Latin America to Europe and its rebuilding. Richard Nixon’s disastrous 1958 trip there showed the dire consequences of this neglect, which led, first, to a wave of popular revolts across the continent and then to ill-advised U.S. support of several right-wing dictatorships. One of the casualties in the post-war shuffle was Samuel Putnam’s remarkable examination of U.S. and Brazilian literature, *Marvelous Journey*. Published by Knopf in 1948, Putnam’s groundbreaking effort appeared just as the United States was turning away from Latin America and, once again, toward Europe. Still, Putnam had proven that comparative studies involving Brazil and the United States were not only doable, they were unusually rewarding. The seed had been planted, and Professor Wasserman would see it flower. Indeed, she would be instrumental in seeing that it did.

As the reception of “Latin American” (i.e. Spanish American) writers in the United States of the 1960s amply demonstrated, Latin America was a vague, poorly understood clutch of nations somewhere “South of the border.” Worse, giant, Portuguese-speaking Brazil, so important to the U.S. in so many ways and featuring a wealth of superb poets, novelists, and essayists, was rendered all but non-existent. The one exception to this rule was, arguably, Jorge Amado, whose portrayal of Black Brazil imbued it with a degree of exoticism that, for better and for worse, proved popular in the U.S. of the time. Politically, Brazil was of immense importance to the United States, and our State Department stayed abreast of developments there. The events of 1964, when the U.S. supported the right-wing coup that brought down Brazil’s democratically elected government proved that. Culturally, however, Brazil rarely registered, even during the “Boom” years. A handful of our more progressive departments of English showed some curiosity about such Spanish American innovators as Borges, Neruda, Julio Cortázar, and García Márquez. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for such Brazilian masters as Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, and Clarice Lispector, all of whom were available in English translation. Brazil, like the nameless Black protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1994), was not being seen by the U.S. public. Both were there, but they were neither recognized nor accorded the respect they deserved.

This was the cultural, political, and intellectual milieu in which Wasserman began to make her contributions. Her work was instrumental in helping to move Brazil and its literature out of the oblivion into which its non-appreciative U.S. readership had relegated it.

Fortunately for all of us, Professor Wasserman was more than up to the task. Her 1983 essay, dealing with the “Indianist” novels of José de Alencar, introduced her U.S. audience to a fascinating and immensely talented American writer they had formerly known nothing about. The fact that the article appeared in the prestigious *PMLA* meant that it could not be ignored or dismissed. And it showed U.S.-centric readers that they were not the only “Americans” in the hemisphere. It is, moreover, a credit to her skill as a scholar that Wasserman could make space

for Alencar not by demeaning those of our colleagues who had a narrower vision of what the term “American” meant, but by convincing them that Brazil *deserved* a seat at the American table. In making her case, Wasserman provided us with a model of how comparative inter-American scholarship should be done, of how the “American” canon might be expanded.

In addition to writing urban novels and novels addressing the condition of women in Brazil, one of which, *Senhora* (1875), stands as a milestone in the Americas with respect to this topic, Alencar produced three Indianist narratives (*O Guarani*, 1857; *Iracema*, 1865; and *Ubirajara*, 1874). All of them involve some sort of “hybrid marriage,” one either implied, and involving whites and Indians (as in *O Guarani*), one realized (as in *Iracema*), or one involving Native Americans of different and hitherto warring tribes, as in *Ubirajara* (Wasserman, “Indian Novels” 1983, 824). In each case, the transformation of rancor and contention into harmony is the theme Alencar pushes. And he will do so by arguing that, as a national characteristic, it exemplifies Brazil.

By presenting hybridism as a positive force in Brazil’s development as a nation, Alencar portrayed it as possessing a distinctive culture. This was his goal, and he achieved it. Given the books from Europe and the United States he was reading as he composed his own, it seems fair to also say that he viewed, or imagined, Brazil as being unique in the Americas and globally. He had a vision of his nation that exceeded the merely national. Racial and cultural miscegenation, a theme later to be made internationally famous by Gilberto Freyre, is celebrated in Alencar’s Indianist novels. As Wasserman puts it, “The belief in the positive value of hybridism,” and in searching for “the harmonious combination of heterogeneous elements, constitutes one of the great arguments in the literature of and about Brazil” (“Indian Novels” 816). Brazil, in Alencar’s telling, becomes a metaphor for what the entire American experience should be but wasn’t, a new land where disparate elements become harmonized.

In 1865, when *Iracema* was published, Alencar had only to look to the appallingly destructive Civil War in the United States to make his point. While the U.S. would seek to promote itself as a “melting pot,” it was not; there was precious little melting, or merging, to it. Its many internal fissures, or fracture lines, of which race and religion were conspicuously dangerous, would make such mixing not a reality but an infrequently realized dream, a myth to be promulgated but only superficially and sporadically practiced.

In Brazil, a nation much older than the United States, this was not the case, and Alencar knew it. On his side was Brazilian history, much of which, and from the very beginning, in 1500, had to do with its indigenous peoples, who, for better and worse, had a very different relationship with the Portuguese than the Puritans would have with the Native Americans they encountered. It was Alencar’s genius to convert a historical fact into a positive and productive pillar of Brazilian nation building, one that has no counterpart in the United States, where, in the westward expansion of the post-Civil War period, the dreadful slogan, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” would be put into bloody practice.

Though Brazil had not become the true racial democracy it envisioned itself as being, it did achieve a level of hybridity that made it stand out among New World nations. When, many generations later, Freyre famously argued that “Hybrid from the beginning, Brazilian society is, of all those in the Americas, the one most harmoniously constituted so far as racial relations are concerned,” he could look back to Alencar as his antecedent (1971, 83). While Freyre’s thesis, postulated in the context of other American nations, has been challenged by many in Brazil, it remains cogent to the inter-American project.

This same worthy project, the education of U.S. readers and critics about Brazil, a long-ignored part of their own hemisphere, continued with “Re-inventing the New World: Cooper and Alencar” (1984). Appearing in another prestigious scholarly journal, *Comparative Literature*, this article, noting similarities and exploring differences, brings these two American, or New World, authors, and argues that their most memorable work shares a common motif: the mythologizing of the American Indian in helping to shape the process of nation building. Once again, Wasserman delivers a convincing piece of literary scholarship. Judicious and non-hierarchical, this 1984 study makes it possible for U.S.-based students of the nineteenth century to broaden their horizons and learn about a Brazilian writer who is both similar to and different from Cooper. As Wasserman points out, there is even an element of possible influence and reception, though, as she makes clear, Alencar, showing himself to be an astute reader of Cooper, denies it.

The brilliance of this essay, a model of what the comparative method can achieve, is that its author clearly identifies the many features that bind Cooper and Alencar together while also elucidating the many things that differentiate them. Chief among these, one can conclude, is how each author viewed the deeply American theme of miscegenation. Obviously titillated by the idea of a romance between a young Native American, Uncas, and a white woman, Cora, Cooper, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (2001), cannot countenance bring it to fruition. In *Iracema* (1941), the narrative most often read against Cooper’s earlier novel, Alencar, with a different plan in mind, does precisely this. Openly promoting racial and cultural mixing, and establishing it as a defining part of Brazil’s future, Alencar comes at the key question of American identity from the polar opposite of Cooper. One is hard pressed to find, anywhere in American literature, an issue that more sharply separates Brazilian culture from that of the United States than the racial one.

In reading Alencar against Cooper, who wrote earlier, and so, to a certain degree, established himself as the model of this type of writing in the Americas, Wasserman reveals another fundamental difference between them. While Cooper is normative, prescriptive, and in favor of rigidly kept boundaries, Alencar is all about fluidity and the erasure of boundaries (“Cooper and Alencar” 135). While his Eden is in flux, in the process of being created, and new realities “challenge hierarchies,” Cooper’s Eden “is associated with stability of meaning, with the reliability of signs,” and “the impermeability of boundaries” (“Cooper and Alencar” 135). This even applies to gender roles. While Cooper’s males and

females are portrayed exactly as their culture demands they be, Alencar's men take on supposedly female qualities (Wasserman, "Indianist Novels," 823).

Wasserman also points out that, for both Cooper and Alencar, it is Christianity that separates the white world from that of the Indians ("Cooper and Alencar" 135). But for Alencar, who seeks to bring harmony out of disharmony, Christianity is more "transposable" ("Cooper and Alencar" 137); in the Brazilian model, it can accommodate seemingly irreconcilable differences. This more flexible position as regards religion is fully consistent with the Catholicism the Portuguese brought to Brazil in 1500, one made more malleable by generations of interaction with Jews and Moors. But for this very reason, it was at odds, in the Iberian Peninsula and in the New World, with the harsher, more intolerant Catholicism the Spanish brought with them to America in 1492. And, as Alencar knew, it was even more at odds with the fire and brimstone variety of Protestantism the English Puritans brought to the New World in 1610 and 1620.

The two other major differences between Cooper and Alencar are their views on history and colonization. In Wasserman's estimation, "history proper" begins for both authors with the arrival of the Europeans ("Cooper and Alencar" 139). But there is a clear difference. For Cooper, "the European colonizers created the New World out of nothing" ("Cooper and Alencar" 141); the New World began with them. Alencar took a very different tact. In contrast to his U.S. counterpart, who ignored the Native American past of his own country, the Brazilian writer "assimilated Brazilian pre-history, the time before colonization, to European pre-history" ("Cooper and Alencar" 141). His Indians were linked to Biblical figures, medieval knights, and even ancient Greek heroes. For Alencar and the Brazilian people, American history thus precedes European colonization and must be valued in light of it. Alencar knows full well that America did not begin with, and was not defined by, the U.S.-American experience, whose advocates were, already by Cooper's time, arrogating unto itself the entire meaning of "America." Our common American history, Alencar makes clear, is much older than that of a single nation. It is, in fact, ancient, a point borne out by nearly all anthropologists.

But the most explosive difference that separated America from Europe, and the issue that was not so easily reconciled, was cannibalism. For Cooper, this issue does not appear anywhere in his texts. For Alencar, however, it did come up, and it was addressed, again in harmonizing fashion, via the copious notes that accompany his last Indianist novel, *Ubirajara*, which, unlike the other two, was set far in the past, before the arrival of the Europeans. In note 37, for example, Alencar opines, apropos of a captive warrior who is to be sacrificed and whose flesh will be eaten by his victorious enemies, that to be consumed by one's adversaries is akin to Christian communion. Cannibalism, argues Alencar, is more sacred rite than savage act. "Thus," writes Wasserman, "while Cooper banishes the native Americans from history altogether, except as adjuncts to the process of colonization," Alencar "makes his Indians into proto-Christians and shows, for good measure, that Europeans are not all that far from barbarism" ("Cooper and Alencar" 142).

Studies of inter-American literature are most valuable when they involve at least three of our New World cultures. Wasserman shows us why this is true in the 1993 *PMLA* essay, “Mario Vargas Llosa, Euclides da Cunha, and the Strategy of Intertextuality,” which deploys the strategy of intertextuality to make an incisive point about American literature, as understood in a hemispheric context. By focusing on two Latin American texts, one canonical, from Brazil, and the other, from Peru, destined to be, Wasserman offers up nothing less than a new theory of American literature.

Relying on her training and experience as a scholar of U.S. literature as well as her expertise as an authority on Brazilian literature, Wasserman carefully dissects the deeply organic relationship between *Os Sertões* (2009) and *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* (2003). But she does so in the context of the larger American experience and its New World/Old World matrix. Wasserman makes clear why, today, any valid conception of America, its histories, cultures, and literatures, must take into account the New World’s many and diverse autochthonous identities as well as its imported, or learned, identity. This same tension can be found in the cultures of North, Central, and South America. It ties us together here in the New World and it is endemic to our common experience.

Though we in the Americas, separated as we are by a host of factors, have long sought to define ourselves by aping European models and systems of thought, we must, Wasserman demonstrates, also recognize and embrace the imperatives of our own lands and people. And we must cease to discount the latter merely to enhance our standing in light of the former. “Like other nations in the Americas,” Wasserman argues, “Brazil must define itself . . . according to how it” handles this contradictory process of validation, how it conducts this “confrontation between European and American” (825). There are truths to be learned about the American experience that do not need to be measured against some outside standard to be recognized as valid. We have, historically, been stuck in an evaluator structure, European in nature, from which we seek to free ourselves while at the same time also seeking to gain respect in it. In short, we Americans must recognize our multiple and diverse identities before we seek to become something else, something external to our own, unique, experiences.

The consequences of our failure to do this, to make this valorization, constitute the conflicts examined in these two great American books. For Wasserman, these same two texts, one from Brazil, the other from Spanish America, allow her to make Latin America emblematic of the entire American experience. In terms of our thinking about what the elusive term, “America,” really means, Wasserman’s argument amounts to a major paradigm shift. There is ample reason to applaud this daring move. In Latin America, it is an issue of long standing. As the Brazilian intellectual José Veríssimo pointed out in *Cultura, Literatura e Política na América Latina* (1986), the cultures of Brazil and Spanish America had much more in common with each other than they did with either Europe or the United States. Although many close affinities between Latin America and the United States did, in fact, exist, and although both North and South America tended to look to

Europe for their models, major differences were also in play, and, when ignored and allowed to fester, these become serious problems. From our beginnings, to be American has meant something unique, even as we Americans have felt obliged to measure ourselves against English, French, or other European standards. And with these, we always find ourselves to be lacking. This is a theme that can be found throughout New World literature.

As Wasserman astutely points out, both *Os Sertões* and *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* “frame historically recurring questions about the particularity of the culture of the Americas: is there such a culture, distinct from others in the Western world, and, if there is, how should the distinction be defined and evaluated?” (“Intertextuality” 461). The key word here is “Americas,” plural, and not “America,” singular. While in the earlier (1902) narrative, *Os Sertões*, this drama plays out in a wrenchingly personal way, with the author, a professionally trained engineer and a man of science, undergoing a wholly unexpected and destabilizing transformation, in *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo* it is much more political, a problem of how a society is organized. Vargas Llosa, a writer and social critic, is not so much influenced by *Os Sertões* as he is committed to rewriting it – in order to emphasize what he feels are its most critical issues. By doing so, he establishes a cultural pattern that connects not merely Spanish America and Brazil but Latin America and the United States, a country he knows well. An enterprising inter-Americanist could easily extend Wasserman’s argument here to Canada (the story of the *Métis*, for example) or to the Caribbean, with its Creole cultures.

It is a watershed moment when an English department scholar avails herself of two texts from Latin America to theorize about “the Americas,” and to call attention to the dangers inherent in seeking identity through comparisons with Europe but without valorizing a variety of national realities here in the New World. Yet it is high time we did so. “Taken together,” Wasserman writes, of *Os Sertões* and *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo*, “the two books create an inter-American intertextuality and affirm a kinship among American nations based on the recognition of shared problems that, more than economic, are social and cultural, ontological and epistemological” (“Intertextuality” 469, 461).

Wasserman’s 1994 book, *Exotic Nations* (1994), offers Americanists of all stripes a greatly expanded analysis of both Cooper and Alencar. Taking into account the influence of French thought on New World writing about the Native American, it engages Brazil and the United States with each other, as American nations in the making, and with Europe. This enhanced international perspective, and the integrative methodology Renata employs, validate the inter-American initiative as few studies had before. It shows us how organic these multiple connections, between the Old World and the New, really are.

A major advance in comparative hemispheric studies, *Exotic Nations* divides itself into four parts: the first part establishes our early documents of discovery, conquest, and settlement. Extensions of the various European nations whose sorties into the New World would give rise to our several American cultures, these sundry writings, all of which deal, in one form or another, with indigenous

America, stand as the foundations of our collective American experience. More narrowly focused, part two examines the influence of Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and Chateaubriand on the creative visions of Cooper and Alencar. Part three takes up the role of the Indians, or, better said, the roles they would be assigned, in American nation building. A special strength of this section is that it highlights the power of the creative imagination, especially as this is yoked to specific political agendas. Finally, in part four, Renata argues, a bit surprisingly, I would say, for U.S.-based Americanists, for the related importance of Mário de Andrade's great comic epic, *Macunaíma* (1928). Her justification for this canonical twentieth century text is very solid. A paragon of Brazilian Modernism, and a text that has no equivalent or parallel in the literature of the United States, *Macunaíma* is, as Renata makes clear, a logical extension of Brazil's earlier Indianist tradition. The text itself engages, in parodic fashion, many of these earlier Indianist works, the purpose of which was to establish for Brazil an authentic national identity. In a darkly comic way, *Macunaíma* does the same thing, albeit ironically, with its Native American protagonist, a decidedly non-Noble Savage, emerging as America's first epic anti-hero. As Renata demonstrates, the Indianist tradition, a major component of Brazilian Modernism, lives on, though in a radically different form.

For the inter-Americanist, paramount in part 1 is the author's comparison of Brazil and the United States not merely as marginal literatures (which, in the nineteenth century, she considers them to be) but as marginal literatures that "offer what Roberto Schwarz has characterized as the built-in critical stance of the margin toward what the center takes for granted in values, culture, politics," and "literature" (*Exotic Nations* 3; Schwarz 1977, 1978). This perspective is essential to understanding the larger American experience. The hemispherically inclined Americanist can easily extrapolate from this dual focus to include Spanish America, Canada, and the Caribbean. Part 2 concludes by extending the Brazil/U.S. axis to show how Spanish America, too, engages in a discourse about self that attempts, unsuccessfully, to meet European standards for "civilization" while also reordering its own autochthonous realities, too often, in the Americas, relegated to the scrap heap of "barbarism" (34-68). Well known to Latin Americanists, the "civilization versus barbarism" duality applies equally well to North American cultural history, taking form, as in Latin America, in the contrast commonly made between the intellectual and artistic life of the urban centers as opposed to rural life. The result, felt throughout American literature, is a discordance that often has dire political consequences.

Part 2 is tightly focused on the influences the aforementioned French thinkers have exerted in the Americas, and, one can conclude, particularly in Brazil. Two key concepts tie these closely argued chapters together: One, a discussion of the so-called "natural man," seen by Rousseau as prototypically American, and the "civilized man," defined, problematically for the Americans, as European in nature, and, two, a running analysis of what Wasserman envisions as an American exotic, in all its culturally diverse permutations. Wasserman reads Cooper and Alencar as emblematic of the New World's effort to accommodate

its European lawgivers while also remaining true to its manifold realities, many of which were being depreciated as “uncivilized” or “primitive” and therefore unworthy of global veneration.

Freud’s work on the nature of the “primitive” mind can be regarded as something of an exception to this rule, and some of the Brazilian *modernistas* did seek to link their work to his arguments. The problem was that what was attractive to the European mind in theory was often less so in fact. The result was that certain Brazilian realities, and especially those germane to its native peoples, were seen as less culturally valuable than merely “exotic,” something alien and grotesque that existed for the entertainment, and not the edification, of the Old World élite.

Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (2020) was, for example, regarded by many of the Brazilian modernists as affirming much of what characters like Macunaíma and his kin represented. Freud, of course, was all the rage in the United States at the time as well, though there his main appeal seems to have had less to do with the mores of “primitive” cultures than with issues of sexual repression.

While we can admire the idea of the “natural world,” we, in the Americas, know that, though beautiful, it is also full of creatures (including certain native tribes) that will kill and eat us. Like certain of its occasionally anthropophagous people, American nature is not as innocent as Europeans make it out to be. It is this reality that complicates the application of thinkers like Rousseau to the American landscape. The figure of the American Indian is crucial to this process, and nowhere more explosively so than in the area of sexual relations between whites and Indians.

Whereas Cooper cannot abide racial “hybridism” (which, for him, makes sexual congress between Uncas and Cora impossible), Alencar is all about hybridism, seeing in it the future of Brazil (*Exotic Nations* 174, 192). Recognized and accepted in Brazil as normal since colonial times, and now celebrated by Alencar, racial mixing was out of the question for Cooper and his public. This fundamental difference between Brazil and the United States (and between much of Spanish America, the Caribbean, and Canada) could hardly be stated in starker terms<sup>1</sup>. Uncas is about as noble as a “noble savage” can get, and Cora is an acceptable mate for her Native American protector and beau because, thanks to a Black Caribbean woman who was one of her ancestors, she is cursed by having “tainted” blood. But none of this is enough. Their union cannot take place. Intriguingly, however, Cooper leaves the door open just a bit as, in the end, the Indian maidens who lament the deaths of both Uncas and Cora can envision them together in their version of the afterlife. Cooper’s hero, who, though biologically white, has taken on the ways of the Mohicans, clearly rejects the possibility of any sexual coupling by the two. Through his main character, Cooper thus brings the specter of miscegenation up, only to disavow it. Only the Native American women see it as a possibility.

“Cooper and Alencar,” as Wasserman concludes, “wrote histories of hope and disappointment and created myths of opposition which, unlike most myths,

do not explain what is but tell what was dreamed or wished but is not” (*Exotic Nations* 219). They show the New World projecting one reality, while living out a very different one, one constantly falling short of its ideal. If there is an Ur-theme to American literature, this might well be it.

Because difference, carefully elucidated within a field of similarity, is the lifeblood of the comparative method, Wasserman offers her readers a particularly penetrating observation. *Macunaíma*, she avers, continues the concerns of Alencar much more than the U.S. modernists, Pound, Eliot, or Stein, did those of Cooper. While in the English-speaking world of global Modernism, the Indian is left behind, in Brazil it was not; Brazil’s transformative modernist movement, in fact, places the nativist tradition at the heart of the entire enterprise. In the United States, the modernist break with the past was more radical than in Brazil, where it lived on, playing a decisive role in the process of nation building.

But the mode of presentation, ironic and self-critical, would be something altogether new, and this is the critical difference.

As a result, *Macunaíma*, the protagonist, becomes a character never before seen in American literature. Far from being another “bon sauvage,” like Uncas or Iracema, Andrade’s “hero” is, in truth, a complete “anti-hero.” Although the narrator constantly refers to him, drolly, as “o herói”/“the hero,” *Macunaíma* is incompetent, lazy, and bungling. And beset by mosquitoes, which do not usually assail our standard epic heroes. Yet he stars in what is nothing less than a riotous “anti-epic,” which is what the text (termed not a novel but a “rhapsody” by its author), *Macunaíma*, reveals itself to be.

A parody of a venerable European form, and, indeed, the entire European epic tradition, *Macunaíma* casts the story of Brazil not as a grand achievement, like the founding of Rome (which, obliquely, is invoked), but as a series of absurd mishaps. “Pouca saúde e muita saúva, os males do Brasil são/ little health and lots of ants, thus the problems of Brazil are,” one of this super-hybridized text’s recurring motifs constantly reminds us about Brazil (Andrade 61; my translation). *Macunaíma*, the character, is American literature’s first anti-hero, and he is a memorable one. As an American epic, *Macunaíma* is utterly, and uniquely, *sui generis*. And it thoroughly skewers the mythic notion of America as Utopia.

And yet, in the wild and hilarious finish, in which a capitalist-cum-man-eating-giant (Venceslau Pietro Pietra, a.k.a. the monster, Piaimã) must be dispatched, *Macunaíma* does manage to accomplish what every good epic hero must do: he defeats his arch-enemy (whom “the hero” manages, largely by accident, to drown in a steaming pool of spaghetti with cheese and tomato sauce)<sup>2</sup>, he regains his “holy grail” (here, taking the form of a magical amulet from the depths of the Amazonian rain forest, which is *Macunaíma*’s home), and, if he does not exactly form it, he introduces the reader to the nation that is modern Brazil, which is symbolized not in the primordial forest but in the loud, smelly, and utterly mercenary metropolis of São Paulo. Then, too, as befits Brazil’s national “hero,” *Macunaíma* also, along the way, magically invents the national game, *futebol*. In the process, of course, he shows himself to be an inept player.

Nevertheless, the reader, now in the game, reminds herself, not even Aeneas was able to accomplish such a feat.

With his unforgettable 1928 mock-epic, Andrade creates an “Indian antihero” who “represents Brazilian authenticity with the literary manifesto that took cannibals as models for intellectual endeavor, ancestors of present-day Brazilians, and sources of a desired difference from other cultures” (*Exotic Nations*, 227).

Since *Macunaíma* was published in 1928, it makes for an interesting exercise to read it against another memorable American novel from the same period, *The Great Gatsby*, which appeared three years earlier, in 1925. The two texts could hardly be more different, and yet it is easy to see why they must be regarded as the two most singular American narratives of their time. They also offer fascinating insights into the natures of Brazil and the United States during the 1920s, the cultural myths that were forming them and the social, political, and economic forces that were driving them. One can imagine Jay Gatsby alive and well in São Paulo, but one has more difficulty seeing either *Macunaíma* or the narrative voice as Nick Carraway.

In the course of a long and distinguished career, Professor Wasserman has brought the literatures of Brazil and the United States closer together than they have ever been. By doing so, she has advanced inter-American studies to hitherto unknown heights. And the excellence of her work provides us all with a model to emulate.

### Notes

1. Brazil has never had anything like “the one drop rule,” which, in the culture and history of the United States makes a person like Cora, who has a tiny bit of Black blood running through her veins, not white but Black.
2. As the giant goes down for the third time, he avers that the sauce needs more cheese (Andrade 100).

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