

“BRAZILIANS ARE NATURAL COMPARATISTS”

“Os brasileiros são comparatistas natos”

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RESUMO

O comparatismo e as literaturas brasileira e hispano-americanas. O papel da universidade norte-americana na difusão das literaturas latino-americanas. Caminhos da produção brasileira e hispano-americana mais recentes. Circulação da literatura brasileira na América do Norte. Escritores afro-descendentes e a cultura norte-americana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comparatismo latino-americano; Machado de Assis; Clarice Lispector; circulação da literatura.

ABSTRACT

Comparatism and Brazilian and Hispanic-American literatures. The role of the North American University in the propagation of Latin American literatures. Trends of the recent Brazilian and Hispanic-American literary production. Circulation of Brazilian literature in North America. Afro-descendant writers and American culture.

KEYWORDS: latin american comparatism; Machado de Assis; Clarice Lispector; dissemination of literature.

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Earl E. Fitz é professor na Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Estados Unidos), atuando no Departamento de Português e Espanhol e lecionando Literatura Comparada, Literaturas Brasileira e Hispano-Americanas e Teoria da Tradução. Doutorou-se em Literatura Comparada na City University de Nova York (CUNY), em 1977. Dedicou-se em particular às literaturas do Brasil e da Hispano-América, com ênfase nas obras de Clarice Lispector e Machado de Assis. Sobre a escritora, Earl E. Fitz publicou, em 2001, *Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector: The Differance of Desire*; sobre o ficcionista carioca, *Machado de Assis and Female Characterization: the Novels*, em 2015, e, em 2019, *Machado de Assis and Narrative Theory: Language, Imitation, Art, and Verisimilitude in the Last Six Novels*. No âmbito da Literatura Comparada, associada a questões de História da Literatura, lançou, em 2017, *Inter-American Literary History: Six Critical Periods*.

É igualmente renomado tradutor de livros originalmente pertencentes às literaturas em língua portuguesa e espanhola, além de pesquisador de questões relativas à ciência da tradução, tópico de que resultou a obra *Translation and the Rise of Inter-American Literature*, de 2007, elaborada em parceria com Elizabeth Lowe.

Na entrevista que se segue, realizada por meio eletrônico em novembro de 2021, Earl E. Fitz conversa sobre sua trajetória acadêmica, o interesse pelas literaturas da América, os vínculos com a Literatura Comparada e a avaliação que compartilha sobre a produção latino-americana recente, destacando-se em particular sua percepção da ficção produzida por mulheres e afrodescendentes e da circulação da literatura não-norteamericana nos Estados Unidos.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): Could you talk about your trajectory as a comparatist scholar and how you became interested in Brazilian literature?

Earl E. Fitz (E.E.F): My interest in Portuguese and Brazil began in the early 1960s, when, as an Iowa farm boy taking a break from corn picking, I first heard the mellifluous sounds of Astrud Gilberto singing "A Garota de Ipanema". I became completely beguiled by Astrud's voice and by the idea of what a place like Ipanema Beach must be like. I decided that if I studied Portuguese at the University of Iowa, which I could do with the great Mary Lou Daniel, whose book on the language of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is still a classic, I could go to Brazil and meet the "garota de Ipanema." That was my plan. I began to study Portuguese via *Português Para Principiantes*, by Claude LeRoy, and by way of a set of cassette tapes that accompanied it. My interest in Brazil grew exponentially as I discovered "futebol," also at the university, and began to read the sports pages of the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, which arrived, always a couple of weeks late, at the University of Iowa library. This is where I learned about people with names like Pelé, Garrincha, Rivelino, and Tostão and their exploits. Although I never met "a garota de Ipanema", I did meet the love of my life, Julita, at Iowa. And I remain a passionate follower of "futebol brasileiro".

My development as a literary comparatist has been less interesting, perhaps, but equally passionate. I had studied other languages, German, which was spoken by many people where I grew up in rural Iowa, French, and Spanish, which I first encountered in the 1950s in a Donald Duck comic book. I liked languages. Later, at Iowa, I studied both Spanish and Portuguese enough to become either the first or one of the first, to complete the new, combined Spanish and Portuguese MA program that,

under the leadership of Professors Daniel and Oscar Fernández, had just been created. Knowing of my interests, they both urged me to enter the doctoral program at the City University of New York, under the tutelage of Gregory Rabassa, and continue my studies, as a comparatist but one whose specialty was Brazilian literature.

(RBLC): You have published many critical essays on Brazilian writers from a comparative perspective. You've also published, among many other important books, the volume *Brazilian Literature in a Comparative Context* (MLA, 2005); how does a comparative approach enhance our understanding of Brazilian authors and their literary production?

(E.E.F): I had, for some time, been drawn to comparative approaches to the literatures of both Spanish America and Brazil because I felt they were both unjustly ignored by readers, critics, and scholars trained only in English, French, and German, the defining languages, in those days, of Comparative Literature as a discipline. These people tended not to know, or care about, writers like Borges, Pessoa, Machado, or Rosa.

I took umbrage at that. And I still do. This is when I decided that, in spite of what the traditionalists said, the comparative method was for me. I also decided that, because I found the comparative method wonderfully democratic, I was going to use it to bring the texts I liked and admired, especially those of Brazil, to the attention of the rest of the world. I'm still trying to do that, and I have never regretted that decision. Indeed, I am more enthusiastic about it than ever, since I believe it is the best, single way for Brazilianists to make their authors and texts known in other venues.

For me, this has proven fun to do. Brazil has such a rich and diverse national literature, and it touches profoundly on so many issues of fundamental importance, that it is easy to show its brilliance by comparing and contrasting its writers, authors, and texts with those of other, better known literary cultures. In *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature*, Roberto González Echevarría, Enrique Pupo-Walker, and David Habery opine that "Brazil's is the most independent, and perhaps most original, national literature in the New World" (vol. 3, p. 1). They are not wrong.

Brazilian literature benefits from the comparative method because it has so many outstanding, and often quite original, poets, novelists, short story writers, essayists, and critics to offer the world audience. Brazilian writers and critics have always been aware of the need to measure themselves in terms of other value systems, to be players in the global game.

This very fact, so characteristic of Brazil, is what caught the attention of comparatist David Damrosch, who, in his influential book, *What Is World Literature?* cites Brazilian *Modernismo* as a prime example of how a modern nation successfully circulates its writers and literature throughout the global system. Professor Damrosch was right to laud Brazilian Modernism for its integrative, synthetic outlook, but the tradition from which it comes had been in active existence for generations. Brazilians are natural comparatists.

(RBLC): You have been one among very few scholars to advocate for the field of inter-American literature; has the field gained traction? Who are other scholars working from this approach?

(*E.E.F.*): The question of inter-American literature is an interesting one. I view it as a subset of Comparative Literature. This was also the position of the International Comparative Literature Association when they devoted their 1982 conference to it. I was very gratified to see the ICLA do that, as I had been advocating for it since the 1960s. A wonderful conference hosted by Brown University in 2009 focused on this question: Is Brazilian Literature an American Literature? The overwhelming answer was "yes", but that it was also a global literature, which is entirely true as well. The one does not cancel out the other; indeed, each enriches the other.

The field of inter-American literary study is gaining traction. But it is doing so in ways I did not expect. In the 1970s, when, at Penn State and under the auspices of its Comparative Literature program, I first began to teach it in systematic fashion, I expected departments of Spanish and Portuguese, and, to a degree, departments of French, to also begin to set up programs for the study of inter-American letters. And I expected this to happen around the country. But it did not. Why is still a bit of a mystery to me, though I have some suspicions about it.

But the even bigger surprise is that before too long English departments, spurred on by their American Studies people, did move to cultivate this field, which faculty in English departments tend these days to designate as Hemispheric Studies, or the Literatures of the Americas. Although I have not kept close tabs on the jobs that are becoming available today, my general sense is that this trend is still the case. U.S. departments of English seem to be more interested in inter-American literary – and cultural – study than departments of Spanish and Portuguese or French are.

What troubles me about this development is that it seems backwards; the young scholars who have the requisite training in Portuguese, Spanish, English, and French are not embracing the inter-American project while their counterparts in English departments, where far too many are still fluent in only one language and only one culture, are embracing it. Or at least warming to the idea of it, of America as a plural entity. It seems odd to me that it is there, in departments of English and not departments of Spanish and Portuguese, or French, that the idea of inter-American literary study is being bandied about. Or "a-boot", as our Canadian friends might say. I appreciate that U.S. departments of English want to de-provincialize themselves, but it worries me that they seem willing to do so without learning other American languages well enough to read literary texts in Portuguese (or, as I prefer to say, in Brazilian), Spanish, or French.

Worse, in my view, is that because of the prevalence of Spanish in the United States, when U.S.-based students and scholars bother to think of "Latin America" at all, it is in terms of Spanish and Spanish America only. Giant Portuguese-speaking Brazil is elided, rendered all but invisible. And its wonderful literature gets ignored. This sad state of affairs is slowly changing, but the new generation must make it happen faster.

The good news is that Brazilians and Brazilianists are leading the way forward. More than any other group, I believe, they are forging a place for Brazil, its culture, history, and literature, in the Americas and in the global community. And they are doing it by availing themselves of the comparative method, which is available to everyone. And by means of which a so-called marginal literature can prove to others just how good it is. I see no reason for this very positive trend to abate. Inter-American study is a field that will continue to grow, and Brazilians will lead it forward.

There are a wealth of marvelous young scholars (and more than a few also excellent “not quite so young” scholars) who are tilling the fertile soil of inter-Americanism. Some of the names that come to mind are Luiz Fernando Valente, Antonio Barrenechea, Renata Wasserman, John Maddox, Zilá Bernd, Amaryll Chanady, Charles Perrone, Odile Cisneros, Adam Shellhorse, Joelma Siqueira, Claire Fox, and Albert Braz. There are many more. I am considerably buoyed up by the number of young scholars who are seeing the value of comparative inter-American work.

(RBLC): Do you think Brazilian literature is finally gaining more space in critical works and in graduate and undergraduate courses dealing with Latin America? Are we moving beyond the same token names (Clarice Lispector, Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa)?

(E.E.F): Progress here is irritatingly slow. In spite of its excellence, Brazilian literature is still not gaining the respect it deserves in critical studies. David Damrosch, as I have already mentioned, devotes a few lines to how Brazilian *Modernismo* illustrates the argument he wants to make in favor of World Literature, but he does not go any further. He is not a specialist in Brazilian literature, of course, but his abbreviated praise of a Brazilian phenomenon makes a Brazilianist feel more marginalized than ever, more of an afterthought than a major contributor to the global republic of letters. Héctor Hoyos' *Beyond Bolaño* does a better job of advocating for the important role the literature, culture, and history of Latin America (by which he means both Spanish America and Brazil) have in the healthy development of World Literature. And, so I am told, there are some anthologies that are interested in including Brazilian authors. This is all welcome news.

It takes time for people to be weaned of their linguistic, literary, and cultural prejudices and blind spots, but progress here is slowly being made. We who work with Brazil have the innovative, outstanding texts, so, with time, and with the opening of minds, we will gain more and more presence in critical studies.

We are doing better in college and university classes, both graduate and undergraduate, that deal with Latin American literature. Though here, too, the progress should be faster. At Princeton University, Professor Michael Wood, of the English department, teaches Machado de Assis in his courses, while Clarice Lispector has established herself as required reading for a number of U.S. English department courses and programs in Women's Studies.

Overall, my feeling is that wide spread cultural biases and stereotypes still hold us back. And here in the United States, conservative politics are exacerbating the problem. But I have great confidence in our young people, who prize respect, tolerance, and excellence. All of these qualities militate in favor of a more positive reception of Brazilian literature here in the States.

Also working in our favor is a small but growing number of American Studies scholars who seek a more hemispheric vision of what constitutes “America”, and, by extension, American literature. Currently, too many internationally inclined Americanists tend to see only the “other” America as Spanish America, which then gets lumped under the vague rubric of “Latin America”. Eventually, this movement will feature more Brazilian writers and texts than is currently the case. But this will happen. Why, one might ask? Because, as we know, Brazilian literature, like Brazilian history and culture, is so different from Spanish American literature, history, and culture. Although this day is in the future,

scholars in the United States will come to understand this and learn to make the same distinctions we Brazilianists do.

Alas, we here in the United States have not progressed very much from Machado, Clarice, and Guimarães. Of these three, moreover, it is overwhelming the first two, Machado and Clarice, who dominate reading lists. Rosa sometimes, but, I think, less and less. He is different, and wondrously so, but, in terms of his reception here in the States, I think he is regarded as being different from Machado and Clarice, and that is just too much for U.S. readers (and instructors not knowledgeable about Brazilian literature) to handle. At the present time. I also think the obsession U.S. readers, critics, and publishers seem to have with "realismo mágico", which is thought here to define all "Latin American" literature, also hurts Brazilian writers, who, of course, have not cultivated this kind of writing the ways some Spanish American writers have. García Márquez, of course, is the prototype of this kind of writing.

(RBLC): Recently, we have seen in Brazil an increase in the publication and circulation of Spanish-American authors, particularly women writers. How do you interpret this recent trend and what would the reasons behind it be? How different or how similar is this augmented interest to what has been happening in the United States for some time now?

(E.E.F): Wow. This is a tough question. But also a great one. It reminds me of a similarly tough (and not as great) one I got years ago in one of my graduate school exams. A professor asked me if I found a certain book difficult to read. Trying to buy time to put together some kind of answer, I replied, "No, I found it easy to read but hard to understand". No one laughed. I am still surprised they voted to pass me. And now that I think about it, your question also reminds me of another exam in which a professor said, "Mr. Fitz, that is a good answer but to a different question", to which I replied, "Well, could you please ask me that question, then?" Again, no one laughed.

Ok. Now that I've bought a little time, I'll have a go at this one.

To me, the increased popularity of Spanish American writers, and especially that of Spanish American women writers, in Brazil today is a sign of two factors, both characteristic of Brazil's more open literary history: One, Brazil has a long tradition of either women writing or (more commonly but only slightly less important) of men writing about the condition of women in their common society. One thinks here of Alencar, Azevedo, and Machado. Two, it also reflects Brazil's traditional openness to the rest of the Americas and to the world. This second point, in my opinion, also helps explain why Brazilian writers and thinkers, as well as Brazilianists, are the leaders in promoting the inter-American perspective. Along with Brazil's prominence on the global stage.

I may well be quite wrong about this, but I would also venture to say that what is happening on this score today is different than what is happening in the United States. Women constitute 50% or more of our human population, and so of course their immensely important contributions to human life should be recognized and promoted. And this is equally true of women writers. In the case of Spanish American women writers, and their reception in the U.S. and Brazil, I think there is a critical distinction that we need to make: In my view, readers in Brazil understand Spanish American women writers far better than do readers in the United States. So, for me, it's not just that Spanish American women writers are being read in Brazil and the U.S., it's how well they are being read, how well they are

being understood and appreciated, that's really important. And their appreciation is more complete, more profound, in Brazil than in the United States. My feeling on this great comparative question stems from my personal experience as a reader of Brazilian and Spanish American literature in the United States, a culture that really does not know much about what it thinks of, often disparagingly and always in very fuzzy terms, as "Latin America. Brazilians know better.

(RBLC): Do you see more of an affinity between the fictional production of Spanish American and Brazilian women writers now than ever before? This affinity may reside in these writers' concern with the theme of memory and a desire—we could say, a need—to recover and register the experiences during the military dictatorships in Brazil and the Southern Cone. Do you agree with this assessment?

(E.E.F): I think this line of interpretation – that these Brazilian and Spanish American women writers have, for the betterment of their nations, taken on the difficult and painful task of remembering and assessing the terrible damage done by the Brazilian and Southern Cone dictatorships – is exactly correct. What these brave women have done and are doing is vitally important.

Even as I say so, however, I worry that I am unintentionally endorsing a kind of essentialism about women writers. Am I?

Perhaps not.

I feel I'm on more solid ground when I think about this important question in the context of one of my favorite Brazilian books, *A Via Crucis do Corpo* (1974), by Clarice Lispector. I understand why this collection of stories was so panned as trash when it first appeared, just after one of the worst periods of the Brazilian dictatorship. But in my reading of it, *A Via Crucis do Corpo* offers a ringing endorsement of the role of Brazil's women in recovering Brazilian democracy but also in rebuilding a new and better Brazil for the future. And in this new and better Brazil, women will play major roles; they will have agency, at home, in their sex lives, in the world of business, and -- perhaps most pertinent to the question of the dictatorships -- in government and the political arena as well. For me, Clarice is here using the alleged trashiness of these stories as a guise, as a way of making these droll, often hilarious tales seem less politically revolutionary than they truly are, in my estimation, at least.

Now, I do not regard Clarice in essentialist terms at all. I never have. A great writer, she was one of modern Brazilian literature's most acute political commentators, and essentialism has nothing to do with her intelligence and perceptivity. So, we may rightly conclude the same about the Spanish American and Brazilian women who write so eloquently and powerfully about the establishment, the maintenance, and the consequences of these Latin American dictatorships. As I said earlier, women are half or more of our human population, and until now we have not had their take on the awful events that gave us these monstrous regimes. And their aftermath. Talent, then, plus keen intelligence, fearlessness, and a strong sense of civic duty – not essentialism – can explain the splendid, and badly needed, achievements of these women writers.

We are, I fear, very soon going to need something similar here in the United States, where, as in Brazil and the Southern Cone, reactionary and misogynistic forces are determined to undermine a great democracy and to relegate women (and scores of other people) to second and third-class status.

Readers here in the U.S. need to stop looking down on these and other Latin American writers and, instead, take a lesson from them.

You have written extensively on Lispector and Machado from a comparative perspective that highlights their literary connection to other writers from the Americas, such as Borges, for example; could you comment more generally on modern and contemporary Brazilian literature vis-à-vis the literatures of the Southern Cone?

I'm gratified to see this development. It encourages more people to think about Brazil and to study its literature, history, and culture. Interest in the Southern Cone offers a natural engagement of Brazil and Spanish America, which I heartily endorse. Finally, the validity of this comparative approach to things Latin American proves the validity of the connection between literature and politics, especially in today's world. In an age when literary study is often criticized for being irrelevant to the great issues of our time, Brazil and the Spanish American nations of the Southern Cone remind us all why literature and politics are inseparable. And they have been since the time of Plato and Aristotle. This engagement, led by women writers, will enhance Brazil's stature as the leader of Latin America and as an American voice that demands greater respect and attention.

(RBLC): In the past decade, Afro-Brazilian writers have finally been receiving considerable critical attention in our country. How can we understand this phenomenon? Would this be a consequence of more African American writers being published in Brazil?

(E.E.F): The critical attention Afro-Brazilian writers are finally beginning to get is fully deserved. And long overdue, as was the case here in the United States, where this did not begin to occur until after World War II and which, even today, is fraught with controversy.

Finding publishers for their work is undoubtedly a major element in the current surge of Afro-Brazilian writers in the public eye. So publishing companies that recognize talent when they see it and who have the courage to promote writers of color must be celebrated. And supported. Their efforts are crucial to this process.

Racial bias, sad to say, is an on-going struggle in the Americas, and while progress continues to be made, the voices of reactionaries, misogynists, and bigots seek to obstruct our common quest for more just societies. I think Brazil will emerge as a hemispheric and global leader in this struggle for equal rights. The case of Machado de Assis and how he is read, in Brazil and, more and more, in the U.S. and the rest of the Americas, is a prime example of how Brazil can show us all the way forward.

Machado's reception here in the United States is a topic of keen interest to me. He is gaining admirers with every passing year, though he is still far from being as well-known as Borges is. Especially in English departments, where, in contrast to Clarice, I still do not hear his name dropped in conversations about other American literatures. My question is this: Will Machado be read here as a Black writer? And, if so, will that restrict his reception? Will it limit or distort how readers and critics understand him and his art? The problem, if, indeed, there is one, is not Machado or his work; it lies in our own tortured racial history.

In an age of World Literature, as advocated by many U.S. departments of English, as a way of trying to escape our deeply rooted insularity, the always complicated process of influence and reception has more to do with the nature of the culture that is reading a foreign text, that is, receiving it, than with the original text itself. This may become the story in terms of Machado's reception here in the United States.

Dr. Vanessa Valdés, a professor and interim Dean at City College of New York, and I are assembling a collection of critical essays that examine this very question.

Much the same question has long concerned me about Clarice and her reception here. Would she be read as a great writer or a great woman writer? And would this kind of "either/or" thinking hurt how she was read here?

I sometimes wonder if our penchant for categorizing people and things here in the U.S. is a consequence of our Puritan formation. The Puritans, we remember, believed devotedly in the doctrine of "predestination", which grouped everyone into two groups, the "saved", that is, the people God had pre-approved, and the "not saved", that is, everyone else. Even today, this kind of rigid, binary thinking is characteristic of the United States, and it is not helpful in terms of our dealing with the rest of the world, which just doesn't reflect that sort of simplistic divvying up. Human reality is more complicated than that.

(RBLC): Who are some of the 21st century Brazilian authors you have been reading? What have you seen in their works that is compelling and/or innovative, in terms of their aesthetic choices, thematic concerns, etc.?

(E.E.F): These days, I devote a lot of my reading time to environmental concerns, and especially those that relate to Brazil and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. Along these lines, a book by a Brazilian author that is about to appear here in a splendid English translation by our son, Ezra Fitz, and brought out by the Milkweed Press, is *The Life and Death of a Minke Whale in the Amazon*, by Fábio Zukar.

As far as Brazilian fiction and poetry are concerned, I very much like three writers, Regina Rheda, Nélide Piñon, and Hilda Hilst. My students and I adore the short fictions of Rheda. We regard them as funny and poignant, but thought provoking as well. Hilst, of course, is not what one would call contemporary, but I regard her as a tremendously important voice and she is finally beginning to appear here in English translation. Other immensely talented Brazilian writers that I like reading include Giovanni Martins, JP Cuenca, and Fabrício Corsaletti. But there are many others. Brazil's tradition of producing brilliant writers and thinkers is being carried on today, and magnificently so.

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