

McNee, Malcolm K. *The Environmental Imaginary in Brazilian Poetry and Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

For centuries, images of a marvelous and abundant nature dominated literary and artistic depictions of Brazil. These recurrent figurations, initially shaped by European edenic myths, made their way into the Romantic and modernist national imaginary; later exploited for the sake of commercial and territorial expansion, they also generated disquieting visions of destruction and loss. As Malcolm K. McNee argues in this groundbreaking study, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century nature-centered Brazilian poetry and art confronts this legacy, adding yet another stratum of signification: beyond the particularities of the Brazilian landscape, “place-making,” and issues of identity formation, these artists and poets convey an acute awareness of environmental risks, and of the fragility of the natural world and the concept of nature itself. Thus, while still grounded in a specific tradition, their work advances a global conversation around eco-centered art and writing that challenges the stability of concepts such as nature and environment.

McNee surveys artists and poets who span several generations, yet come together in their consistent interrogation of our relationship to the environment. The authors include Manoel de Barros, Astrid Cabral, Sérgio Medeiros, and Josely Vianna Baptista; and the artists are Frans Krajcberg, Bené Fonteles, Lia do Rio, and Nuno Ramos. A brief but rich introduction charts the evolving visions of Brazilian nature—from the awe-filled chronicles of exploration and colonization, to enlightenment and Romantic visions informing myths of national identity, all the way to the ambivalent figurations of the modern and contemporary periods.

McNee lays out the introductory groundwork drawing from such theoreticians as Timothy Morton, J. Scott Bryson, and David Gilcrest to consider “a skeptical environmental poetics” that acknowledges nature and environment as always and inevitably linguistically mediated, but where referentiality is not entirely abandoned. In this way, his study productively moves beyond the specific Anglo-American tradition of “nature writing,” which does not seem to have an equivalent in the Brazilian context. Instead, he talks of an ecopoetry where postmodern and modern environmentalist sensibilities converge.

On the visual arts front, McNee relies on critics such as Amanda Boetzkes, who invokes Earth art as an aesthetic strategy that breaks with landscape painting and figurative approaches to nature, pointing instead to the ways “nature exceeds these discourses and forms of representation and framing” (18-19). He also references Silvana Macêdo’s reflections on art that intentionally blur the boundaries of aesthetic and scientific representation. The Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, particularly his notion of “Amerindian perspectivism,” is also brought into the conversation for the ways in which it unsettles Western notions of human and nonhuman beings and worlds.

The middle four chapters comparatively analyze a pair of poets and a pair of artists each. The pairings are rooted in affinities and commonalities, but McNee is careful to bring out their individual specificities as well. In Chapter 3, the poetry of Manoel de Barros and Astrid Cabral is analyzed as grounded in regions of Brazil considered ecologically relevant—Pantanal and the Amazon—yet surpassing mere referentiality. McNee argues, for instance, that Barros’s poetry “paradoxically seeks both to return the word to an original state of nature and, simultaneously, to free [it] from the restrictive confines of language and [...] rationality” (39). Cabral for her part contests received notions of the Amazon both as pristine paradise as well as a positivist paradise brought about by destruction and modernization while also probing the kinship between the human and the nonhuman.

The following chapter characterizes Sérgio Medeiros and Josely Vianna Baptista as poets who share an interest in Amerindian cosmologies and visions of nature, and in conceptual poetics. Medeiros’s highly idiosyncratic and innovative poetry is emblemized by his short pieces entitled “dégor,” where backgrounds are foregrounded to become “intensely living settings [...] now apprehensible with the removal of anthropocentric presence and drama” (80). For Baptista, landscape is layered with multiple historic, linguistic, and mythic traces that question the idea of wilderness as blank slate waiting to be inscribed by discovery and documentation.

Explicitly environmental and activist artists, Frans Krajcberg and Bené Fonteles, analyzed in Chapter 4, can be inscribed in the tradition of Earth art. Both engage urgent issues such as deforestation and ethnobiodiversity and

incorporate soil, stone, wood and other elemental materials into their work. But while Krajcberg's work is marked by signs of a pure, integral wilderness, Fonteles's is inspired by the materiality of natural and cultural objects and by alternative socio-environmental practices.

As in the case of the poetry in the second pairing of artists he discusses, McNee identifies a drive toward abstraction and a more diffuse discursivity. Lia do Rio's work blurs the boundaries between the work of art and its surroundings, emphasizing its environmental make-up and temporality. Rather than depicting nature, Rio subjects the artistic process to its effects in a way that evokes an "ethics of wonder and humility" (139). Even more ambiguous and impervious to clear political interpretation, Nuno Ramos engages the landscape and natural forces to obliquely draw attention to ecological concerns. Ramos has characterized his own artistic vision as "digging a black hole into the world" or "inserting ambiguity into a world that has become unidirectional and monotonous" (147).

McNee concludes his study with a thoughtful examination of the art exhibits that accompanied the Rio+20 UN Summit, the sequel to the famous 1992 Rio Earth Summit. McNee notes how an exhibit focused on Brazil's *cerado* biome was overshadowed by the more spectacular, privately funded show "Humanidade 2012," which placed humans, not nature, at the center of the discussion. These events are telling of the way debates around environment and art are unfolding in Brazil and globally.

McNee's book is unique in its exclusive and timely focus on Brazil and also in its theoretically sophisticated approach. He eloquently and convincingly displays the wealth that contemporary Brazilian poets and artists have to contribute to the global conversation on environmental art and poetry. Balancing insightful close readings with a coherent and broad panorama, McNee illuminates the environmental imaginary in Brazil as a contested yet "expanded and increasingly dynamic ... terrain of meaning" (156).

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