

Wasserman, Renata R. Mautner. *Central at the Margin: Five Brazilian Women Writers*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007.

Bucknell University Press continues to show valuable support for Luso-Brazilian studies by publishing another title that will be helpful to both students and researchers. In the wake of such studies as M. Elizabeth Ginway's *Brazilian Science Fiction* (2004) and Hilary Owen's *Mother Africa, Father Marx* (2007), among others, Renata R. Mautner Wasserman's *Central at the Margin* is a useful contribution to the field of literary criticism on works written in Portuguese, making them more visible, and therefore accessible, to an Anglophone readership. Following on from Susan Quinlan's *The Female Voice in Contemporary Brazilian Narrative* (Peter Lang, 1991), Darlene Sadlier's pioneering anthology *One Hundred Years After Tomorrow* (Indiana UP, 1992), which is curiously not mentioned here, and Cristina Ferreira Pinto's *Gender, Discourse and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature* (Purdue UP, 2004), not to mention Brazilian researchers of women's writing like Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda and Zahidê Muzart, the volume under review foregrounds the role of women in Brazil's literary history.

Wasserman's series of essays is exactly what it says on the cover: five chapters devoted to five women writers from Brazil, always discussed with an awareness of how they can be seen as "marginal" through, for example, their gender, their background, their ethnic origin, the language in which they write or wrote, and their cultural impact in Brazil and abroad. The essays, on Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Rachel de Queiroz, Lygia Fagundes Telles, Clarice Lispector and Carolina Maria de Jesus, are preceded by a lengthy introductory chapter which explains how the author wishes to bring her subjects together "to establish a series of conversations" (11) among them: "They form an assortment, at this point, rather than a community: what they do not have in common makes their juxtaposition noteworthy, what they do have in common makes it plausible" (24). What they do have in common

is that they are or were all read avidly at some time by an appreciative public, even if they are out of fashion now.

The author is careful not to generalize about these writers and stresses that she has chosen them “to show variety rather than comprehensiveness” (16). She is conscious throughout of the dangers of reductive analysis. In Chapter 5, she uses Gayatri Spivak’s theories on the subaltern, as well as the debates about Latin American testimonial literature (quoting John Beverley and Doris Sommer) to articulate the importance of reading Carolina’s diaries as a unique case. Furthermore, Wasserman is aware of the risks of exoticizing Brazilian writing (she cites Roberto Schwarz’s theory about how ideas from outside can be “misplaced” in Brazil) and also of oversimplifying discussions of gender in her subjects, making it absolutely clear that these women were from diverse backgrounds and were writing in different contexts. At the same time, she is an experienced professor of Comparative Literature and one senses that she is keen to present these authors and their works to a wider public, encouraging comparisons and “conversations” across time and space: Almeida’s *A Intrusa* and *A Silveirinha* are discussed with reference to *Jane Eyre* and *The House of Mirth*, respectively; Queiroz’s *Dôra*, *Doralina* with Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*; and Lispector’s reworking of autobiographical material with the technique of Thomas Mann. Indeed, one of the benefits of this volume is that it stresses the potential for comparative work.

In terms of structure, the introductory chapter sets the scene in order to show the obstacles faced by Brazilian women writers over time, using the history of reading and writing in Brazil as developed by Antonio Candido, Marisa Lajolo and Regina Zilberman. The longest chapter is devoted to Lispector and analyses several texts and aspects of her work. The “Very Short Conclusion” is indeed only two pages long and could have been used to discuss other interesting women writers, maybe contemporary ones, and to suggest new directions and projects.

Wasserman does not provide a thorough introduction to every work of each of the five writers, nor does she claim to

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do so. Indeed, as all quotes have been translated into English, but not all the works discussed have, the curious reader may be forced to learn Portuguese, which can only be a good thing. She focuses on a select choice of works using a different critical framework in each chapter and produces some fascinating readings of well-known and little-known works alike: the neglected nineteenth-century novels of Almeida (and her tactics for equalizing the relationship between the sexes), the major works of Queiroz (avoiding categorizing her as a regionalist but contextualizing her “feminism”), the subtle subversiveness of Telles’s novels (rather than her short stories), Jesus’s famous diary and, surprisingly and refreshingly, two of Lispector’s children’s stories alongside *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* Most of these chapters are reworked versions of published articles, which could explain the occasional errors (no note 33 on page 79; a couple of references to Queiroz, who died in 2003, in the present tense; a sprinkling of spelling mistakes; disparities in the bibliography—was *Cadernos da Literatura Brasileira* 4 published in 1977 or 1997?) and the repetition of material in both the main text and the often extensive and rather unwieldy, if interesting, endnotes.

The critical material quoted offers non-Portuguese readers access to contemporary feminist thought from Brazil, because all quotations are translated. Occasionally there are inconsistencies of presentation: some quotes appear in the original Portuguese as endnotes, others are included as translations within the text; some titles are translated, others not; it is strange that the text mentions Italian translations of Lispector’s works, but not the English versions of *A Descoberta do Mundo* and *Laços de Família*, despite referring to *crônicas* and stories from both collections. But these are minor quibbles. The volume as a whole features engaging readings of five writers who are undoubtedly “necessary stopovers in a tour of Brazilian literature by women” (30) and it could easily be used as the structure for a module or course on this very topic.

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