

Book Review

Scliar, Moacyr. *Eden-Brazil*. Translated by Malcolm McNee, Tagus, 2019.

The protagonists of Moacyr Scliar's 2002 satirical novel *Eden-Brazil* set out to create a nature-as-Eden theme park with a Brazilian Adam and Eve. When it does not go well, they put on a more deceitful play. To get funding from a Swedish foundation supporting threatened indigenous peoples, the owner, Adamastor, has his hired actor, Richie, portray an isolated "Indian." With their ploy to save the preserve, Scliar unselfconsciously makes indigenous peoples' invisibility the satire's central premise. Expertly translated by Malcolm McNee, Associate Professor of Portuguese and Spanish at Smith College, *Eden-Brazil* appears in English at a time when such invisibility is not theoretical, and indigenous peoples are demanding they be protagonists in their own narratives. But it also masks Brazil's history of anti-indigenous violence, detailed horrifically in documentary works such as *Os fuzis e as flechas: História de sangue e resistência indígena na ditadura* (Valente, 2017).

Scliar's Atlantic Forest, supposedly in Santa Catarina, lacks place markers, ecological details, and specifics about the area's native inhabitants. Scliar tries to carry it off with a knowing wink and a nudge. A consultant tells Adamastor that the swath of forest he just invested in is "boring." That is bad luck for Adamastor, but good luck for Scliar, thus saved from having to describe any of its biodiversity. In a comedic scene, an animal wrangler shows Adamastor a catalog of monkeys he could import into his preserve to make it more interesting to tourists. It's hard to believe that the sizeable tract of forest, which we're told its former owner didn't develop at all, doesn't already have monkeys.

Is this forest empty and boring or full of unseen, menacing animals? Scliar tries to have it both ways. Richie (the narrator), hiding out overnight in the preserve while pretending to be an "Indian," has a Conradian "the horror" moment. He can't get to sleep "[b]ecause of the jungle sounds, the thousand sounds of the jungle and of the jungle animals, the cracks, the whistles, the buzzes, the chirps, the hisses" (94). Richie's preferred forests are North

American, with “oaks and sequoias.” By contrast, this jungle is suddenly fearsome, evoking tropes of the Amazon as a mysterious “hell” (89): “we were dealing with thick, nearly impenetrable vegetation. The jungle was dense, dark, enigmatic. Like my father” (94). His father, whom Richie considers too silent, “Indian,” and “passive,” is portrayed as having been content to sell his handicrafts from a shack, distinct from the preserve’s entrepreneurial, capitalist aspirations.

Adamastor first conceives the business as a revolt against Disney World, where he’d taken his son, to find him interested only in “buy[ing] stuff—video games, mainly” (5). But when he hires an Argentinian who proposes an ecotourism plan explicitly based on adorning nature with consumer experiences, Adamastor takes the advice, even though it’s against his initial impulse. He had imagined he’d help tourists learn how to “[d]ialogue with the flowers” (7). He had dreamed of camellias and petunias as colleagues, wiser than him, imparting plant intelligence to everyone. In a lovely passage, the “chronic depressive” Adamastor, hopeless at anything he turns his hand to, finds refuge in “communicating” with the superior flowers: “You read my mind, camellia. You are more than just a flower, camellia, you are a teacher . . . my empathy with you is complete” (7).

It’s a doomed romantic vision that Scliar exploits for a lot of comedy, whose nuances McNee renders superbly. When Adamastor pays a substantial sum to secretly import fifteen animals to his supposedly animal-less piece of forest, one malnourished coati in search of food enters a minimart, only to be immediately killed. The rest of the animals get sick or are stolen, and only an elderly, cataractous monkey remains. Trying to solve their cash flow problem, Richie convinces Adamastor to swindle the Swedish foundation. He’ll become “[t]he only survivor of a family—maybe from the Xokleng, Indians that had been removed from their lands by the building of a dam” (85).

Scliar’s depiction of the Xokleng stops at the name. Though the book revolves around native peoples’ invisibility, it should be read in the context of substantive information about the Atlantic Forest as well as indigenous-created narratives, including struggles for territorial demarcation in Santa Catarina state and throughout Brazil. The YouTube channel of *Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil* (APIB), featuring many subtitled videos, is a great place to start, as is *Amazônia Real*’s website, which includes articles by indigenous authors such as

the anthropologist Francineia Fontes Baniwa. Speeches and articles are available with the perspectives of Kerexu Yxapyry, a former Guarani cacica in Santa Catarina, and Thiago Djekupe, Guarani spokesperson for Terra Indígena (TI) Jaraguá in their fight against Construtora Tenda. These peoples are fighting for cultural survival. And that is not a satire.

These observations notwithstanding, McNee's translation is remarkable. He also includes a useful translator's note for Anglophone readers and students new to Portuguese and Brazilian Studies that situates the book's environmental imaginary within Luso-Brazilian ecocriticism, making *Eden-Brazil* an important addition to Tagus Press's excellent Brazilian Literature in Translation Series.

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