

Literary tourism

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Literary tourism: Brazilian literature through Anglophone lenses

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In its appropriately hard-cooked translation, *The Silence of the Rain* is a striptease of a thriller that moves to a samba beat. Armchair travelers and sleuths alike should enjoy these vicarious vacations to Brazil.

(Herter 2002)¹

This paper explores the role of marketing and, in particular, media reviewing, in the creation of literary value and the circulation of literature by examining how the Brazilian literary landscape is framed through the lens of the Anglophone press. A distinction is made between homogenizing, heterogenizing, and exoticizing tendencies in the marketing of translated fiction. Brazilian literature is found to be sometimes exoticized, presented as a way of vicariously experiencing a remote culture, as a form, in other words, of literary tourism. Comparing the cases where the literature is exoticized to those where it is homogenized as part of the international literary canon helps us understand how cultural differences are mobilized in order to create an image of a “national” literature that appeals to the tourist gaze. Thus, this paper reveals the precise mechanisms through which media reviewing can contribute to both the consecration but also the devaluation of national(ized) literatures.

Keywords: Brazilian literature; exoticism; homogenization; landscape; book reviews; world literature

A partial view of the Brazilian literary landscape

This article explores the Brazilian literary landscape as it is framed through the lens of the Anglophone press and questions the role of marketing and, in particular, media reviewing, in the creation of literary value and circulation of literature.² Kershaw and Saldanha (2013) propose the use of “landscape” as a useful metaphor to conceptualize the environments in which translations are produced and received in a way that challenges images of such environments as stable substances within fixed boundaries. The landscape metaphor is used here to highlight the notion that the view of the Brazilian literary landscape explored is partial because it is seen from a particular perspective, that of Anglophone reviewers of literary fiction. This partiality is purposeful: it exposes “the danger of seeing the world through the lens of those societies that form the current centers of the world system, with the assumption that what occurs there can and should be used as a benchmark” (Wang et al. 2013).

The construction of literary landscapes is a process of the imagination. Readers’ perception of literary landscapes is filtered and framed through “mediascapes”, i.e. “the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios) [...] and the images of the world created by these media” (Appadurai 1996, 35). These “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” offer those who experience them “a series of elements (characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (35). This article sketches the mediascape of Brazilian literature as filtered through the Anglophone media and explores the implications of that framing process for how the source texts navigate the receiving landscape in their struggle for consecration.

Reviewing translated literature in a globalized landscape: homogenization and heterogenization

The emergence of world literature as a field of study, alongside the development of a sociological approach to the study of the “world system of translation” (Heilbron 1999), has resulted in increased attention to translation as the material precondition for world literature. According to Pascale Casanova, translation allows a literary work to be legitimated: “translation is the only specific means of being perceived, becoming visible, of *existing*” (2010, 296). In Casanova’s model as well as Johan Heilbron’s, literature has a considerable level of autonomy from “the constraints of the world market” (Heilbron

1999, 432). Literary value is, in Casanova's words, "incommensurate with the values of ordinary commerce" and is the "sole value recognized by all participants" (2004, 13). Consequently, in Casanova's model, the burden of consecration for authors from dominated languages lies exclusively in the literary capital of the source and target languages, the author of the source text, and the translator (290). While the importance of literary capital is undeniable, it seems naïve to downplay the role played by marketing. As Gisèle Sapiro points out, if the publishing field has become less constrained by national ideologies, it has also become more constrained by market forces (2003). Still, economic factors are not sufficient to explain the translational power relations between countries; political and cultural factors must also be taken into account (Sapiro 2008). As English and Frow (2006 45) argue,

it is not very illuminating to say that literature has become "more commercial" or to conceive the situation in terms of an ideally free or autonomous literary space increasingly "penetrated" by the logic of commerce. It is necessary, rather, to accept from the start a more multidimensional model of the literary field, and to propose that both the individual and the institutional agents involved in literary production (which means the production not just of books, but of the regimes of literary value) have come to act more strategically, and the kinds of transaction and exchange that transpire among them are becoming more sophisticated – more "advanced," perhaps, in terms of the historical logic of cultural value.

English (2002 127) calls for an investigation of literary value that takes into account "the concrete instruments of exchange and conversion whose rise is perhaps the most conspicuous feature of our recent cultural history", and which include cultural prizes, new forms of corporate patronage and sponsorship, lists and rankings, festivals and book clubs. Answering English's call, Squires (2009) has investigated the marketing of literature "*as a form of representation and interpretation [...] surrounding the production, dissemination and receptions of texts*" (3, emphasis in original). This broad understanding of marketing covers practices such as "the decisions publishers make in terms of the presentation of books to the marketplace, in terms of formats, cover designs and blurb, and imprint" (2) but also "the multiplicity of ways in which books are presented and represented in the marketplace: via their reception in the media; their gaining of literary awards; and their placement on bestseller lists" (3).

As Sapiro argues, demand can be estimated only on the basis of the sales of a previous product, which means that “the risk of standardization is inherent in the logic of the market, and in conflict with the constraint of innovation” (2003, 450). Thus, this model has produced a “blockbuster”, or long back-list model, which has often been blamed for the “*imperium* of monolingualism [...] an increasingly market-driven situation in the global culture industry that rewards translation-friendly works of art” (Apter 2001, 12, emphasis in original). Appadurai (1996, 32), however, warns against overestimating the role of homogenizing forces; he argues that the “new global cultural economy” is not a simple centre-periphery model but a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order and both heterogenizing and homogenizing forces are at play. In fact, it is the *tension* between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization that is “[t]he central problem of today’s global interactions” (32). This tension can be seen at work in the media discourse surrounding the publishing of translated literature, where we can find opinions in favour of homogenizing literary products ready for global consumption, as well as in favour of heterogenizing them, as windows to another world.

As a way of illustrating what I call the homogenizing approach, I quote Mireille Berman (2011), Head of International Literary Projects at the Dutch Literature Foundation, describing the *Go Dutch!* promotional campaign in Britain in 2010:

Our impression was that British people often refer to the insular mentality of their countrymen, their “fear of all things foreign”. And so for such an audience, the presentation of foreign literature as “a window to the world” [...] would be counter-productive: it emphasises the distance, and confirms their impression of foreign literature as strange and hard to grasp – and therefore unattractive. (35)

Berman describes selecting Dutch authors “who dealt with recognisable themes and issues; writers with excellent English who we knew were great on stage” (36) and presenting Dutch writers “simply as interesting authors with an original point of view that was recognisable for UK readers” (36).

Other agents operating in the publishing industry, however, favour a heterogenizing approach whereas translated literature is seen as a window into another culture. John Parrish Peede (2011, 31), director of Literature Grants at the National Endowment for the Arts, in the US, believes that: “the best works in translation [...] transport us to places we have never

been, to live among people we have never known”. Peter Stothard (2011, 11), editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, explains the need to review translation as responding to readers’ desires “to find books that tell us of worlds we do not know, or have forgotten or been encouraged to forget”.

Answering English’s call for an investigation into the concrete instruments of exchange and conversion of literary value (2002, 127), this paper will focus on the role of newspaper reviews as intermediaries. As Sapiro (2003) notes, marketization has led publishers to attempt to control the intermediaries, through publicity and close connections with critics and members of juries. As a result of this, as well as increased dependency of the consumers – unable to process on their own the high volume of information about a high number of products – the “role of professional literary critics has increased, although it does not suffice to determine the success of a book” (2003, 451). In marketing theory, reviewers are “‘opinion formers’ – readers in a position of privileged authority, with an advantaged capacity for communicating the book to other potential readers” (Squires 2009, 66-67). While their impact on sales is difficult to assess and may not be particularly strong, media reviewers tell the readers what to read and why, and may tell us something about why Anglophone readers read, or are told to read, Brazilian literature.

Data collection

The *Index Translationum* is so far the only global source of comparative data on books published in translation. However, the data collected is not considered very reliable, something that was confirmed in the process of this research, which found, for example, that books published in Portuguese by American presses would figure as translations. Efforts to obtain more reliable figures tend to be on a much smaller scale. *Three Percent*, a website based at the University of Rochester, offers a database of translation into English that is populated with data provided by publishers directly but it is limited to “original” (not having previously appeared in English) translations of fiction and poetry published or distributed in the United States. *Literature Across Frontiers* (LAF), a European Platform for Literary Exchange, Translation and Policy Debate based in Wales, has also been working towards providing more reliable translation statistics for translation into English but focusing on the British Isles.

In 2015, LAF produced a statistical report on translated literature published in the UK and Ireland from 1990 until 2012, on the basis of the British National Bibliography (Büchler and Trentacosti 2015). According to the *Index Translationum*, Portuguese ranks eighteenth

among the most popular source languages in translation around the world. According to LAF's 2015 report, Portuguese is the ninth most translated European language into English but, when other non-European languages are taken into account, Arabic and Japanese make into the top ten, pushing Portuguese out of the "top ten league" (Büchler and Trentacosti 2015, 5). When dead languages are taken into account, Portuguese is further pushed into thirteenth place, after Ancient Greek and Latin. Whether Portuguese ranks thirteenth or eighteenth, it is, in Casanova's (2004) model, a dominated language of the fourth type, i.e. a language whose literature, despite the large number of speakers, is not recognized in the international market. In Heilbron's (1999) model, it is a peripheral language from which less than 1% of the book translations worldwide are made.

Both the *Three percent* and the LAF reports, as well as the *Index Translationum* have been used to collect the data for this study, which consists of a bibliography of adult fiction published in Brazil and translated into English from 2000 until 2015,³ together with 214 reviews of those titles published in newspapers around the Anglophone world.⁴ The reviews were obtained from the Nexis database and the *Times Literary Supplement* database, searching for the name of the authors found in the bibliography. Nexis contains texts of newspapers from across the world, but only book reviews in English dating from 2000 onwards were selected.⁵ The reviews from the *Times Literary Supplement* date from 2000 until 2011 because data from 2011 onwards is not available electronically. While it is not possible to claim fully accurate coverage, the pool of data is wide enough to consider it a representative sample of the discourse of professional readers on contemporary Brazilian literature published in non-academic media in English.

Overall, 94 fiction titles by 49 Brazilian authors were found in English translation from 2000 until 2015 inclusive. Most authors appear with one title; the exceptions are: Paulo Coelho (11 titles), Machado de Assis (6); Garcia-Roza (6), Jorge Amado (5), Moacyr Scliar (4), Hilda Hilst (3), Patricia Melo (3), Milton Hatoum (3) and João Almino (3). The 214 reviews found through *Nexis* come from a wide range of newspapers but with a clear concentration on the British "quality" press, with the most prolific being newspapers that are known for their liberal stance and generally viewed as slightly to the left of the political spectrum; the group formed by *The Guardian* and *The Observer* published 32 reviews, 17 and 15 reviews respectively. *The Independent* features 26, the highest number by one individual newspaper. The group formed by *The Times* and the *The Sunday Times* follows with 14 in total (seven in each). Both the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York Times* reviewed 11 titles each; the *Washington Post* nine and *The Irish Times* six.

The scarce existing research on reviews of translated literature does not permit an assessment of these results in terms of the representation of Brazilian titles in relation to other literatures in the same or other languages. Studies so far have concentrated on the (in)visibility and assessment of translations in reviews (Venuti 1995; Fawcett 2000; Vanderschelden 2000; Bush 2005) and tracking the reception of particular works or authors (see, for example, Bielsa 2013 or Zhao 2009). This study demonstrates that reviews can also offer important insights into how the media discourse creates and disseminates perceptions and expectations around specific national literatures, thus contributing to the construction of literary value.

From homogenization to exoticism

Paulo Coelho, an indisputably popular writer whose book *The Alchemist* won the Guinness World Record as the most translated title by a living author, is by far the most reviewed Brazilian writer: 65 of the 214 reviews (approximately 30%) are of his books. He is also the only author about whom strong negative opinions are voiced, although others are extremely positive. Whether positive or negative, the reviews are a textbook example of homogenization: there is rarely any mention of the translated nature or source language of the work. This is not surprising, since Coelho's writing deliberately aspires to universality. Coelho himself describes his style as "universal" (Whittell 2004) and the themes – spiritual journeys – are meant to appeal to a wide audience. The settings are mostly European (Geneva, Ireland, the French Pyrenees) so there is no need to mention Brazil other than to point out the author's nationality. In any case, reviewers are far more interested in the author's international reputation than his nationality.

Other authors whose work has been reviewed often (more than five times) are listed in Table 1. With the exceptions of Verissimo's and Lispector's, to which I return below, the reviews for all these novels and most of the others adopt a heterogenizing approach; that is to say, they highlight the geographical location of the setting, clearly marking the foreignness of the text. This is achieved in many different ways: through headlines and leads (see Table 2 for examples), long and detailed descriptions of cities, scenery and social problems that are presented as typically Brazilian, and through the characterization of style in a way that recalls the distinctive features of the setting.

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

The risks of homogenization – that is, of privileging translated literature that does not flaunt its foreignness, or the presentation of translated literature as if it were originally written in (in this case) English – are well documented in the academic literature, particularly in work that follows the example of Venuti (see e.g. Apter 2001 and Bandia 2015). Heterogenization – or “foreignizing” – is not seen as problematic as a translation strategy. Applied to literary marketing, positively highlighting foreignness and giving visibility to the translated nature of the text need not be problematic either. However, when moving down the line towards the heterogenization end of the continuum, there is a risk of slipping from the “different” to the “unknown” and thus from heterogeneity into exoticism. It is with this slippage, I will argue, that translated literature becomes the object of an essentially tourist, rather than literary, “gaze” (Urry 2002).

Exoticism is a term that, with some exceptions (Carbonell Cortés 2006; Carbonell 2000; Carbonell i Cortés 1997) remains under-theorized in translation studies. While not intending to offer a thorough exploration of exoticism as a theoretical concept, I propose here a distinction between heterogenizing and exoticizing that relies on the presentation of cultural difference as more or less susceptible to comprehension. As aspects of difference become prioritized over aspects of commonality, we reach a point where the lack of shared ground makes the difference mysterious. It is this “mystery” factor that makes cultural difference “exotic”. Knowledge and exoticism are incompatible (Huggan 2001, 17); the difference in the exotic cannot be assimilated because it is mystified and “kept at arm’s length rather than taken as one’s own” (Foster 1982, 22).

Translated literature as armchair tourism

In reviews that highlight the Brazilian setting, exoticism is both an implicit and a literal attribute of the writing. Garcia Roza’s novels, set in Rio, are described as “exotic and sophisticated, crime writing at its best” (*The Daily Telegraph* 2004); a “treat” for “[f]ans of sophisticated crime fiction with an exotic locale” (*Publishers Weekly* 2004). Manaus, in Hatoum’s novels, is described as “an exotic world, a dangerous world” (Robson 2002), “gloriously colourful and exotic” (Hopkin 2002); “bustling and exotic, filled with the cries of street-traders, smells of the jungle and eccentricities of the foreigners and locals alike” (Rice 2003).

Apart from making literal references to exoticism, the reviews exoticize the world depicted by focusing on those aspects that are sufficiently remote from the likely everyday experience of Anglophone readers to be mystifying: extreme poverty, pervasive corruption, daily violence and a tropical climate. These are aspects of the source culture that are not just “different” or “interesting” but difficult to grasp in their entirety, which presumably justifies the reviewers’ need for detailed description and even a certain educational attitude. Vincent (2002) reminds us that this is a “country where more than one-third of the population of 175 million live well below the poverty line”. Poverty often appears linked to corruption, as in a review by Hopkinson (2002), who points out that “only around 9 per cent of the population are deemed wealthy enough to pay taxes and only a fraction of these actually do” and then goes on to suggest that, as a result of poverty and tax evasion, “few get anything out of the official economy. In the favela, security and social services, even medicines and schoolbooks, are provided by the local boss”. Likewise, Heathcote (2015) describes Brazil’s lowland borders as a place “where oppressive heat, poverty and corruption are a part of daily life in towns controlled by drug cartels” and praises Melo’s “exploration of greed and corruption in poverty-stricken rural Brazil”. Corruption is “part of the daily life” (Heathcote 2015), “pervasive” (Skenazy 2005) and “rife” (Pearson 2003), resulting in “an overwhelming atmosphere of moral decay” (Berlins 2015), a “gritty, morally dubious” world (Woodhead 2003). Corruption combined with violence leads to statements such as “Rio is a place where evil thrives” (Newton 2002).

If wealth is alluded to, it is generally contrasted with poverty elsewhere: Rio is “a city where glamour and violence, wealth and poverty, leisure and corruption live side-by-side” (Woodhead 2003); “[I]n the background of Garcia-Roza’s novel, Rio’s middle classes are busy preparing for Christmas in the glorious summer weather, barely noticing the neglected, impoverished and abused” (Phelan 2004). This is not only the case in Rio, “where chic apartments teeter uncomfortably close to the city’s slum-dwellings” (Pearson 2003), but also in Manaus, “a ramshackle city in the heart of the Amazon” with “extremes of poverty and wealth” (Woodhead 2010), and in the interior: “[t]he only Brazilian aristocracies are of wealth and of labour and, in the underpopulated interior as in the overcrowded favelas (slums), the two are entwined” (Hopkinson 2002).

Two other worlds are contrasted: one natural and tropical, the other urban and violent. What is particularly interesting is that the way in which they are juxtaposed makes them appear as two sides of the same coin. Mangué (2002), describing the setting of Hatoum’s *The Brothers* as “the sprawling Amazonian jungle, the teeming city of São Paulo”, plays with

adjectives that could apply to both urban and natural settings; he could have described the city of São Paulo as “sprawling” and the Amazonian jungle as “teeming”. Likewise, the verb used by Stasio (2006) to describe the actions of a detective, “*plunging* into the crooked, colorful streets of Copacabana”, reminds the reader of the possibility of plunging into the sea at Copacabana beach. The blending of urban and natural landscapes makes aspects of the former, corruption and pollution, seem as inevitable as Brazil’s very nature (rather than as the outcome of human processes). Skenazy (2005) describes “Rio’s white middle-class neighborhoods” as “dripping with the summer heat that seems as pervasive as the corruption”, hinting at an image of middle-class neighbourhoods “dripping” with corruption. Likewise, when Giles (2001) describes a character as navigating “the social *jungle* that is São Paulo in the 1990’s, with its beggars, junkies, transvestites, shattered revolutionaries, fortunetellers and social climbers” (my emphasis) we can be forgiven for seeing junkies and beggars as part of the natural landscape of São Paulo, like the jungle that used to cover the area.

Rio (unlike São Paulo) is a city where the natural and urban world do blend in the landscape because of its seaside location and the vegetation that still covers the hills that are part of the city (as opposed to a distant, rarely seen backdrop as in the case of São Paulo). This is something that reviewers constantly highlight and play with for effect. Woodall (2004), in a review of Chico Buarque’s *Budapest* entitled “The Sounds of Rio”, describes “cities [...] modelled on Buarque’s Rio de Janeiro, the undisciplined traffic, the grille-protected condominiums, the crackle of gunfire, the Atlantic”. The sounds of Rio thus blend nature (the Atlantic), cities (traffic) and machines (gunfire).

A justifiable question that may be asked at this stage is whether reviews reflect a selection process whereby publishers favour importing literature that has in itself the effect of transporting readers to different lands. This is indeed a possibility worth considering; however, reviewers themselves often clarify that the more exotic and distinctive Brazilian traits are characteristic of the *real* setting that comes across through the novel *accidentally* or even *not at all*. Reviews of Garcia Roza’s novels often appeal to the contrasts and exoticism of Rio de Janeiro; however, Skenazy (2005) notes that “the landscape comes at us tangentially” and Bickerton (2003) complains that

Rio itself is notably and disappointingly absent. Garcia Rosa has not – yet – created the unique atmosphere of the sprawling metropolis, as, say, Chandler did

with Los Angeles. Events are restricted to a few major *avenidas*, making the setting particularly incidental.

Ryan (2002) also warns us “[t]here is nothing tropical or sunny about Espinosa’s world” and according to Tonkin (2003), “[t]he Rio that lonely, bookish Inspector Espinosa navigates”, “feels like a working city. In no sense an exotic tourist backdrop, neither is this the squalid killing-ground relished by film critics who hailed the shanty-town bloodbath, *City of God*. [...] Garcia-Roza transforms sunny Rio into a workaday burg”. Clements (2003) articulates the same feeling when he explains that “[t]he setting is incomparably exotic, but Garcia-Roza uses the culture and society of the city, rather than its geography, to place the action”. So, it is probably safe to suggest that it is not the novels themselves but the reviews that foreground the exotic. In fact, the fiction can “easily” make you “forget you are in that exuberant tropical city of beautiful people, beach society and *favelas*” (Moss 2004). This is also the case with Hatoum’s *Manaus*: Keates (2002) starts his review with a long paragraph about the appeal of Manaus to the imagination, how it has been recreated on the screen and how “[t]he very idea of a thriving city in the middle of the world’s largest area of tropical rainforest, the haunt of indigenous people whose contact with the white man is vestigial or non-existent, appeals to our love of paradox and the bizarre”. One cannot help wondering whether Keates herself is appealing to our love of paradox when she then goes on to tell us that, in this particular novel, “Manaus is a city like any other”. Similarly, Byatt (2002) argues that Hatoum “has quite deliberately tried to avoid representing the idiosyncrasies of ‘exotic’ Manaus”, and concludes that “[t]he story is universal, though sensuously anchored in Manaus”. Byatt, a celebrated novelist herself, presents the argument from the writer’s point of view: “[I]f you don’t see your own world through the alienating eyes of tourist orientalism, neither will good readers” (ibid). However, for Byatt herself, Manaus is *not* a city like any other, and Byatt, like Keates, also reminds readers of the fascination of Manaus in a long paragraph about its geography, architecture and multicultural population.

At first sight, a focus on poverty, violence, corruption, may not immediately come across as a commercially savvy marketing strategy; however, it is precisely this focus on lives and contexts that are substantially different from the everyday experiences of the readers that brings the promotion of literature close to that of tourism. As Urry argues, “tourism results from a basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary”: what produces a distinctive tourist gaze are those “aspects of the place to be visited which distinguish it from what is conventionally encountered in everyday life” (2002,

12). Another feature shared by the descriptions of the fictional world in the reviews and the non-fictional world of tourism is the claim of authenticity. In tourism research, MacCannell (1989) describes tourists as on a quest for authenticity, fascinated by the “real lives” of others that they cannot discover in their own experiences. In the reviews, we notice an insistence on presenting the fictional world as a true mirror of the real world. “Who needs magic realism when reality is as strange as life in Manaus, deep in the Brazilian interior [...]?” asks Hopkin (2002). Garcia Roza’s novel *The Silence of the Rain* is praised for being the “first to include some of the things that make Rio *the city it is*: street kids, prostitutes, violent cops and bad traffic” (Clements 2005, my emphasis). Heninghan (2008) goes a step further and suggests that the reality itself makes the fiction what it is, imposing a way of looking at the world: “Only a slave-holding society of the nineteenth century, with its enforced silences and conformism, could have honed this [Machado’s] ambiguous gaze on the human condition”.

The insistence on seeing the fictional world as portraying the real world can result in considerable time gaps being ignored. Horsham’s (2005) review of Jorge Amado’s *Gabriela* starts by mentioning it is “[s]et in 1925” and finishes claiming that “[t]his carnival of corrupt politics, sensuality, amorality and the desire of a backwater town to achieve ‘progress’ at any price gives a delightful insight into Brazilian culture”, as if nothing had changed in Brazilian culture in almost a hundred years. The gap is acknowledged by Lezard (2014) in his review of Barreto’s *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma*, but that does not prevent him from seeing the book as a reflection of Brazil’s problems today: “Even though we are an ocean and a century away, we get a proper sense of what Brazil’s problems were – and may, in some ways, still be”. The sense of continuity and stagnation is also present in Heninghan’s (2008) review of Machado’s *Slaves and Masters*, in which he informs us that “[t]he hills above Rio de Janeiro, now covered with shanty towns, were already poor, marginal districts in 1839, when Joachim Maria de Machado, a mulatto [...] was born”. The reviewers’ representation of Brazil as stuck in the past could be interpreted as the effect of the “denial of coevalness” that Fabian posited in 1983 as a characteristic strategy of anthropological work where the Other is consistently placed – despite evidence to the contrary – “in a time other than that of the one who talks” (Fabian 2006, 143). This strategy of temporal distantiation, in anthropology and elsewhere, facilitates the marginalization of other cultures as belonging outside our time.

Translated literature as literature

As mentioned above, homogenizing reviews are not restricted to Coelho’s books. Another author who is reviewed with little or no reference to geographical and cultural settings is

Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), whose work sits at the other end of the spectrum from Coelho's in terms of the literary and distinctive quality of her style. While still little known in the Anglophone world, at least outside feminist literary circles, she is generally regarded as one of the most important Brazilian writers of the twentieth century. Among the authors included in this study, only Jorge Amado could be said to come close in prestige and critical acclaim. The lack of references to the source culture could be explained by the nature of the fiction itself. In the words of one reviewer (Rafferty 2015), the settings are "homely and domestic", the tales "uneventful" and "their action is interior". Reviews concentrate on the unconventional Modernist style, the psychological depth of the characters and the surreal nature of the stories. If any effort is made to situate Lispector within a literary tradition, it is within a Jewish rather than a Brazilian one. Benjamin Moser, the editor of Lispector's *Complete Stories* apparently claimed that Lispector was the greatest Jewish writer since Kafka, and this claim is often repeated in the reviews.

Jewishness also rivals "Brazilianness" as a marker of identity when it comes to two other titles: Moacyr Scliar's *The Centaur in the Garden*, and Michel Laub's *Diary of the Fall*. If Lispector was the greatest Jewish writer since Kafka, Scliar is "the most important living Jewish writer in Latin America" and "the author of one of the 100 most important modern Jewish books", as declared by the National Yiddish Book Center (Vincent 2002). Laub's *Diary* is firmly presented as an holocaust novel by Khair (2014), whose review, entitled "Echoes of the Holocaust", claims the novel "excavates the past" and "retrieves the tragedy of the holocaust from its scholarship, politics and deniers", even though Laub himself is much more ambiguous about the role of the holocaust in his writing (Frey 2013).

There are two other works (De Souza Leão's *All Dogs are Blue*, Hist's *With my Dog Eyes*) where, as in the case of Lispector's, the world depicted is internal, there are few references to the world outside the mind. Reviews of De Souza Leão's and Hist's fiction focus on mindstyle and the surreal, psychological nature of the "plot". The few other novels that are reviewed without reference to the setting either take place largely outside Brazil, as with Luis Fernando Verissimo's *Borges and the Eternal Orangutans* and Jo Soares's *Twelve Fingers*, or they picture a society and a way of life that is not particularly different from that of the assumed readers of the reviews. This is the case with Verissimo's *The Club of Angels*, in which there is no mention of where the novel is set, Tezza's *The Eternal Son* and Patricia Melo's *Black Waltz*. In relation to the latter, Moore (2005) mentions that it is "[s]et in Brazil, although it could almost be anywhere". Anywhere, here, presumably means the middle-class,

urban settings shared by the reviewers, readers and the characters in Melo's book, who live "[f]ar from the favelas of São Paulo" (Robinson 2004).

It would appear, then, that the setting is only highlighted in reviews of Brazilian literature when the difference can be commodified as exotic, and thus appeal to the tourist gaze. The commodification of culture has resulted in the aesthetic valorization of cultural difference, which is strategically employed to promote and sell cultural objects, including literature. Unlike the "mean streets of the São Paulo underworld" in Melo's *Inferno*, the São Paulo inhabited by a famous orchestra conductor and his violinist wife in the same author's *Black Waltz* does not lend itself to marketing as a window to another world; middle-class São Paulo is not miles away from middle-class Birmingham. Appadurai (1996, 12) argues that the most valuable feature of the concept of culture is the concept of difference, and privileges the use of the adjectival form "cultural" to refer exclusively to "those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities" (13). Following Appadurai, we could rephrase the argument above saying that the São Paulo of Melo's *Inferno* mobilizes the idea of a particularly "Brazilian" literature in a way that the São Paulo of *Black Waltz* does not.

In three reviews, the international literary canon offers a point of comparison and of contrast with Brazilian cultural influences that is interesting from the point of view of literary capital. Reading Lima Barreto's *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma*, Lezard (2014) is "strongly reminded of Bouvard et Pecuchet, Flaubert's masterpiece" but points out that "Flaubert didn't have to consider his country as an absurdly pretentious post-colonial state continually on the brink of collapse, with an incompetent executive, a military that was like a bad joke and some dubiety as to what its official language should actually be". Heninghan's (2008) review of Machado's *A Chapter of Hats and Other Stories*, also places the literary canon, as represented by Chekhov, James and Swift, as directly in contrast to a Brazilian background:

One of the many enigmas which surround Machado de Assis is how a writer whose sensibility is as finely pitched as that of Chekhov, who extended the possibilities of realist fiction through experiments with point of view as subtle as those of Henry James, and whose savage disenchantment might have earned him the respect of Jonathan Swift, emerged from an impoverished background in a tropical empire run on a regime of slavery.

It is also interesting to note how international and local influences are described in Hausner's (2003) review of Scliar's work: alongside "echoes [...] of the Jewish literary imagination" we find "a meshing of the archaic images we have inherited from European culture with the hoarse, deep sounds of Brazilian folklore, constantly renewing itself through mythmaking in the form of *Literatura de Cordel* (Brazil's pulp fiction) and *telenovelas* (soap operas)". The contribution from Brazil is popular culture (soap operas) lacking in refinement (hoarse) and embedded in oral traditions, as in "Literatura de cordel". The literariness and ancient images come from the Jewish and European traditions.

Occasionally, Brazilian works are placed within a regional, Latin American "tradition", namely, the pre-packaged one-size-fits-all bag of magical realism, with the obligatory reference to Gabriel García Márquez. The reductiveness of this label has been convincingly argued by Molloy (2005), who describes "magical realism" as a mode of representing Latin America, an ethnicized commodity that has more to do with readers' expectations than with a typically Latin American mode of production.

Conclusion

This study set out to reconstruct the mediascape of Brazilian literature as framed through the lenses of the Anglophone press. The landscape depicted was of clusters of books which, despite their hazy boundaries, retain a distinctive core in terms of the promotional discourse of the reviews. This core concerns the degree to which culture specificity is highlighted, which was discussed in terms of a continuum from homogenization, through heterogenization, to exoticism. At the homogeneous end we find literature presented as just happening to be authored by a Brazilian writer. In these cases, the narrative could take place "anywhere". Still, we find three distinct clusters at this end of the continuum: one consisting exclusively of Coelho's pseudo-philosophical tales designed to speak to the whole world (excluding, perhaps, the intellectual elite), another consisting of difficult, stylistically innovative writers such as Lispector and Hilst, designed to appeal to the literary elite, and a third one consisting of books that are less popular than Coelho's but stylistically more sophisticated, such as Melo's *Black Waltz*, Veríssimo's *The Club of Angels* or Tezza's *The Eternal Son*.

Coelho's books, written with a "universal" audience in mind, clearly fit into the "blockbuster" model that is favoured by the publishing industry (Squires 2009). Those in the third cluster could be considered translation-friendly books pliable to domestication and the rule of monolingualism (Apter 2001, 12). The second cluster is not translation-friendly but,

because of their experimental nature, which appeals to a certain elite, they can be marketed by reference to an already established literary canon (the Modernists, Kafka, Jewish literature).

Finally, at the opposite end of the continuum from the homogenizing one, we find books that, according to the reviewers, will take us on an exotic journey to experience the heat, sounds and smells of the tropics, as well as the violence, desperate poverty and pervasive corruption of Brazilian metropolises, all – it goes without saying – from the safe comfort of our armchair in Melbourne, Bristol, Vancouver or San Francisco. This, we are told, is the real Brazil, a country that remains anchored in the past. These reviews, in addition to constructing an image of the culture behind the literature, also construct a reader: the literary tourist, which we can imagine forms part of a cosmopolitan, middlebrow readership.

As argued above, exoticizing is only possible when the object is sufficiently different from the experience of the viewer, not entirely knowable. This difference mobilizes a sense of identity which becomes cultural. Culture is “a contrastive rather than a substantive property of certain things” (Appadurai 1996, 13), so we recognize a culture when we recognize a difference. The source culture is thus contrasted with the implied culture of the assumed reader. From the point of view of literary value, cultural differences are important because they can be attached to national identities, and nations are the building blocks of world literature. As Casanova argues, “[l]iterary authority and recognition – and, as a result, national rivalries – came into existence with the formation and development of the first European states” (2010, 11), and this resulted in the national “appropriation of literary stature” (12). Because literature is nationalized, we can expect a national literature to be associated with the cultural differences that that literature projects in the mediascape. Other characteristics of that literature, those that do not mobilize group identity – experimentalism, for example – can more easily be subsumed under “world literature”, but not the characteristics that mobilize identity, such as the thematization of violence or poverty in the case of Brazil.

The cultural differences projected onto a mediascape will vary from nation to nation and have different – positive and negative, commercial and symbolic– effects for different national literatures. In the case of a country such as Brazil, and possibly many other “developing” countries, this is problematic because what is sufficiently different to be commodified as exotic, at least for the educated cosmopolitan Anglophone readership of reviews, is the poverty, the violence, the corruption, the climate and the natural landscape. This seems to create a clash in the mind of critics who are, in Casanova’s words, “creators of

literary value”:, and have the “huge power of being able to say what is literary and what is not, of setting the limits of literary art” (2010, 22). As a result of this clash, they will see the emergence of great writers from such impoverished and cruel societies as exceptions (as in the review by Henninghan) and fail to see the rich literary tradition that has nurtured their talent. In brief, if literary value is created – at least to some extent – by reviewers, far from being independent of political and economic factors, it is subject to the reviewers’ Anglocentric bias, which is a result of political and economic inequalities that thus become perpetuated in the reviewing process.

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¹ Book reviews and databases are listed among the Primary Sources at the end of this article, while Secondary Sources appear beneath these, in a separate list.

² "Anglophone" is used here to refer to media, in particular, newspapers, in English, and the readers who access it.

³ Only the *Three Percent* database includes titles from 2009 until 2015. LAF only surveyed 2000, 2005 and 2008 and the *Index Translationum* contains titles from 1979 until 2010.

⁴ I would like to thank Asimina Aktipi who assisted in the laborious collection of the data during her ERASMUS+ traineeship at the University of Birmingham, under my supervision.

⁵ All results from the Nexis database were included, independently of country of publication or type of newspaper. Therefore, any bias along those lines in the data presented here results from existing bias in the sources used by Nexis. Any clear patterns, such as the concentration on British quality press, are reported here.