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Machado de Assis: Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist by G. Reginald Daniel (Review)

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Abstract

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, the sociologist Erving Goffman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963) discusses the relationship between individuals who possess a social stigma and the "normals" (8). Reginald Daniel's new book, *Machado de Assis: Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist*, discusses the stigmatized identity of the most celebrated Brazilian novelist as perceived in his literary work. Machado's biography is traced, his work commented on, and we are offered a picture of the Brazilian mulatto writer as a way to understand the inclusion, or lack thereof, of race relations and black identification in his writings.

Keywords

Reginald G. Daniel, Machado de Assis, race in literature, identity, stigma, Mércia Santana Flannery

Disciplines

Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Literature | Portuguese Literature | Race and Ethnicity | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Culture

Comments

This is a review of *Machado de Assis: Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist* by G. Reginald Daniel

DANIEL, G. REGINALD. *Machado de Assis: Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2012. pp. 338.

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, the sociologist Erving Goffman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963) discusses the relationship between individuals who possess a social stigma and the “normals” (8). Reginald Daniel’s new book, *Machado de Assis: Multiracial Identity and the Brazilian Novelist*, discusses the stigmatized identity of the most celebrated Brazilian novelist as perceived in his literary work. Machado’s biography is traced, his work commented on, and we are offered a picture of the Brazilian mulatto writer as a way to understand the inclusion, or lack thereof, of race relations and black identification in his writings.

Having written extensively about Brazil’s racial relations and about Machado, Daniel is delving into known territory, being more than well qualified to take on the subject. In the introduction, the author comments on the importance of Machado’s legacy to the Brazilian literary canon, and on this famous author’s “betrayal” and his “racial self-negation” (1). From here on, the assumption seems to be that a mulatto writer should be expected to make his race a topic of his literary writings, but we miss the advancement of this line of thought.

In the first chapter, Daniel includes a panoramic consideration of Brazil’s racial configuration. A recapitulation of the country’s racial makeup and the role of miscegenation as an explanation for who Brazilians are as a people is also incorporated. Daniel discusses the Brazilian preference for the white-European phenotype, along with the stigmatization of African ancestry, which foregrounds the ensuing analysis of Machado’s relationship with his own racial ambiguity.

This chapter supplies an interesting account of Brazil, and particularly Rio de Janeiro, during the nineteenth century, the time when Machado wrote and that he used to contextualize most of his novels and short stories. Daniel stresses Brazil’s looking to the outside, especially to Europe (France and England in particular) as a way for the elites to “reckon with the embarrassing gulf between themselves and the masses” (26). Machado is guilty of the same, having chiseled out his characters mostly from European models.

In chapter two, Daniel reflects on the “absence” of literary voices of African ancestry in Brazil. He explains this situation through a description of the African Brazilian condition, which worked to “neutralize” those who could have worked as “mouthpieces in the African Brazilian struggle” (35). According to Daniel, this was a result of how European Brazilians thought about blackness. Considering that blackness in Brazil was so “irreconcilable with social advancement,” those who moved upwards could only be perceived as “whitened” (35). The chapter includes

a brief account of other Brazilian mulatto writers and the degree to which they included the African Brazilian tradition in their work. For example, Caldas Barbosa used the African Brazilian vernacular in his *modinhas* and *lundus*, whereas Lima Barreto “openly discussed the topic of racism from an African Brazilian point of view” (58).

In chapter three, Daniel offers a biographical account of Machado’s life, including his modest origins in Livramento (born to a Portuguese immigrant mother, a washerwoman and seamstress, and a mulatto house painter), until his death as an acclaimed writer in Laranjeiras. Machado’s transition, the accomplishment of his hard-fought upward mobility, with scant formal education, as he was mostly self-taught, is a reason for praise and part of what is used to compose his portrait as a genius. However, as Daniel indicates, Machado was also condemned for his refusal to discuss racial themes in his works, or, as demonstrated by José do Patrocínio’s accusation, for having “hated his race” (67).

What is unclear is how we are meant to believe that Machado was a detractor, in view of what was said thus far in the book about Brazil’s racial relations. Was Machado acting as the majority of Brazilians did—and do—as far as race is concerned? Do we expect more of him because of his notoriety? In addition, Daniel notes, citing other scholars, that “Machado disguised his mulatto facial features by wearing a thick moustache and a beard and that he also wore his hair closely cropped in his late years to enhance this camouflage” (72). One cannot help but ask whether this is the only explanation for why Machado decided to wear his hair and moustache. Further, isn’t this an example of trying too forcefully to interpret the author’s conduct?

In chapter four, Daniel presents the criticism on relatively unknown works by Machado in which the author shows concern for the institution of slavery. Although he is mostly criticized for not discussing issues concerning the condition of the black Brazilian man, or for not having referred to himself as a mulatto, the institution of slavery was, at times, the subject of Machado’s observations. Indeed, as Daniel shows, Machado included references to slavery and slaves in his works, and wrote, albeit sparsely, about them.

One case in point is Machado’s praise, in 1876, for the abolition of slavery in the United States (79). Crucially, however, Daniel makes an interesting final comment in this chapter in indicating that Machado’s voice was that of a “narrator—a former diplomat with a more universal perspective,” rather than that of a politician concerned with the institution of slavery. It could also be argued that, in some regards, the (short) story “*O caso da vara*” was that of Machado himself. Although the main character in that story is “sympathetic” and sensitive to slavery, or the condition of the black man of his time, he was more concerned with his own self.

In chapter five, Daniel approached the relationship between Machado's characters and his own life experience as a mulatto. The statistics cited in the beginning of the chapter foreground the discussion of Machado's "desire not to deny being a mulatto but to become 'raceless'" (119). Of the more than 900 characters in his works, there is not a description that allows for a clear indication of their race (101). While Daniel considers Machado's concern with "the universal dimensions of the human psyche and experience," and the fact that his approach to slavery revealed his understanding of it as a "symptom of a larger social order" (117), are we still discussing his desire to become "raceless"?

Indeed, perhaps Daniel could have stated earlier that Machado's work was influenced by the Realism-Naturalism aesthetic, and thus the elusiveness of the black victimized character could be illuminated. This highlights another important question whose answer could, possibly, summarize the entire book: was Machado avoiding engagement in the discussion of slavery as a way to hide his own stigmatized identity, or rather, was his so-called detachment part of his performance as an analyst of social maladies?

Chapter six shifts from Machado's preference for the inclusion of the "object X subject" duality aspects of human character (135), to a consideration of Brazilian *lusotropicalismo*, in the figure of its most famous articulator, Gilberto Freyre (143), and affirmative action in Brazil (149). The chapter concludes with an acknowledgement that Machado's was a "moderate Afrocentric" perspective. He was "African Brazilian," but also of "European descent," and attempted to "transcend his blackness in response to Brazil's racial constraints" (152). The question then becomes, wasn't Machado's conduct and approach to his racial identity similar, if not equal, to that of most Brazilians from a mixed background?

In chapter seven, Daniel proposes a discussion of Machado's literature against the background of the criticism that he did not write an authentically Brazilian narrative. Some of Machado's critics accused him of an "artificial attempt" to imitate the "humor of the eighteenth century English novel" (154). However, as Daniel shows, Machado was a Brazilian and a carioca, author of a literature that, despite borrowing from the universal European exemplars, was "uniquely Brazilian" (158).

Chapters eight and nine deal more specifically with the aesthetics to which Machado subscribed. Daniel traces a characterization of Impressionism, Realism-Naturalism and Romanticism, describing the aspects by which Machado's characters, narrative structure, point of view, and setting are perceived to oscillate from aesthetic to aesthetic in ways that seem to parallel the "mulatto experience" (210).

Daniel argues that Machado's Romantic-Realist characters possess "conflicting sentiments" and that they are constantly faced with situations in which they are "judged" not by their moral traits alone, but "by the cut of their clothes, their

family name, and their material wealth” (218). Although these characters are not victims of their social circumstances, they victimize themselves through their pursuit of “genuine love.” This discussion highlights an emphasis throughout the book on Machado’s personal life in its connections to his work. More specifically, as Daniel concludes in his epilogue, Machado’s life and work “represent both a triumph over” many of the social constraints on Brazilians of African descent, and “a contribution to the struggle of racial equality” (253).

The book makes an interesting contribution to the study of the great Brazilian novelist, highlighting his personal life struggles, and aesthetics, as a way to understand why, or if, he avoided race. At times, however, it is not possible to see beyond the proposed ambiguity of Machado, and whether he was, on one hand, an ambitious mulatto writer who may have despised his background, or a great writer attempting to aim at the universal. Or perhaps both.

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ROGERS, CHARLOTTE. *Jungle Fever: Exploring Madness and Medicine in Twentieth Century Tropical Narratives*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2012. ix + 234 pp.

Environmental determinism arose in Latin America particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when positivism was in vogue and when Latin American nations thirsted for their own exceptional claims to rooted identities in native soils. Regionalism’s deep ties to place, to geographical and climatic specificity, became the paradoxically modern claim to identity and nationhood. The tropical regions inspired particular fascination because of their radical departure from the environmental norms of European and imperial points of reference. They were the spaces where extravagant and violent nature broke the will of colonialism and where the regionalist novelist could offer diagnosis and, perhaps by implication, a cure for national ills.

Charlotte Rogers’s excellent study of tropical narratives is not exclusively focused on Latin America, but its essential import remains within the sphere of Latin American Studies, and more specifically within this particular modern turn toward the land. Its originality lies in its comparativism, drawing on readings of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and André Malraux’s *The Way of the Kings* that are offered as context for understanding the rise and function of discourses about medicine and madness in Latin American *novelas de la selva*. In addition to individual chapters devoted to these two novels, she also devotes chapters to Jose