

# Introduction <sup>1</sup>

## Identity and Difference

**Judith Still**

One of the problems any political argument must address is that of the degree of universality it can legitimately claim. Feminism is haunted by the question whether or not it speaks for (all) women. Even where it seems relatively straightforward, such as in the fight for equal pay for equal work or for access to contraception, it can be argued that, say, class interests divide us since equal pay only benefits those with secure jobs whereas the most exploited may be made redundant or forced into the black economy;<sup>2</sup> and contraception may be thrust on the poorest parts of the population, distracting from the real issues of poverty. Brazil is a particularly fascinating case to study for anyone interested in the politics of identity and difference in that it is at once exceptionally diverse, and equally strikingly driven by a rhetoric of universalisation. It is also of course the largest industrial power of the southern hemisphere<sup>3</sup>... and yet rarely a point of reference in feminist debates.

The diversity of Brazil is partly a function of its size and varied terrain, and partly of its history with its legacy of diminished indigenous peoples, descendants of Portuguese colonisers and of later European immigrants, former slave populations and of the present influence of the U.S.A – the country we love to know as America as if it had indeed swallowed up the entire continent – but also, less obviously, of France. Brazil is often referred to as part of the Third World, but a significant proportion of its population live First World lives in many respects.

- 
- 1 I am grateful to those who read this Introduction in advance of publication, in particular to Dave Murray and Jane-Marie Collins and to my co-editor, Solange Ribeiro, for their comments. Thanks also go to Bernard McGuirk for his help with this project.
  - 2 This may be a specious argument, and indeed there is little evidence that the U.K. Equal Pay act had a negative effect on women's employment, but I raise it as an example of the spectre which haunts even the apparently most uncontroversial feminist argument. And it can certainly be the case that campaigns around women's position in the labour market may be dominated by middle-class women, and also ultimately benefit them most.
  - 3 It is currently estimated to account for 45% of the total GDP of Latin America and to be the ninth largest economy in the world (*The Observer Business*, 4/19/98, 3).

With respect to feminism, the situation is also complicated.<sup>4</sup> A European or North American perspective on Brazil might combine the caricature of a relatively patriarchal, purist and repressive culture (born of old-style Hispanic rural Catholicism) with a titillating image of racially-mixed and sexually-liberated carnival. While both these elements relate to certain material aspects of Brazilian culture, we can easily complicate the picture by noting that already by the mid 1970s (in other words, well ahead of the U.K.) more women than men attended University in Brazil. Brazilian feminists have been swift to make certain gains – such as women-only police posts for dealing with domestic violence – which are yet to be achieved in Britain.<sup>5</sup> Equally women have been able to achieve positions of political prominence such as Finance Minister or Mayor of São Paulo. However, Brazilian feminism also has particular problems to deal with which may be less acute in the U.K or the U.S.A. For instance the extreme class differences (and their inter-play with racial difference) make it even more difficult to legitimate a discourse of ‘we women’ even on limited strategic fronts. The relative freedom of middle-class Brazilian women, even those with small children, which British working mothers may gaze on with envy, is largely built on the low-paid labour of maids. While middle-class women may have excellent opportunities to attend University (particularly in the Humanities of course, a point of similarity with Britain), in the North-East of Brazil half the population is illiterate.<sup>6</sup> Another historical difference with Anglo-American feminism is the role that women played in Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, under military dictatorship.<sup>7</sup> The pressing political needs of that period led to particular alliances, for example with the liberal side of the Catholic Church. Whereas in

---

4 One summary of feminist activity in Brazil is to be found in Cynthia Sarti, ‘The Panorama of Feminism in Brazil’, *New Left Review*, 173, 1989, 75–90.

5 Of course a further complication in analysing feminist gains in any country is that of knowing to what extent the letter (or spirit) of the law is obeyed. It has been argued that the majority of cases of domestic violence in Brazil never reach the police even where women-only posts have been set up, and that egalitarian employment laws are not enforced.

6 It is sometimes surprising to the outsider how often these two elements are treated in isolation from one another. For example, in her useful article ‘Women Writers in Brazil Today’, *World Literature Today*, 1987, 61, 1, 49–54, Luiza Lobo cites data on women’s participation in higher education relative to men, but does not relate this to the issue of low overall participation in the education system – and the degree to which that must fracture the term ‘women’ (or ‘men’ for that matter). An exceptional attempt to bring questions of race, class and sex into relation with each other is Daphne Patai’s *Brazilian Women Speak. Contemporary Life Stories*, New Brunswick and London, Rutgers University Press, 1988. She provides some useful statistics on the Northeast, including the illiteracy rate of 55% (39), and on race (78–9).

7 Patai points out in her Introduction to *Brazilian Women Speak* (1–35) that responses to the dictatorship introduce another fracture in that it was not a significant issue for women at subsistence level. For them economic crisis has the greater impact.

Europe or North America, the Church has largely been viewed as a repressive force by feminists, and one particular focus of women's liberation movements has been sexual liberation and, in particular, access to contraception and abortion where necessary, in much of Latin America these issues were often at least put on hold during the 1970s when they were most alive for us.<sup>8</sup> Women's traditional role as mothers (or grandmothers or sisters) was often a crucial political driving force, a rallying call for protestors against brutal regimes when so many people 'disappeared', and an attempt to prevent 'the family' being entirely hi-jacked by right-wing ideology while right-wing political practice was destroying families in order to achieve submission. In the *favelas* the Church organised women's groups which were often a practically effective political force in improving material conditions. The situation in Brazil may have been less acute than that in Argentina or Chile, but nevertheless it provided a radically different context to that pertaining to Anglo-American feminists at the time. The history of Brazil, and the continuing role of the Roman Catholic Church today (and indeed of the North-American sponsored Evangelical Churches which have grown in popularity and are highly visible on television), influence, for example, the complicated attitude towards abortion - even for the rape victims for whom it is now legal.

While feminists in Brazil may have a particularly acute problem with the charge of race or class blindness, with which feminists have been accused in many different countries, there is also the issue of Marxists or theorists of race who are sex blind. Of course in pragmatic terms, it is impossible for every analysis to take account of every factor pertaining to the social situation. It is important that different analyses home in on different issues, and operate strategically at different levels of universality. Just as too much gets lost in terms of crucial detail if all analysis operates in completely general terms ('mankind'), there is insufficient political purchase when we focus only on very small groups in their particularity (indeed on the qualitative experience of individuals). There is therefore a need to move between different levels and different focuses of analysis, and, at one moment to let stand an insightful and strategically useful, albeit partial, picture; then, at the next moment to critique that representation, say, by showing a wider picture or conversely by fracturing the homogeneity it assumes. In the short space of this Introduction I shall attempt to introduce in particular the question of race, both because race may fracture any attempt on the part of feminism to construct a homogenising discourse about women (or

---

8 See Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, 'Parking in a tow-away zone: women's literary studies in Brazil', *Brasil-Brazil: Revista de Literatura brasileira A Journal of Brazilian Literature*, 6, 1991, 5-19, for examples of women's achievements and difficulties in Brazil. She mentions 'feminism's' alliance with the progressive sectors of the Church in the fight for civil rights (8) which began to return in 1978. Full *abertura* was formally achieved in 1985.

men), and because discussion of race (with its concomitant horror of, or fascination with, miscegenation) usually evokes sex.

### *Feminism and National Identity*

One of the guiding forces of Brazilian literary criticism if not of Brazilian literature, has been the need to construct a national identity.<sup>9</sup> In the 'Old World' where national identities may seem well established, literature has been more concerned with questioning the apparent solidity of these fantasmatically homogeneous constructions.<sup>10</sup> Brazil achieved political independence from Portugal in the early nineteenth century, but has been much exercised by the need to achieve cultural independence from Europe and North America. The questions of borrowing, translation, mimicry and other apparently *dependent* activities are consequently highly acute in Brazilian literary debates - and have led to some paradoxically original and provocative formulations. These have a certain affinity to poststructuralist critiques of the origin, and poststructuralist theory is correspondingly popular in the Brazilian academy.

The concern with national identity has a number of consequences for feminism. One relates to the echoes of the family romance in literate or literary Brazilians' relation to Portugal.<sup>11</sup> This issue is taken up in Maria Manuel Lisboa's essay on Lygia Fagundes Telles in this volume. Another is the (civilising) role ascribed to Mothers in the construction of the new nation. Lisboa points out, moreover, how the rejection of the old mother Portugal becomes a desire to invert the birthing process so that the nation's sons create their new mother Brazil, and how this collective fantasy also shapes the representation of the always ambivalent relation between individual mothers and sons. Another consequence of the obsession with national identity has been the various celebrations of assimilation of difference, the literary variants of the politics of (national) universalism: Brazil's identity as a country which is deemed to have no need of

---

9 Roberto E. DiAntonio writes of 'the almost obsessive nature that various Brazilian fiction writers express regarding a need to reshape the national consciousness. One can think of few other world literatures that exhibit such a passion for introspection and the refocusing of national ideals and myths' (*Brazilian Fiction. Aspects and Evolution of the Contemporary Narrative*, Fayetteville and London, The University of Arkansas Press, 1989, ix-x).

10 See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, 2-3 for the precariousness of English or 'British' national identity.

11 Portugal is often represented as the mother. For example Afrânio Coutinho peppers his discussion of the problem of literary nationality for a nation colonized by Europeans 'without a native tradition that could serve as a useful past' (*An Introduction to Literature in Brazil*, trans. Gregory Rabassa, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1969, 26) with references to Portugal as the mother country.

black power or feminism. A fourth is the complicated relation of Brazilian women to 'First-World' theory, whether feminist or otherwise. Women who make claims which have also been made by feminists elsewhere, or who find it productive to import elements of foreign theory, are easily criticised for bowing to the cultural power of the West, and paying insufficient attention to their home context.<sup>12</sup> While this critique may have a purchase in some cases, it can also be a weapon to defend the status quo or the interests of certain parties - 'we (need to) do things differently here' is a two-edged sword.

### *Feminism and Race*

Feminists in Brazil (as elsewhere) do not necessarily address racial or class issues, rural or urban distinctions, and of course the argument can be made that this is not always necessary: that certain women's issues cross racial and class barriers and that certain structures (for example psychoanalytic structures) transcend race and class lines. These questions are raised everywhere in the world, but are surely particularly acute in Brazil, and particularly strongly contested (sometimes by the powerful weapon of silence). In evading the question of race and class Brazilian feminists may be following a certain liberal tradition of the democracy of races which was a historically important answer to the theories maintaining a hierarchy of races. However, two problems arise. One is the possibility that feminists need to address the fractures within the term *women* in order to get a real purchase on women's issues. For instance the psychoanalytical purchase on motherhood may be affected by the neonatal death rate in *favelas*, if that affects the construction of maternal love as some social historians maintain. Conversely, the feminist critique of maternal self-sacrifice may be modified where women's primary political action will be a campaign for infrastructural facilities such as water, sewage or electricity, fuelled by their anguish for their children. The second problem, which I shall dwell on briefly, is that discussions of race which may appear not to be directly relevant to feminism in fact persistently revolve around desire (and disgust). The pure white woman, sometimes celebrated as the virgin and mother in white supremacist theories,<sup>13</sup> becomes the bitter, envious and implicitly sterile figure of reverse theories. The *mulata* or the black (slave) girl, the white man's downfall in racist formulations, the bringer of physical

---

12 Roberto Schwarz, 'Brazilian Culture: Nationalism by Elimination', *New Left Review* 167, 1988, 77-90, is a good example of the critique of middle-class Brazilians' hankering for the advanced countries' latest products' (78). He does not mention women's issues anywhere in this article, but Maria Elisa Cevasco in this volume shows how easily the argument applies to feminist debates.

13 Heloisa Toller Gomes, in her analysis of *Fogo Morto*, in this volume, shows how the sexless white woman's revenge on the negress can also be a theme in racist literature.

decay (epitomised in syphilis) and moral degeneration, becomes the carefree, warm and fecund sexual partner. All four stereotypes, overlapping and mobile, have something to disturb the feminist. The powerful black man of black power iconography has a lesser role to play here in a discussion which rages over miscegenation. For miscegenation must always be a question of the white man's relation to lascivious women of colour. The white woman as desiring subject is no more than (and no less than) a scare story.

The issue of race in Brazil has two immediately interesting aspects for the non-Brazilian. The first is the role played by the indigenous Brazilians, who, whether despised or hallowed, are in many senses barely 'Brazilians'.<sup>14</sup> When discussing Brazil and Brazilians we are almost always discussing the descendants of immigrants (whether colonialist, slaves or other kinds of immigrants), or the offspring of miscegenation. (It should be noted that there was perhaps a more open attitude to miscegenation in Brazil where a higher proportion of early colonialists were single men than in North America.) Those Indians who have not inter-bred, who still live apart, become the objects of anthropology rather than sociology.<sup>15</sup> The second is the degree to which the myth that 'race doesn't matter' has a hold, relative to, say, another former slave-owning colony, the U.S.A.. Brazil was late in abolishing slavery (not until 1888), and yet, at the same time, has been extraordinarily successful in creating a sense amongst much of its population that race discrimination is not an issue, that the politics of race are irrelevant in the melting-pot which is Brazil. Yet, any study of the relation

---

14 See David Brookshaw, *'Paradise Betrayed'. Brazilian Literature of the Indian*, Amsterdam, CEDLA Latin American Studies, 47, 1988. Brookshaw contrasts Brazil with Peru or Mexico where Indians were transformed into peasants; in Brazil it was slaves or immigrants who took on that economic role, while Indians were pushed out to remote areas. He argues that Indians were viewed as part of nature, which from an economic perspective meant as an obstacle to colonisation. This economic perspective can easily be reversed in literature which adopts an 'edenic' model. This dichotomy survives in present-day attitudes to Amazonian societies not only in Brazil, but in Europe and North America where the rain forest and its inhabitants are a hot issue both for certain multi-national corporations and for environmentalists. Edenism is particularly powerful in writing on Brazil; images of terrestrial paradise, implying natural riches in inexhaustible abundance, marked the first descriptions by European 'discoverers'. According to David Haberley this still marks rhetoric and influences policy on a range of issues from land-use and energy to pollution. See 'The Edenic metaphor' in *Three Sad Races. Racial Identity and National Consciousness in Brazilian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1983. Haberley relates the Edenic metaphor, and the notion of the Fall, to the question of miscegenation.

15 This is a gross over-simplification, but I am using this formula in an attempt to encapsulate the 'outsiderness' of Indian peoples relative to discussions of the industrial, or even agricultural, nation, Brazil. This is not to say that Brazilian politics do not impinge on them - clearly they do! Deforestation of the rain forest is the example which many Brazilians are most tired of privileged First Worlders hurling at them.

between a racial marker such as skin colour and, say, income level in Brazil will, unsurprisingly, come out with a very strong correspondence - the darker your skin the lower your income is likely to be - and Brazilian Portuguese has a wide range of terms for describing shades of skin colour not to mention other racial distinctions.<sup>16</sup>

While this volume focuses on literate or literary Brazilians, it seems important to note at least in the Introduction that important feminist work needs to be done, and is being done, with respect to Brazilian Indians. Anthropologists, unlike literary critics, often tend to ignore the individual voice; understandably, they wish to describe and analyse the general characteristics of the people they are studying. However, as has been pointed out, this can mean that the dominant male voice is presented as the universal one - and the 'exceptional' woman is ignored. Janet M. Chernela has argued that the study of poetics in small-scale Amazonian communities often presents these societies as homogeneous, static and consensual - ignoring the divergences that a woman's performance might introduce.<sup>17</sup> Nineteenth-century 'Indianist' mythology,<sup>18</sup> while benign relative to the attitudes which led to early genocide (for instance in Argentina), survives in many representations of Indians today which cannot allow detailed analysis of power inequalities within these communities. This means that just as women's writing is marginalised in literate Brazil, women's performance, and the social critique it may contain, is ignored in oral cultures.

It has been argued that, while race in the U.S.A. is largely seen as a question of inheritance in the sense of genes, in Brazil it has at least two other components which work alongside and complicate the genetic one. These two other components are physical and cultural characteristics.<sup>19</sup> While genetic

---

16 Patai cites Marvin Harris's listing of 492 different racial categorisations found in just five Brazilian states (350, note 6).

17 See "The 'Ideal Speech Moment': Women and Narrative Performance in the Brazilian Amazon", *Feminist Studies*, 23, 1997, 73-96. This is a study of the Wanano group from the Northwest Amazon, part of the Eastern Tukanoan family.

18 See David Brookshaw, *Race and Color in Brazilian Literature*, Metilchen, N. J. and London, 1986. Brookshaw argues that the 'nativism' of anti-establishment Brazilian whites had a largely Indianist focus until about the 1920s when modernism produced an alternative African nativism (paradoxically originating in Europe) which operated alongside. While the Indianism of the nineteenth century focused on the Noble Savage, a good subject for Christianity, the 1920s preferred the Irreverent Savage (and hence the cannibal who eats the missionary).

19 This argument is presented in David T. Haberley's *Three Sad Races*. It should be noted that this study focuses on six authors - all men.

inheritance works on a scale from African to European stock, physical characteristics such as hair texture or shape of nose may be said to work on a scale which in both high culture and popular culture is represented as one which runs from ugliness to beauty.<sup>20</sup> The cultural scale naturally runs from barbarism to civilisation. This means that the consumption (never mind the production) of literature is an elite sign of 'whiteness'. Haberley argues that the strength of this association means that the great mulatto novelist Machado de Assis is not only usually presented as universal and hence white, but is often believed to be white.<sup>21</sup>

In the period following Abolition (say, from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century) many influential Brazilians sought explanations for what was perceived as the underdevelopment of Brazil in depressing racial theories which established a clear hierarchy of races. These of course characteristically placed Aryan races above 'Mediterranean' ones as well as representing the offspring of any miscegenation as more degenerate than even the most inferior of races (the African) in their pure-blooded form. The official Brazilian view of course adopted the more optimistic (although still racist) view that Europeans had improved the bloodstock of other races (whitening them) by miscegenation. In their most extreme form, racial theories argued that races were species and hence the products of miscegenation would (ultimately) be sterile.<sup>22</sup> Against these, Modernism introduced a degree of optimism even though it has a range of often contradictory attitudes with respect to race and sex. One key point in all these discussions is the way in which race cannot be analysed independently of sex, and various fantasies of inter-racial sex (chiefly of Portuguese men and dark-skinned women) spice up, if they do not fuel, even scholarly debates.<sup>23</sup> One

---

20 While Haberley produces this *against* the North American model, we might note the role over the years of, for instance, Hollywood in contributing to notions of beauty and ugliness (and indeed good and evil, and purity and temptation) which relate to racial types. Cinema has been very important in Brazil from the early days; see, for example, Maria Fernanda Baptista Bicalto, 'The Art of Seduction: Representation of Women in Brazilian Silent Cinema', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 30, 1, 1993, 21–33. The related roles of other mass media are also of course crucial; Ruth Silviano Brandão suggests the importance of soap opera stars in Brazilian culture, as figures both mythical and real.

21 To take another example, in his discussion of Mário de Andrade, Haberley uses the formulation: 'This new interpretation begins with a simple statement of fact, but one that will distress and even anger his family and friends: Mário de Andrade must be read as a nonwhite writer' (137).

22 See Young, *Colonial Desire*, Chapter One for an analysis of the argument that hybridity entails infertility.

23 Young analyses this phenomenon in other colonial contexts.

series of powerful, and often radically inspired, responses to the racial diversity of Brazil, which differed from the hierarchy of races, was the democracy of races or the prejudice of having no prejudice. I shall take two examples of radical responses to Brazilian racial diversity: the first is Anthropophagism and the second the writing of Gilberto Freyre, about a decade later.

Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibal's Manifesto* boldly took as its model the Brazilian Indians who ate their enemies, famously celebrated by Montaigne in the sixteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Buarque de Hollanda argues, however, that the Anthropophagy movement of the 1920s has had negative consequences for the development of women's studies in Brazil this century. She points out that it aimed not to identify with the Other but to assimilate (digest) what is desirable or worthy from the Other and eliminate (excrete) what is not ('Parking in a tow-away zone', 15-17) - and the question of definition of worth remains thorny. For the Modernists this assimilation constructs Brazil as hospitable to the other, but, she claims, history gets left out and the end result is a kind of racial bleaching. The Modernists tried to invert colonial stereotypes and give voice to the natives, but by retaining colonial representations they invented a carnivalised nation driven by pre-logical feelings - exploiting a fantasy of the *mulata's* body which is shared by the rest of the world in its representations of warm, seductive and colourful Brazil. Hollanda points out that black and women authors do not share this focus on the carnival or this myth of a matriarchy in which difference can freely float without being subject to the law, because it does not correspond even minimally to everyday social experience (18).

One of the most influential of Brazilian thinkers is the social historian Gilberto Freyre.<sup>25</sup> Freyre makes the liberal argument that all Brazilians are non-white, and that this is central to Brazilian society, unifying it and making it better adapted and indeed superior to other American societies, which are both less humane and less stable. He argues, against many other racial theories, that miscegenation means bringing together the best characteristics of the races. Any negative qualities which may be observed are not hereditary but the product of historical and social factors such as the aftermath of slavery, disease or poverty. While this theory is a great improvement on many others (without even making the comparison with theories of race popular in much of Europe in the 1930s),

---

24 See Judith Still, 'Key pre-texts on the gift economy: Plato, More and Montaigne' in *Feminine Economies. Thinking Against the Market in the Enlightenment and the late Twentieth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, for a brief analysis of this account of 'symbolic exchange' and some of the discussion it has generated.

25 See *The Masters and the Slaves*, trans. Samuel Putnam, New York, Knopf, revised 1956 (first published in Brazil, 1933). (See also *The Gilberto Freyre Reader*, trans. Barbara Shelby, New York, Knopf, 1974.)

there are two issues which we could raise. One is the difficulty of tackling issues of real race discrimination when the assertion is made that all Brazilians are non-white – the material problem remains that some are more non-white than others and suffer the consequences. A second issue is the representation of miscegenation – in terms of a foment of sexual activity in Brazil in which insatiable Portuguese ‘stallions’ mounted a succession of eager and lascivious black or brown-skinned girls.<sup>26</sup>

Patai's *Brazilian Women Speak* presents interviews with a range of urban Brazilian women from different class and race backgrounds. While she is aware of the many pitfalls and possible partiality of the interview form, nevertheless this work may come closer to suggesting the sense ordinary women make of their everyday lives than many theorisations are able to. An interview with two sisters, Alma and Júlia, from a middle-class mixed-race family is interesting for the way the women analyse the differences between the way they have always been perceived because the one has a ‘coarser’, ‘frizzier’ hair texture than the other (12–15) – ‘the hair is labelled “bad”’. In this volume we include an essay by Jane-Marie Collins which draws on a rather different use of the interview form. It gives a rare glimpse of, or echo from, two slave women who turned against the families they worked for with murderous violence. Collins investigates various theories of subaltern resistance to see what might cast the most light on these dramatic cases and the impact they could have had.

### *Women's writing in Brazil*

Until the 1980s there were very few women writers regularly recognised by

---

26 *The Masters and the Slaves* returns incessantly to images of Indian women or *mulatas* offering themselves to highly-sexed Portuguese men (see, for example, 94–8). A wide range of reasons are given for this including the ‘fact’ that Europeans have larger penises than Indian men. The reader learns that Indians even resort to wrapping the skin of poisonous reptiles around their members in an attempt to enlarge them. It may be noted that Freyre inverts contemporary racial hierarchies even with respect to the detail that Aryans are superior to ‘Mediterranean’ races. It should also be pointed out that Freyre's interpretation of the salacious anthropological data he repeats is generally more humane than that of earlier analysts eager to prove the degeneracy of inferior races. However, alongside the repetition of the figure of the dusky temptress is the image of the sadistic white woman. While Freyre allows that this sadism is partly the projection of the sadistic treatment she herself experiences from the white man, he emphasises the role of feminine sexual jealousy (for example, 350–3). He also asserts, against a certain mythology, that sexual contact on the plantations between white mistresses and black slaves must have been very rare.

27 See Darlene J. Sadlier (ed.), *One Hundred Years after Tomorrow: Brazilian Women's Fiction in the 20th Century*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992, for a sample of twenty Brazilian women writing fiction over the last century. Sadlier argues that only three or four achieved recognition until very recently.

Brazilian literary critics,<sup>27</sup> and little feminist scholarship in the Brazilian academy, in spite of a nineteenth-century tradition of women's literary activity. Darlene Sadlier in this volume points to a recent attempt to identify the Brazilian canon, which contained only four works by women (two by Lispector) out of 150 listed.<sup>28</sup> And yet, it is now possible to point to a significant and growing number of research groups, conference papers, publications, dissertations and so on even if this research remains marginal in many institutions. It has been argued that this research has been influenced by political exiles returning from abroad, many of whom work on French, British or North-American texts.<sup>29</sup>

We end this volume with two essays which contribute to the ongoing feminist theoretical debate, the arguments over which theories are most appropriate to the Brazilian context, imported or not, universal or not. Sadlier argues in her essay in this volume that the feminist theory most often adopted in Brazil does not engage with race and class adequately for the Brazilian context. She writes about her experience of teaching texts by African-American women in North-Eastern Brazil, which may have more of a purchase, she suggests, than some elite French feminist theory. At the same time she stresses the usefulness of Brazilian theory such as that of Paulo Freire. The influence of feminist liberal pluralist and poststructuralist theory originating outside Brazil is examined critically by Cevasco, who claims that they fail to account for the social realities of the Brazilian context. For Cevasco, change can only come about through collective action directed against capitalism rather than a pluralist fragmentation into interest groups such as those of gays or black women. Taking Gayatri Spivak as emblematic of a certain poststructuralist feminist position, she questions her focus on language. Instead she turns to North American feminist work which has a greater emphasis on everyday maternal experience. These critical analyses of the role of theory may be compared to the two articles which put imported theory to work, Brandão's psychoanalytical work on the autobiographies produced by Brazilian soap opera stars and Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida's article on insanity in Lispector.

---

28 Of course we in Britain can hardly feel certain or complacent about the number of women who will be placed in any mainstream critic's assertion about the contents of any canon. A recent article in *The Observer Review* ('Sexual reading' 27/9/98, 2-3) by Nicci Gerrard and Sean French, backed up with an offer from Waterstone's Books, asserted that men and women naturally like completely different books. The list of books women like (according to Gerrard) were all by women authors, and the list of books men like (according to French) were of course all by male authors (all focused on male protagonists). If we subscribe to such a polarised world view then perhaps it is not surprising that the the top echelons of academia (dominated by men) produce masculine canons...

29 See Hollanda, 'Parking in a tow-away zone', 9-11.

This volume focuses largely on women's writing, but we have included two essays which provide some historical and cultural context in terms of the dominant production - men's writing. Luiz Carlos Villalta analyses some Jesuit writings from the sixteenth century, Brazil's earliest productions, showing how European myths are 'translated' and reinterpreted in the Brazilian context. Eve, Mary and the Magdalene are all powerfully reinscribed, and continue to haunt discourse today. He also asks to what extent we can detect any 'answering back'. Heloisa Toller Gomes brings together two canonical authors writing in the 1930s about the collapse of slave-owning plantations: William Faulkner and José Lins do Rego. Both represent women in stereotypical terms as passive, dependent and ornamental even if, more interestingly (another imbricated 'answering back'), reflective and critical. These two essays have contrasting racial contexts: the encounter with Indians and the backdrop of black slavery.

The writer best known outside as well as inside Brazil is Clarice Lispector, and so we have included three rather different essays on her work, in order to give a sense of her important and controversial status. The analysis of Lispector's work raises precisely those questions of the importing of foreign theory, of the deployment of universal categories as opposed to focusing on allusions to a specific context. Although Lispector was already regarded as fairly important in Brazil, it was Hélène Cixous's championing of her work which contributed to her gaining international (posthumous) celebrity status over the last two decades and thus adding to her credit at home as well as influencing the way in which her work, and other women's texts, have been analysed.<sup>30</sup> Elena Carrera's essay focuses specifically on Cixous's particular style of reading Lispector (and other texts considered as *écriture féminine*), and, by implication, the questions that this raises about reading practices in general. It is sometimes argued that first world intellectuals make reference to the third world (or to the Orient) as a means of gaining more knowledge about themselves. If it is accepted that Lispector is a third world writer (which could be contested), then Cixous might be deemed to take this hegemonic attitude to parodic extremes. And yet Cixous is determined to retain Lispector in her otherness while praising her for the generosity which allows the reading subject space to discover herself. Almeida produces a reading of Lispector influenced not only by Cixous, but also by other 'poststructuralist' theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Shoshana Felman or Roland Barthes. She argues that Lispector is aware of the double-bind of any kind of celebration of madness, exclusion or the semiotic, and that 'her writings

---

30 Lispector's first story 'The Flight' was published in 1940; it is included in Sadlier (ed.) *One Hundred Years After Tomorrow*, 53-7; Cixous discovered, and began publishing on, Lispector in 1979, two years after her death.

ironically express the awareness of the impossibility of creating a discourse that is completely excluded from the symbolic, that is, from society and language'. Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira, by way of contrast, focuses on the specific social references in *Lispector*. She argues that the determination to read her as universal - whether in terms of metaphysics, style or psychology - overlooks her purchase on her historical context.

A third woman writer to be considered in this volume is the rather different Patricia Galvão (Pagu) who foregrounds the experience of proletarian women and highlights differences of race, class and sexuality as well as sex. While the novel in question (*Industrial Park*) was first published in 1933, typically it has received very little attention until the 1980s, and Pagu was best known for her life and her links with famous men. Pagu, *Lispector* and Telles (the most contemporary of writers to be studied in this collection) have in common an ambiguous series of representations of mothers and motherhood, and also their formally innovative style. Owen deploys Bakhtin's theory of carnival to bring out Pagu's radical qualities. Lisboa's analysis focuses on Telles's representation of the retaliatory response of the mother in two stories which take place around Christmas, the moment most associated for us with the maternal-filial bond. In some ways this work refers very closely to its national context; for example, the second story to be analysed ('Midnight Mass') is a re-writing of a short story by the great Machado de Assis. In other ways the force is anti-genealogical.

We hope that these readings all complement each other, and suggest the need, precisely for complementarity - for imports and exports; carnival and moral seriousness; universalising and specificity; mothers fighting for, and when necessary, against their children... That is not to say that these should be a random selection of anything goes - the liberal pluralism evoked earlier - but something more pragmatic and more attentive to context, no tools rejected out of hand, in the *bricolage* favoured by one of Brazil's admirers, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Jacques Derrida has already provided the critique of Lévi-Strauss's method, and indeed of his political belief as pious faith. We need not regard native Brazilians or any other peoples with his Romantic (and thus ultimately ethnocentric) eye, but, while exercising our own auto-critique and checking each step forward, nevertheless keep moving on.

This collection originated in a link between two Universities, UFMG in Brazil and the University of Nottingham in the U.K.<sup>31</sup> It has focused on Brazil as the subject for our polylogue. However, any attempt to 'fix' one side of the partnership at the expense of the other, to emphasise the certainties of the Old

---

31 This was set up by Bernard McGuirk and Else Vieira.

World or the First World in order to celebrate or deplore the plurality or mobility of the New World or the Third World, should note that the 'English' side of the collaboration includes one contributor who originates from Spain, one whose origins are Mozambician and one from North America. If I took myself as a token 'English woman' I might have to admit that I was born in the Channel Islands, which are part of the United Kingdom but not of Great Britain nor even of the European Union; or equally that one of my grandmothers was a Polish Jew (educated in Belgium); or that my other grandmother and one of my grandfathers have origins shrouded in a degree of darkness. Thus, while we have chosen on this occasion not to interrogate our own mongrel status in England, our discussion with and around Brazilians is not to be taken as establishing one term of a stable opposition...