

THE RECEPTION OF MACHADO DE ASSIS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract This essay argues that Machado's current reception in the United States will not be particularly positive. Or long lived. The essay further argues that either he will be erroneously identified by professors in departments of World Literature as yet another "magical realist" from "Latin America," and found to be wanting as a "magical realist," or he will be read here in the States as a "Black writer" and found to be too tepid and not angry enough.

Keywords Machado de Assis, reception in U.S., American literature.

The story of Machado's reception in the United States is both old and new; old, because he has been available to U.S. readers in English since 1952, and new because he is once again enjoying a spurt of interest. In the pages that follow, I will focus on this current reception of Machado and offer a few thoughts about how it's proceeding. The Brazilian master's reception here has always been spotty. And it has never stuck; it's never become permanent. But this time, something different is afoot. Word of Machado's brilliance is starting to sink into the consciousness of English-speaking America. Slowly but surely, Machado is beginning to establish an audience here in the States.

Mario Higa confirms this, but adds, importantly, that Machado is gaining a readership here in the United States not through our classes in Brazilian literature but through classes in departments of English and World Literature. As Mario puts it, "The main agents of change in helping to improve the reception of Machado in the realm of education, particularly in America, . . . are the teachers of World Literature" (34-35). I think Mario is entirely correct about this. It's a question of numbers. English departments and World Literature classes simply have more students than we do in our Brazilian literature classes, and most especially if we teach those classes in Portuguese.

While I'm happy to see Machado gaining a readership outside our classes, there are already issues with how he is being received here. In the main, these are classic reception problems, but, with respect to the Brazilian writer, it is also clear that many of them have more to do with the nature of the receiving culture, in this case, the United States, than with the influencing author or text. As regards Machado's current reception in the U.S., I see two scenarios playing out. One involves Machado being read here as a Latin American writer, and the other involves him being read as a Black writer.

Let's begin with the first of these, Machado's reception here as a Latin American writer. My fear is that he will be lost under the vague rubric of "Latin American" and lose his identity as a Brazilian writer. In fact, I think this is all but inevitable. Here in the United States, when people refer to "Latin America," they nearly always mean Spanish America only. Spanish America is their frame of reference. Brazil, in all its cultural diversity and literary richness, just isn't considered. It isn't known. To readers, writers, and critics here in the U.S., Brazil is, as Ralph Ellison might say, "invisible." And this is a problem. World Literature instructors here in the States who are charged with teaching Machado in their classes simply won't know what to say about him. And so they will rely on what they think they know about "Latin American" literature, and this, alas, means "magical realism."

Why? Because, unfortunately, this is how U.S.-American critics understand "Latin American" literature to be. In both Brazil and Spanish America, "magical realism" is a thing of the past; it's yesterday's news. In Brazil, moreover, "magical realism" has always been regarded as an import, a foreign mode of writing; it is not indigenous to Brazil. But in the United States, a nation that has never been much interested in its neighbors south of the Rio Grande, "magical realism" still too often dominates critical thinking about what "Latin American" literature is thought to entail.

To further complicate Machado's reception here in the States there is this: A great deal depends on which Machado work is selected for classroom use. If the Machado text chosen for study is *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, readers in a World Literature class will likely key on the use of a deceased narrator to tell the story. As Brás Cubas, the dead but still quite voluble narrator informs us, "Properly speaking, I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing" (Assis 5). But readers will also key on chapter 7, "The Delirium," in which our "deceased writer" is astride a hippopotamus flying back through time to the origin of things. For some readers, these features of the text will be seized upon as examples of Machadoan "magical realism," and the entire novel will be reduced to this level.

But if the Machado text chosen for study is *Quincas Borba*, the U.S.-American reader, again scouring the text for evidence of "magical realism," could get hung up over chapter 141, and the

conversation the roses have about the character, Sofia. If, however, *Dom Casmurro* were the text selected for classroom use, then the “magical realism” issue would be mostly obviated. Mostly, but not quite. There is the case (chapter 17) of the talking worms, who, like literary critics (Machado wryly suggests), know nothing of the things they gnaw; they just gnaw. But the real issue with *Dom Casmurro* is: How will it be read? Will it be read as a tale of adultery, or, post-Helen Caldwell, will it be read as a great tragedy, the tale of how a single human being is destroyed by his own insecurities, fears, and jealousies (see Caldwell, 1960; also Caldwell, 1970, 142-149)? If it is presented to U. S. students as a story about adultery, it will disappoint because read that way *Dom Casmurro* has to be the most boring adultery novel ever written. If *Dom Casmurro* is approached as a tale about adultery, then I predict it won’t be on the reading list for long.

Yet the fact is, this is the risk a writer takes when she or he becomes a player in the World Literature game. The home culture loses control over its writer and other readers in other cultures gain control. If a World Literature class in the United States wants to read *Dom Casmurro* as a story about adultery, it is free to do that. And it will. This is one of the things, frankly, that most fascinates me about issues of influence and reception: A writer venerated in his or her own culture may be dismissed or even lambasted by readers in another culture.¹ Ditto for specific texts; *Dom Casmurro* may be celebrated in Brazil, but when it leaves Brazil and becomes part of World Literature, its fate is up for grabs.

But there is another view of this. As David Damrosch suggests in *What Is World Literature?*, what I consider a misreading actually enriches the value of a literary text as it “circulates” through various global cultures (5; also 6). But if *Dom Casmurro* is regarded here in the States as a novel about adultery, has it been enriched? I don’t think so. I’d say it’s been diminished.

Let’s go back to *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* for a moment. Readers trained in English literature may see the parallels between Machado’s novel and Laurence Sterne’s 18th century text, *Tristram Shandy*. The danger here is that Machado will be immediately pegged as merely another New World imitator of a European model. In this reading, Machado, who goes beyond Sterne in so many ways, will be relegated to the secondary status of a copycat. Much the same thing could happen if the Machado text chosen for study is *Dom Casmurro*, with its imaginative use of Shakespeare’s Othello. There is a tendency, in influence and reception studies, to value the influencing text over the influenced one, no matter if the latter turns out to be the superior work of art. This is, of course, a problem of

¹ The opposite, of course, is equally possible; a writer not highly esteemed in her or his native nation can become a celebrity for the global audience.

American literature in general, which means Brazilian literature faces it, too. Machado offers a case in point.

There is another issue to be considered here as well. As we've seen in the reception of Roberto Bolaño here in the United States, U.S.-American readers (and critics, for that matter) expect to see certain stereotypes associated with what they imagine as "Latin American" writing (see Pollock, 356-363). They expect to see a parade of dictators, frustrated poets, florid prose, revolutions, sex, and violence. Machado, as we all know, does not exhibit any of these stereotypes; he is, in fact, the least "Latin American" seeming writer I can think of. But U.S.-American readers will be expecting to find these tired, old tropes of "Latin American" literature in Machado's work, and when they don't, they will be disappointed. And they will judge Machado accordingly.

Before leaving this topic, we need to consider one final possibility, the one in which Machado is seen not as a "magical realist" or as a supposedly typical "Latin American" writer but as an iconoclastic genius, a true innovator of the novel form. This is how I read Machado, and I know many others do as well. But how likely is it that U.S.-American readers in a World Literature classroom will perceive him this way, too? Outside of a few places, I don't think it's likely. Machado, as we all know, is a subtle and demanding writer, one possessed of a deeply ironic outlook. The reader has to know a lot to appreciate his art. For Machado, it's not the story that's important, it's how the story gets told — and how it's received by the reader, who is expected to be actively engaged in the creation of the text's meaning. And it's not what his characters do that's important, but why they do it. And Machado's characters do things for very complex reasons. The character Dona Plácida, from *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, is a wonderful example of this. Though she has lived her entire life in abject poverty, Dona Plácida is depicted as a resolutely moral woman, one who will not sell her body even when to do so would improve her economic situation. Getting on in years, her greatest fear is ending up on the streets begging for change. Recognizing the precariousness of Dona Plácida's situation, and deciding to take advantage of it, Brás Cubas approaches her with a proposition. If Dona Plácida will agree to look after the little house that Brás and his married paramour, Virgília, use for their trysts, he will pay her a small stipend. Conflicted but desperate, Dona Plácida accepts this offer, even though she is painfully aware that she has compromised her sense of dignity, the one thing that has sustained her in a lifetime of penury. She has allowed herself to be bought, and she knows it. Pressed hard by old age and impecunious circumstance, Dona Plácida picks money over morality. Because of how Machado structures Dona Plácida's story, some readers are led to indict her for what they feel is selling out while other readers see her as merely doing what she has to do to survive. Other

readers see her in still different ways. It is difficult to render a single judgement about Dona Plácida. Like much of real life, hers is a complicated situation, with many factors involved. Again, Higa has it right; Machado is “not for beginners” (27). To be appreciated, Machado demands a lot from his reader, and in the typical World Literature classroom, I don’t think he’ll find an audience that can grasp him and what he is doing. It takes time to appreciate Machado de Assis, and it takes multiple re-readings. And there’s just not time in a World Literature classroom for Machado to be read, reread, and savored the way he and his work deserve.

Still, it is possible that a really skilled instructor, one who’s spent time reading some of the critical bibliography surrounding Machado, could present him not as just another name on a World Literature reading list but as a true genius, a writing deserving of special consideration. We could call this the Susan Sontag/Harold Bloom/Michael Wood approach (see Sontag; Bloom; and Wood). Is it possible? Yes. Is it likely? I don’t think so. To do Machado justice in a World Literature program would require a seminar devoted entirely to him, one replete with extensive critical readings. Today, with enrollments in literature courses plunging, such a seminar is not likely to become a reality.

This, then, is the gist of my first perceived scenario, that Machado will be read here either as a tepid kind of “magical realist” or as a bizarre writer who doesn’t fit the mold of what a “Latin American” writer is supposed to be. Either way, Machado will be regarded as a dud, or, at best, as an idiosyncratic bore.

Let’s change our focus now and consider the second scenario, Machado’s reception here as a Black writer. How might this go? We who work on Machado know his racial background.² We, the specialists, know that Machado’s paternal grand-parents were freed slaves. And we know Machado lived and wrote in a society where chattel slavery was a legal institution. We know, too, that Machado has long been read – in Brazil and elsewhere – as a Black man who wrote as if he were white. We also know that, in Brazil, a major re-evaluation of Machado has been going on about how he should be appreciated – as a great Black Brazilian writer, as a great Black writer, or, more simply, as a great writer, one who happens to be Black. Or, to be more precise, of mixed-race. This debate is vital to Machado’s identity as a writer, and it will have an impact on how he is received here.

² Today, thanks to breakthroughs in genetics, we have to understand the idea of “race” in new and more informed ways. As Dr. Shirley Tilghman, the Howard A. Prior Professor of the Life Sciences at Princeton University, has written, “genomic research confirms that human beings vary only modestly from one another: 99.9 percent of all human genomes are identical, and only 10-15 percent of the remaining 0.1 percent of variation differentiates entire populations” (from the lecture handout; see Tilghman).

But how much of this background information will be known, or fully comprehended, by U.S.-American readers as they experience Machado de Assis? How much of this information will be known by the typical World Literature instructor? If said instructor presents Machado as a Black writer from Brazil, how will he be regarded by a U.S. audience? How much time in a typical World Literature class can be devoted to a thorough discussion of Brazilian racial history? And of what it means to be a Black writer in Brazil? To be a Black writer here in the States means something different, something unique to the history and culture of the United States, and I'm not sure how much being steeped in U.S. racial history will help our students read and appreciate Machado. I suspect he will be found wanting, that is, not very Black.

As far as Machado's reception here in the U.S. as a Black writer is concerned, I can foresee a response similar to the case of Ralph Ellison, who, in 1963, was criticized by Irving Howe for not being militant enough about the problems of racism and racial discrimination here in the United States. Ellison's response, that an artist was not obliged to promote any political agenda, was one with which Machado would, seemingly, have agreed. His work seems to call for this conclusion. Will the instructor of our typical U.S.-American World Literature class – even an instructor who knows the story of Ellison and Howe – have taken the time to research how Machado felt about his racial identity and his art? It's possible, but I also think it's unlikely.

A related factor has to do with which of Machado's texts will be selected for classroom use. Presumably, it will be something from his prose fiction, a novel or one of his stories, which, on balance, offer more hard evidence of Machado's status as a Black writer than his novels do. The story "Father versus Mother," for example, has been described as being "one of the strongest and profound indictments of slavery to be found in Brazilian literature" (Jackson 148). At the same time, the novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* offers ample evidence for discussions of race, power, and slavery in Brazil. Chapters 11 and 98, which involve the slave boy, Prudêncio, and references to Valongo, the colonial slave market; and chapter 123, which features the character, Cotrim, a loathsome slave trader who nonetheless presents himself as a paragon of virtue and rectitude, are especially useful in this context.

The questions of genre (novel or story) and translation thus loom large here. If the text selected is *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, there are several different translations available to pick from. Each one comes with a critical introduction or afterword, and these, too, will play a role in deciding which version of the novel gets selected for classroom use. This is so because the introduction or afterword provided may well be the only critical guide a reader in a World Literature class gets. Most

of these at least mention Machado's racial heritage. But if the text chosen for classroom study is one of Machado's short stories, the critical information provided may be much less, even lacking entirely. Think how hard it would be for an instructor who does not know Brazilian culture and history to teach a story like "Father versus Mother," which, in addition to offering a withering critique of slavery as a thoroughly toxic institution, also challenges its reader's ability even to know which characters are Black (see Dutra).

Questions of influence and reception rank among the most complex we have in all literary study. A great many issues come into play, some literary but others involving cultural biases and conflicting traditions. On this score, the problem for Machado's reception here in the United States is that Brazilian literature is all but totally ignored by our critical establishment. This greatly complicates things. It is always challenging to try and speak definitively about issues of influence and reception. Inherently slippery, these issues involve a lot of moving parts. And also unknowns.

But there is one thing we do know: Machado's reception here in the United States has been going on since the early 1950s, and it's as complicated as it's ever been. Maybe more so. With new translations of his multifaceted work coming out all the time, we can say with assurance that we're living in a time when it seems Machado should break into our literary discussions here in the States. The moment seems propitious. But will it happen? Will Machado gain the kind of acclaim that's been afforded, say, a Borges, a García Márquez, or a Roberto Bolaño? I'm doubtful.

Let's sum up. Following Mario Higa's contention that Machado's future here in the United States depends more on faculty in departments of English and World Literature than it does on we who teach him in our Portuguese classes, I've suggested two scenarios: One, that Machado will be received here as a "Latin American" writer or, two, that he will be read here as a Black writer. Where he's regarded as a "Latin American" writer, I anticipate he will be read either as a kind of second rate "magical realist" or as a rather strange writer who doesn't conform to the stereotypes that exist here in the U.S. about what a "Latin American" writer is supposed to be like. The Bolaño case is instructive in this regard. But if Machado is read here as a Black writer, I suspect, as I've already said, that his fate will be like that of Ralph Ellison, who was rebuked by critic, Irving Howe, for not being angry enough about racism and racial discrimination.

Machado's artistry is very subtle; he doesn't tell us, he shows us, and what he shows us is, as Paul Dixon has shown, always shrouded with ambiguity. To further complicate things, Machado is an ironist, a satirist, and a deep-dyed skeptic. He demands both effort and knowledge from his reader. Machado really isn't "for beginners" (Higa 27). And this is the problem. I just don't think there will be

enough time in a typical World Literature class to do him justice. Ironically, Machado's own genius, his own originality, will work against him.

My conclusion, then, is pessimistic. Perhaps that's fitting for our Machado, who, as we know, could be a little pessimistic himself. I'm afraid Machado's not going to enjoy here in the United States the great celebrity he so richly deserves. He's not going to become the next Borges; he's not even going to become the next García Márquez. He's just not flashy enough. I hope I'm wrong about this, but I don't think I am – even though I rank Machado above both Borges and Gabo.

But I don't want to end on a negative note. There is one thing we can do to help Machado's reception here in the United States. And elsewhere, for that matter. We can produce critical studies that examine him in a comparative framework. To employ a comparative optic accomplishes two goals, both beneficial to our cause: First, we get Machado out the ken of Brazilian literature alone, which, as rich as it is, just isn't known here, and, second, we bring him to the attention of readers in other literary traditions. For example, David Jackson, has written that Machado is "one of the greatest writers" ever "produced by the Americas" (6). That is absolutely true, and we should not hesitate to say so. For my part, I've argued, with respect to U.S.-American literature, that Machado is a more radical innovator than Henry James (and certainly funnier), and that Machado is more important to the development of the novel genre here in the Americas than James is (Fitz, 2023, 110-111; 136-139; 182; 2025, 12-14; 45; 136-137). My colleagues in English disagree, of course, but that's OK; I've gotten them to at least think about Machado. The comparative approach really does work, especially with respect to a writer as talented as Machado is, and if you haven't tried it, you might wish to. The comparative method truly does help internationalize our beloved "craque literário." And this is something we need to do.

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