



Vol. 12, No. 2, Winter 2015, 462-467

Review / Reseña

Malcolm K. McNee, *The Environmental Imaginary in Brazilian Poetry and Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Beyond Brazil: Supraregional Ecopoetry and Earth Art in the Anthropocene

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Malcolm K. McNee's innovative study broaches the topic of Brazilian contributions to ecopoetry and Earth art through the detailed analysis of the works of four contemporary poets and four visual artists. He takes a comparative approach by effectively pairing these poets or artists in a series of chapters that not only elucidate key commonalities in their respective *oeuvres*, but also detail important stylistic and conceptual differences with respect to how they engage the environment through their art. While attentive to the uniqueness of each of his subjects, McNee explains their shared tendency to question and unsettle boundaries between human and nonhuman subjects through their contemplation and renderings of the natural world.

The introduction provides an overview of descriptions of Brazil from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the dawn of the Anthropocene, the present geological period that dates from the Industrial Revolution and is marked by our global ecological footprint. Citing Portuguese nobleman and scribe Pêro Vaz de Caminha's 1500 letter of discovery to King Manuel I, McNee dissects the duality of Caminha's statement that the land "seemed to us quite vast." On one hand, many early narratives written by Europeans including Caminha, Jean de Léry, Fernão Cardim, and Hans Staden accentuate Brazil's vastness by portraying the land as abundantly fertile, Edenic, and salubrious. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, prominent works by naturalists Willem Piso and George Marcgraf, painters Albert Eckhout and Frans Post, historian Sebastião Rocha Pita, and novelist José de Alencar propagate this image, which McNee identifies as a metonym for Brazilian national identity and political order as well as a catalyst for the development of Brazil's economy. On the other hand, the verb "seemed," with its inherent uncertainty, belies the idealized notion of Brazil's inexhaustible natural resources. With this observation as a point of departure, McNee traces a counter-narrative of destruction and loss that includes historian Friar Vicente Salvador's 1627 critique of land exploitation by colonial settlers, José Bonifácio's 1819 denunciation of deforestation, and André Rebouças's 1876 proposal for a national park system. The author argues that the unravelling of the symbiotic relationship between Brazilian national identity and the country's storied flora, fauna, and climate continued into the twentieth century and gained momentum during the postmodern period, when artists began to eschew mimesis and regionalism in favor of increasingly conceptual and universal approaches to nature.

As McNee notes in his first chapter, shifts in the ways that contemporary Brazilian artists engage the environment require commensurate changes with regard to the theoretical paradigms used to analyze their work. To that end, he proposes and elaborates an ecocritical framework consistent with the characteristics that he observes in renderings of nature by Brazilian poets and visual artists of the Anthropocene. Specifically, he considers the features of ecopoetry and

Earth art *vis-à-vis* representative works by the four poets and four visual artists profiled in the book. First, the poems, sculptures, and installations analyzed, while often evocative of particular Brazilian ecosystems, transcend regional boundaries to engage in broader conversations and, in some instances, to address global environmental issues. Moreover, they emphasize the interconnectedness of the human self, the nonhuman other, and the environment in a manner reminiscent of Amerindian perspectivism, which ascribes personhood to living and nonliving things. Lastly, McNee notes that many of the works share a focus on “dark ecology,” e.g. abject elements such as vermin, as well as on processes and transformations in nature. In the visual arts, for example, the use of ephemeral or residual materials such as dust, mist, and fog connote environmental volatility and the passage of time.

In the second chapter, McNee undertakes the comparative study of the works of two poets, Manoel de Barros and Astrid Cabral. Each is associated with a specific region of Brazil—Barros, with the Pantanal marshlands of Central-West Brazil, and Cabral, with the Amazon. According to McNee, however, their poetry exhibits a universal quality analogous to that of Brazilian author João Guimarães Rosa’s fiction of the *sertão*, the “backlands” of Northeastern Brazil. With regard to Barros, McNee acknowledges the challenge of analyzing a corpus that spans eight decades. Nevertheless, he offers compelling examples of eco-poetical features in Barros’s work, such as the poet’s contemplation of the infinitesimal, abject beings that occupy his barren landscapes. Termed “*nadifúndio*” by Barros, these empty spaces serve as backdrops for processes of decay and transformation that blur the lines between human and nonhuman matter. Similarly, Cabral’s poetry explores how such changes connect the human subject with nonhuman elements as well as with the environment. As McNee observes, however, Barros and Cabral differ significantly in terms of their tone and treatment of time. The author attributes broader emotional range to the poetry of the latter, noting the sense of anguish and mourning with which she responds to change, as opposed to Barros’s comparatively positive outlook. McNee relates these

perspectives to the poets' perception of time, which Barros presents as cyclical and Cabral, progressive and historical.

McNee dedicates the next chapter to Sérgio Medeiros and Josely Vianna Baptista, two prominent Brazilian poets who began publishing in the 1990s. Points of comparison include their use of abstracted meta-landscapes and Amerindian perspectivism. They differ markedly, however, in terms of poetic language, with Medeiros's poetry characterized by its sparseness, and Baptista's, by its dense verses reminiscent of the Baroque. Medeiros's work, alternately referential and vague with regard to setting, explores the transformation-through-decay of things into beings, and vice-versa. A significant portion of McNee's analysis of Medeiros focuses on the collection *O Sexo Vegetal* (2009), in which the poet contemplates the interconnectedness and interdependency of his human and nonhuman subjects through the lens of Amerindian mythopoeics. Similarly cognizant of Brazil's indigenous heritage, Baptista's work features the Guarani myth of the *yvy marã'ey*, translated to Portuguese as the *terra sem mal*, and portrayed as a land free of war, illness, and hunger. The poet's exploration of this myth, which resonates with contemporary debates over the environmental consequences of Brazilian agribusiness, evidences her engagement with specific social, historical, and geographical contexts, particularly in her poems related to the periods of conquest and colonization in Brazil. Of note in this regard is Baptista's *Roça barroca* (2011), a text that combines poetry, translation, and commentary.

In the fourth chapter, McNee shifts his attention from poets to Earth artists to consider how the latter also unsettle the boundaries between the artist, the art object, and the environment. The two artists profiled, Frans Krajcberg and Bené Fonteles, coincide in their use of found natural materials as well as their orientation toward environmental activism. McNee shows, however, that they differ significantly in that Krajcberg's work proposes a divide between the natural and human worlds, whereas Fonteles portrays the environment and human activity as inseparable. Krajcberg, who experienced an "activist turn" in 1975 following his solo exhibition in Paris, is known as an opponent of deforestation, as emblemized by his iconic sculptures crafted from charred tree trunks.

Krajcberg's association with this issue notwithstanding, McNee effectively argues that the artist's work can neither be divided into "before" and "after" periods, nor defined exclusively by its environmentalist thrust. Fonteles, who terms his work "activism," was instrumental in the founding of the National Movement of Artists for Nature and has expressed solidarity with Indian protest movements. McNee observes parallels between Fonteles's images, sculptures, and performances and Barros's poetry in terms of their blending of human and nonhuman environments as well as their sustained gaze toward abjection in the form of detritus.

In the next chapter, McNee considers how the works of another pair of visual artists, Lia do Rio and Nuno Ramos, evidence key characteristics of Earth art. Consistent with the features described above, their projects reveal the interconnectedness of human subjects, their nonhuman counterparts, and the environment, negotiate local references and global relevance, and evidence an environmental orientation without necessarily advocating for a particular issue. In Lia do Rio's sculpture and installations, McNee notes a desire to retain the ephemeral, as illustrated by her frequent use of found materials and natural detritus, most notably leaves in various stages of decay. Whereas Lia do Rio often references gradual changes and transformations, Ramos represents extreme and sudden change through violent forces. His installations, which combine sound, text, and found and fabricated objects, attempt to capture the intermediate moment of transformations.

McNee's epilogue discusses the 2012 UN Summit on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20. While disappointing in terms of the participants' failure to generate binding policy agreements, the summit offered a backdrop for environmental and sustainability exhibits relevant to McNee's study. The author focuses on three such exhibits: Siron Franco's "Brasil-Cerrado," which combined sculpture, video, and scents to address changes produced in Brazil's Central-West savannah region as a result of the incursion of large-scale agricultural practices; Bia Lessa's "Humanidade 2012," a mega-exhibit housed in a five-story, nine-gallery pavilion; and "Meu Meio," which featured three video productions, each of which was representative of a different system (water, forest, and body).

McNee's thorough analysis of the contributions of eight prominent Brazilian poets and artists will interest scholars in diverse fields, including comparative literature, visual arts, ecology, and Luso-Brazilian studies. In particular, the book represents an excellent resource for Portuguese language, literature, and culture instructors at any level, as the visual works and poems referenced can be incorporated in courses designed for beginning, intermediate, and advanced students. At the same time, McNee's clear, concise prose and methodical argumentation ensure that the reader need not be a specialist to appreciate the volume. Although the inclusion of more and higher-quality images would enhance McNee's vivid descriptions of the paintings, sculptures, and installations analyzed, the artists' websites, referenced in the chapter notes, compensate for this potential shortcoming. In sum, McNee's text makes timely and significant contributions to any number of academic discussions in an eloquent yet accessible fashion.