

BETWEEN WORLDS: A CONVERSATION WITH RENATA WASSERMAN

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Renata Wasserman is Professor Emerita of English and Comparative Literature at Wayne State University, where she taught for almost 30 years. Although she has been living in the United States since her undergraduate studies, she was born and raised in the city of São Paulo, where her parents, originally from Germany, settled after immigrating to Brazil. The experience of living “between worlds” (as she describes it) has offered her a unique perspective as an inter-American scholar. This is one of the topics we address in the interview below, which closes this thematic issue of *Ilha do Desterro*. In this interview, we not only talk to Renata Wasserman about her academic contributions as a comparatist, but we also celebrate the incredible person Renata is, both as a colleague and as a friend.

One of Wasserman’s latest works is her translation of Ana Maria Machado’s *Freedom Sun in the Tropics* (2021). In this novel, the main character, Lena, contemplates the possibility of writing about her experience during the military dictatorship in Brazil from what she calls the periphery, the margin. For Lena, the periphery is not a geographic location, but a historical one (Machado 19) as she remembers being “on the periphery of all the most dangerous things happening,” but still running “the same risks as those at the center. Maybe more” (Machado 19). Lena’s viewpoint as a narrator, as well as Machado’s perspective as a storyteller, delineates a paradoxical position that could be described (borrowing one of Wasserman’s titles) as “central at the margin,” providing some insight into how major historical events affect the lives of so-called “ordinary” people, those who are not seen as decision-makers or who are not at the center-stage of history.

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In fact, the ambivalence of terms such as margin, center, periphery, and mainstream, among others, has often been critically questioned by Wasserman. In her collection *Central at the Margin: Five Brazilian Women Writers* (2007), for example, the concept of marginality is brought to the fore as a way to establish possible connections among the works of Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Rachel de Queiroz, Lygia Fagundes Telles, Clarice Lispector, and Carolina de Jesus. Yet, more than commonality, these writers' marginality also reveals the varied positions they occupied in the context of Brazilian literature. Moreover, since Wasserman's publication of *Exotic Nations: Literature and Cultural Identity in the United States and Brazil, 1830-1930* (1994), concepts such as cultural identity and national literature have been approached from the standpoint of an avid reader who was always interested in finding out unexpected connections between a range of literary traditions.

The following interview highlights some of Wasserman's considerations on important aspects of her trajectory. By talking to Renata Wasserman about aspects of her personal and professional life, as well as about her perspective on the practice of Comparative Literature, we intended to open up a space for the exchange of ideas on inter-American crossings. Moreover, this interview marks Renata's long-standing contributions to *Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina* as a whole, and to the *Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês* in particular.

We interviewed her on March 11, 2022, via Zoom. Our conversation was recorded and later transcribed, and it has also been edited for clarity.

Anelise: Thank you so much for accepting our invitation for this interview, Renata.

We believe this is a very special occasion as we have the privilege of celebrating the significance of your work as a comparatist as well as your contributions to scholarship in the United States, in Brazil, and elsewhere, and to UFSC in particular. You have been collaborating with *Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês* and with *Ilha do Desterro* for a number of years, since 1993, when I returned from Wayne State University, where I completed my Ph.D. under your direction. One of the programs in which we have worked together was the long-term project under CAPES and FIPSE which lasted for more than 10 years. Among other things, this project included a student exchange program, which allowed more than 50 undergraduate students (both from the United States and Brazil) to visit and study in different institutions, in Brazil (UFSC and UFMG) and the United States (Wayne State University and NYU). Your participation in this project was pivotal, as well as that of Prof. Arthur Marotti, your colleague and friend.

This project also included a scholars' exchange, which allowed professors from different institutions to get together, collaborate on their research and share their work with their international peers. In one of these exchanges, professors from UFSC and UFMG, who were coordinating the program, got together at Wayne State University for a series of talks, which resulted in different publications, including an article on cannibalism which you and I co-authored.

Professor Sandra Almeida, Robert Stam, you and me, and Professor Arthur Marotti were the coordinators.

You have also accepted to collaborate as the International Editor of *Ilha do Desterro* and have been on the Editorial Board of *Ilha* since 2001. Previous to this collaboration, I had the opportunity to be your advisee as a doctoral student at Wayne State University back in 1989. It has been a privilege to be working with you for almost 30 years.

Your expertise, your trajectory as a comparatist, and your collaboration as a professional and a friend, who is always one of the best listeners we know of, are only a few of the reasons that have motivated us to organize this special edition of *Ilha do Desterro* and also this interview.

Renata: I am tremendously honored by this interview invitation and also by the journal issue you are putting together. I have no idea how I came to deserve that, but I'll take it.

Magali: Thank you, Renata! I'm also honored to be talking to you today about your work, learning more about your trajectory and your academic contributions. And, as Anelise has already mentioned, we would like to start this interview by acknowledging your significant role as a pioneer scholar in the area of comparative inter-American studies. I remember, for example, that your book *Exotic Nations* was required reading for my Candidacy Exams during my doctoral studies at the University of Alberta, in Canada. This is just a small example to show how far your work has reached.

Also, considering the scope of your work, our first question has to do with your background. In the preface to *Exotic Nations*, you recognize that, as a "first-generation Brazilian and later as an American citizen, [you] have always lived in more than one culture, always had before [you] an amalgam of nationalities, cultures, and beliefs" (ix). Can you tell us a bit more about how your personal crossings in the Americas have influenced your work?

Renata: As I said, I was always in between worlds or at least in two worlds at the same time. The first language I learned was not Portuguese, it was German. That's what my parents spoke at home. They spoke German better than they spoke Portuguese. They had arrived in Brazil a few years before I was born and so they might as well teach me what they knew best. They came right before the Second World War and it took Brazil a while to decide on which side of the war they were going to come in. Once they did, one of the things that happened was that they forbade people to speak German on the streets, so I had to learn Portuguese right away. I knew that outside the gate of the house I immediately fell into Portuguese. But not everybody was sure about what was what.

My parents also spoke Czech, they were bilingual. They went to a movie once and when they came out, my mother said to my father, in Czech, that the movie was

really awful. Somebody overheard them and said, “Ah, German.” They led my father out and called the police on him because he was a German man speaking German. But my mother said to the police, “No, you can’t do that to me, my child is alone at home and the babysitter is going to leave”. And the policeman said, “OK, you go home”, which I always thought was a very Brazilian thing to do. Then the policemen were convinced my parents were not speaking German, but Czech, and let him go. This reminds me also of a story by Monteiro Lobato in which an American goes to some small town in the interior of São Paulo and they find out that he speaks German when, in fact, he speaks English but they think it is German and they make his life very difficult. When I read this story, I thought, “Oh yes, I know about that!” Also, my parents’ friends were from all over the place and they spoke all sorts of languages. I also went to a school called Dante Alighieri. The schools could teach in Italian or German until Brazil entered the war, at which point Brazil decided that unless the school taught in Portuguese, the degrees would not be recognized. Then, all the Italian teachers started teaching in Portuguese. So, my perception of the world was one in which a lot of people spoke a lot of languages and people came from different places and got together as well as they could.

Magali: And eventually you moved to the United States.

Renata: Yes, eventually I moved to the United States. The first time I came to the US was as an undergraduate student. I think it was at the time of the Cuban Revolution or right after the Cuban Revolution, when the United States was afraid that all of South America was going to go communist and one of the things that they did was invite a lot of students to the United States, with all expenses paid, so that they would experience the wonderful thing that was the United States. I was in college at the time, I had just entered USP (University of São Paulo), and I was in Sociology.

I remember that most of our books were either very expensive, whether published in Brazil or elsewhere, or very cheap, published by the Russians, and they were in Spanish, but I thought it was very clever, as they were all Marxist in approach. Isn’t that an intelligent way of doing things? You get the students, the Sociology students, as the only books they are able to afford are these books that were made very cheap. So, there were two different ways of getting to the young population. And I decided to take advantage of the American offer, and when I got here everybody thought that I had to be speaking Spanish because, after all, I was from South America, from Brazil. People said, “What, you don’t speak Spanish? Are you sure?” Some people actually asked me that. I thought they could learn something from me also. And then I got interested in how people see each other nationally and how they formed their senses of themselves nationally from whatever it was that formed them at the beginning. And in the New World you can actually see the process while, in the Old World, it has been going on for many centuries so,

you know, it's harder to see. But in Brazil and the United States, although it's not very clear, it can be found out by somebody who's not obsessive.

Anelise: How did you become interested in the area of Comparative Literature? Was there a smooth transition or were you already thinking about Sociology in terms of national literatures?

Renata: No, I actually thought that Sociology was pretty boring. And when I came to the United States, I could just choose my major. I mean, in Brazil, as you know, you choose your major as you get into the university and it is really hard to change after that. But once I got to the United States, I thought I would take a different direction. And as for Comparative Literature, well, on my parents' bookshelves there were books in Portuguese, and English, and French, and there was, of course, a good German collection. And, my high school offered a course in Italian. So, I always read in many languages. It happened.

Anelise: You were taken by literature.

Renata: Yes. Also, maybe I was not thinking about it that way, but one other reason why I was really interested in making this work about the comparison between the United States and Brazil is that, in the United States, people had no idea about Brazil. When they talked about Latin America, what they meant was Spanish America. Brazil is half of South America, it has half of the population of South America, and it gets sort of enfolded in these other Spanish-speaking populations.

Magali: Prof. Earl Fitz has submitted an essay for this special issue celebrating your work, and he mentions exactly that. He says you were a pioneer in showing the unique space Brazil occupied in Latin America which was different from Spanish America. Moreover, Professor Fitz adds that you were also a pioneer in, and I'll quote him, "providing us with a model of how comparative inter-American studies should be done, of how the 'American' canon might be expanded." Looking back at your academic trajectory now, how do you see this pioneering aspect of your work? Or, maybe, in other words, how do you see the role you played in broadening the scope of inter-American studies?

Renata: I never thought of myself as pioneering anything. I just thought I would do something logical. I mean, here [in the United States] they are talking about all those things that have nothing to do with us. How about focusing on something that has to do with us, or, especially, on the similarities between the United States and Brazil? For instance, when the Spanish arrived in Peru or Mexico or

Guatemala, etc., they found civilizations that had built much bigger buildings, bigger roads, and had a much more complex material civilization than what was found in the United States and Brazil at the time of colonization. The Mexicans have their own way of dealing with the Aztecs, the Toltecs, among others, so it made sense to me to investigate if there were similarities between how the North Americans and the Brazilians dealt with their colonial past. So, I started to think about that. What did Brazilians and Americans do with the input of the native populations? What did they do with the role of nature? And it turns out that there were similarities. At first, the Americans would say, “What? Similarities with Brazil?” So, it was also a bit of a provocation on my part, it seems to me now, in retrospect. But I would never have said anything like that when I started. I was just being very rational about the whole thing. But writers such as Cooper and Alencar actually did similar things that could easily be attributed to the slight differences in the circumstances in which they had come to think about these matters. So, anyway, the fact that nobody had done it before was good; it simplified the footnotes.

Magali: When you were writing about Cooper and Alencar, were you already teaching, or were you still finishing your graduate studies?

Renata: I did my thesis on Structuralism. So, I read all the formalists (the Russians, and the French), and it was interesting because, when I started my graduate studies, Structuralism was being taught in Brazil and discussed in Brazil, but not in the United States. So, I wrote a thesis about something that people here in the US were not doing. I can't really say I was a pioneer because nobody really read my dissertation. Then, I got bored with it. There was too much focus on the structure of stories. And what was really interesting to me was how authors dealt with and made sense of the world in which they lived. So, I wrote my thesis and did not do anything else with it. I decided that, if I'm going to spend my life reading a certain kind of book, it'd better be books that I like.

Anelise: And considering this vast background you have, what is your perspective on the practice and theory of Comparative Literature nowadays? Do you think that there is a major change concerning the subjects that are being researched or taught in universities? Do you think that there has been a change in terms of the practice and theory of comparative literature nowadays compared to your own trajectory?

Renata: I think there has been a shift from considerations about social phenomena, which was something I was interested in, you know, how do a lot of people think about this or learn X, to how does it make me feel, towards a bigger emphasis on identity. And I think that “identity” now tends to be sort of a block identity—you

have an identity—whereas the way I have always looked at it was that identities are made up of different pieces, a bit from here, a bit from there. I don't conceive of identity as a block. I get the PMLA, and I think it is pretty boring because usually identity is approached as blocks. Thinking of black identity, for instance, a Brazilian Black person will feel differently about identity, and identity in color, from an American Black person. If you go to Africa, there is a whole bunch of identities, all Black. I mean, an Igbo will feel differently from a Yoruba as far as identity goes, and a person from the outside might not be able to see these differences. I'm getting into an enormous amount of trouble by saying all of that, but I think that I have always approached identity as a composite. So, you know, I have an identity as a woman. OK. The three of us have identities as women. And we're three fairly different people with different experiences and different origins and different compositions and different histories and that's what I'm interested in. And I think that's why I was not interested in Sociology because I thought I don't want to think about people the way sociologists do, I want to think about people the way writers think about them. And if you get a good writer, they create all those characters who are very different from each other, and, for that matter, from me. My function as a critic, then, is to look at all the different characters and see if they have anything in common, not only in their own history, but in the history being made around them—or, if not, what the differences between or among them, mean, in particular or in general.

That's one reason why I taught a course many times, a graduate course, which I called "Dead Heroines". I included a lot of 19th-century books in which the heroine dies. The books were from all places, from French literature, German, and American. And all those women transgressed something or other and, somehow, they died. Sometimes they committed suicide, they threw themselves in front of the train, and sometimes they got very sick and died from some sort of pandemic, and so on and so forth. Isn't it interesting that all these transgressive women died? That's what I was interested in, and those women were all very different. The only thing they had in common was that they had a sex and misused it, according to the norms of the time. They were very different characters, with very different stories, and that's what interested me: to find the common traits within an incredible difference. I thought that was much more interesting than thinking that they were all the same to start with. That's another reason why I never really went with strictly feminist analysis. I mean, I wrote a book about Brazilian women writers. Is there anything really in common between Clarice Lispector and Rachel de Queiroz apart from the fact that they were women and writers? If there is, I would like to find it because it's not obvious. What's the point of trying to find something that is obvious?

Anelise: I'm also thinking in terms of the ways in which Cultural Studies have taken a very significant place in the academy and its relation to Comparative Literature. In your perspective, have Cultural Studies changed comparativist

practices? Or is it still the same sort of practice with a different object of study? I'm wondering about this because, lately, there has been a discussion about the place of Comparative Literature as a field of studies, and if Comparative Literature has been taken away by Cultural Studies. But that might be a discussion that, as you say, doesn't matter since what really matters is what people are doing. It's also a very political thing as well in many ways because it raises the question: how many hours per day are people at schools or universities reading literature versus watching a movie or a TV series? So, there is a conjunction of media factors that play a very important role in many ways.

Renata: Well, I think that it took quite a while for literary criticism to get from point A to point B and point C and the media is not as old. So, I think that it still has room for the development of critical languages. One thing that annoys me right now here in the United States, at least, is the sort of attack on books from people going around to schools and telling them to take this book and that book and the other books out of their libraries, not allowing students to read them. I think that is very dangerous and it's as contrary to anything that I believe in as anything can be. A writer is perfectly free to write what he or she would like to have written, or they or them. And that's what feeds me. I'm not supposed to decide what they should or should not write or what people should or should not read. I mean, I can see that a hot sex scene might not be appropriate reading for a 9-year-old. I remember that my mother suggested that I do not read a couple of the books on her library shelves. Eventually I did. That's a separate thing. But not read Toni Morrison? I think that is really dangerous and sick.

Anelise: Or Monteiro Lobato.

Renata: Or Monteiro Lobato. Actually, I think that much of my attitude was shaped by Monteiro Lobato. He was a really big influence because he was not doctrinaire except in thinking that people should be free to explore and to puncture nonsense. There is one story in *Sítio do Pica Pau Amarelo* where the kids go to a place called "Land of Grammar." So, they learn all sorts of grammatical rules and, by the end of the book, Emilia goes to a place where all the "vices" of language (as the Portuguese expression goes) are in jail. And she opens all the doors, freeing all those things that you absolutely shouldn't do when you write. I was really shocked when I first read that because I was trying to learn how to write properly. And I then began to appreciate that irony even more, and that was very Monteiro Lobato. Also, the idea that Hercules only managed to do all those things that he did because Emilia was giving him ideas about how to go about it. She told him, "when you confront a guy who has three heads and six arms coming at you, shoot his knees", and the guy just collapses. I think these are good examples for life.

The latest thing I did was translating a book by Ana Maria Machado. I've read some of her books, but I translated *Tropical Sol da Liberdade*. And every single book that I've read so far by her has a mention of Monteiro Lobato. She is a big fan. And I thought, ok, here's a woman after my own heart.

Magali: Speaking of translation, in fact, we do have some questions about your work as a translator. Can you tell us a bit more about your experience as a translator? When did you start translating and why? Or how did you choose the texts to be translated?

Renata: As far as I can tell, translation was always a part of my life, even informally. I was always around people who didn't understand other people's languages, so I'd translate for them. I'm interested in translation because languages have their own spirits and characters. So, how do you say something in another language without losing the taste of the original? A translated text has to not lose the taste of the original language, but it also has to be idiomatic in the language to which it was translated. I always thought this was an interesting problem. And especially mistranslation, I think, is very funny. In translations I read, for instance, of Brazilian works, I could recognize something I knew was from Portuguese, but that was not how one would say the same thing in English. I was interested in that. And one day, a friend from Chicago asked me if I wanted to translate *O Ateneu*. And I said, sure! And I sat down and I translated *O Ateneu*. And, for *Tropical Sol da Liberdade*, I ran into Ana Maria Machado at a conference in New York. We started chatting and we talked about her book and I asked her if she wanted me to translate it. So, I translated the first chapter for her and I said, "this is what will come out". And she said, "alright". So, I translated the whole book, which was a great pleasure.

One of the things for me, in addition to being a good book, was that the narrative is about something that I was a witness to, as I was still in Brazil for some time during the dictatorship. And the idea of having the story being told from the margin, as she puts it, lived by somebody who was not directly involved in it, although afterward I found out that her brother [Machado's brother] was directly involved in it. He actually was one of the people who abducted the American ambassador. But the idea of not being directly involved and not being a hero or anything like that but just having it come down on you, I thought that was interesting as a viewpoint. So, I thought I'd like to translate the book. And I did it and it took a while to get it published until it was finally published. I'm very pleased that I was able to do that.

Magali: Regarding Ana Maria Machado's book, *Tropical Sol da Liberdade*, it tells the story of Lena, a journalist who returns to Brazil after being exiled in Europe due to the 1964 military coup. Machado's book was originally published

in 1988—a significant moment in Brazilian history, during the *Diretas Já* movement which eventually led to the democratic presidential election of 1989—and translation was published in 2021, a moment also marked by a renewed urge for social activism. What does Lena’s story tell us about the effects of political unrest and geopolitics on people’s lives nowadays?

Renata: Well, I wish it were not quite so accurate. Horrible things are happening everywhere, and here [in the United States] too. The “former guy”, as Biden refers to his predecessor, and the people supporting him sometimes remind me very strongly of things that one saw happening in Brazil. And one might say, “well, this couldn’t possibly happen in the United States, it happened only in countries such as Brazil”. Well, we did have dictatorships. I mean, we had Getúlio, and we had the military generals. But a number of people here in the US seem to be really entranced by the possibility of a violent takeover as well. And they are talking about it openly. They are saying things like, “what we need is to take over the government”.

Anelise: And there was an attempt, right.

Renata: Some are saying, “Let’s undo the election.” And they are also working in small places. I mentioned the book banning, for example. Local people are getting together and they are imposing those rules on public entities, like school boards.

Magali: It’s certainly a very difficult moment globally, and we are all being affected by it.

Anelise: Indeed. And, Renata, we do have a final question related to your work as an editor. You have contributed to our journal *Ilha do Desterro* as its International Editor and as the editor of different thematic numbers for a number of years. Previous to that, you were the Editor-in-Chief of *Criticism*, an important literary journal published by Wayne State University. What would you highlight in your career as an Editor?

Renata: I saw it as a kind of duty that came with the profession. Everybody has to publish and some people have to put the articles into journals, and I was willing to do that, trying to choose articles that were coherent and well written and interesting. And I had a lot of people helping me, readers, colleagues. I had to coordinate all those things that are totally against my character which is much more disorganized. I have no idea how I managed to do that.

Anelise: How many years were you the editor of *Criticism*?

Renata: Many years. I was there for a good number of years and it was nice to get all those articles. I could also exercise my judgment because some of them would come in and we would not be able to accept them. So, 1- I'm not that diplomatic and I had to be diplomatic; 2- I'm not that organized, and I had to be organized; 3- I find it hard to address people and ask them to do things for me, and I had to address people I didn't know and ask them to do things. So, I'm very proud of myself for having actually been able to do it. It's not the sort of thing I was created for, but that is a good thing, to do things you do not think you can do. And I have great admiration for you, Anelise, because you manage to run *Ilha do Desterro* very well, and you have done it for a long time.

Anelise: I'm fortunate because we have a great team at *Ilha*. We have now associate editors and great people working with us.

Magali: What an honor to be talking to both of you! Thank you so much, Renata, for your time, and for sharing a little bit of your trajectory with us.

Anelise: Thank you so much, Renata! This is such a great opportunity to celebrate your work!

Renata: It was great talking to you!

Notas

1. WASSERMAN, R. M.; CORSEUIL, Anelise R. *Traveling Cannibals*. CUALLI. v.01, p.209–232, 2013. A Portuguese version of this article was published as WASSERMAN, R. M.; CORSEUIL, Anelise R. *Canibais Viajantes* In: *Cinema, globalização e interculturalidade*. Ed. Chapecó: Eds. Andrea França e Denilson Lopes. Chapecó: Editora Argos, 2010, p. 193-217.
2. Fitz, Earl. "Renata Wasserman and Inter-Americanism." Article published in this special issue celebrating Renata Wasserman's academic contributions to inter-American studies.

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