

World Literature and Periphery:

A Distant Reading of Milton Hatoum's *The Brothers*

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**Abstract**

*This essay uses the novel The Brothers, by Brazilian writer Milton Hatoum, as an example of how literature from periphery countries can be read as world literature by readers of core countries or of cultural centres, based on the theoretical framework of the world system theory, by Wallerstein. which divides the world in a industrialized capitalist core, and dependent periphery and semi-periphery countries. By using the model of Moretti's world literary system to exemplify how some literary production is being left out of the academic conversation on world literature, I propose a distant reading of Hatoum's novel to show that there is nothing intrinsically alien or completely "regional" to the text which would justify its exclusion from the category of world literature. The text does not diminish its cultural and social background to conform to a Eurocentric view of the world, instead it invites us to reflect critically on cultural hegemony, born of imperial colonization, that tends to relegate works from peripheral areas to circulation at the margins of the Western world.*

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## **Introduction**

My goal is to study how works of literature that don't focus on the Global North<sup>1</sup> can pass the initial prejudice of readers and scholars, and be read as world literature. I will use as the book *The Brothers* as case study. Penned by Milton Hatoum, it was published for the first time in Brazil in the year 2000, and has since been translated in various languages, adapted to different media (including a play, a graphic novel, and a Televised miniseries), and received several awards. The book takes place in the 20th century and depicts contact between and the blend of cultures, focusing on a Lebanese family in the northern capital of Manaus. By understanding the ways a novel such as this one operates in the wider world, I hope to help refocus scholarly considerations for world literature production. Academic discussion should shift away from historically colonial centres and towards marginalized peripheral urban centers, in a more inclusive and post-colonial perspective.

## **Theories**

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<sup>1</sup> The division Global North/Global South is generally used as a way to refer to most developed countries as “the north” (G8 countries, European countries, Australia and New Zealand) and less developed countries as “the south” (Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and southern Asia).

For this study, I will base my argument on theorists of world literature like David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and Ieda Magri. By studying Milton Hatoum in the context of world literary systems, I will criticize the subaltern position of his works and question their categorization as regional literature in the Global North, as well as use the concept of ‘distant reading’ to examine how the book’s themes and messages are global in scope and speak to universal concerns shared by humanity.

Damrosch proposes world literature not as a canon of works, but a way of reading. His proposed ‘threefold definition’ which focuses on “the world, the text, and the reader” (201) is useful when we attempt to determine what is considered world literature. Damrosch ascribes three characteristics to the concept: “1. World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures; 2. World literature is writing that gains in translation; 3. World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (201). His proposed approach to readership is characterized by literature that can be translated to other languages, read by other cultures, and used as a tool of reflection for the reader’s own settings. Hiddelston contends that a text can be considered world literature even before it is read, in its conception: “a text is ‘enmeshed’ in the world not because it circulates after completion but because it comes to life through dialogues it maintains with the place of its creation—with the broader, multiple cultural histories that its language draws on or taps into; and with itself” (1388). Both definitions of world literature can be applied to the *The Brothers*, as a text that dialogues with different cultures and spaces and as a book that has traveled through translation. It is a transnational novel, European in format, depicting

Lebanese and Indigenous Brazilian characters in a colonized Brazilian setting.

Moretti provides two concepts applicable to my analysis of Hatoum's novel: the world literary system and distant reading. The concept of world literary system borrows from economic theory to describe a model of cultural production focused on centres and peripheries, where the centres tend to produce cultural works that will be consumed by the peripheries. In this framework, the centres of production for literature would be the English and French languages in Europe and North America. It is not a coincidence that these are among the most recent imperial colonial powers in history. Anything created in the peripheries would have to be presented in the dominant languages. To prove its value periphery literature must measure itself in relation to the centre. The Warwick Research Collective proposes world literature as "the literature of the modern capitalist system" (8), a system built on inequality and unity—or "one and unequal" (Moretti 46), in an attempt to sell European modernity as a model for hegemony to be achieved. Distant reading is the model of study that is an alternative to close reading. While close reading is widely used in comparative studies, distant reading is better suited to world literature studies, especially literature in translation. This model will be particularly useful in this analysis, as it allows us to show the themes and tropes in the narrative and how they relate to a global culture (Moretti 48-9).

Magri questions distant reading in relation to the global study of literature produced in Latin America. In the current scenario, Latin American is a source of case studies for North America but not a "legitimate place of enunciation" (6). English as a language of cultural and

economic hegemony has excluded or restricted languages of the Global South as objects of study, and not active creators of culture (5). This hegemony has created the white European (or North American) man as the common denominator, or measuring rod, for all literature, which restricts peripheral works to the nations where they were created (6).

Both Moretti and Magri (quoting writings of Schwarz, Cândido and de Campos<sup>2</sup>) touch on the “bastard” character of Brazilian literature (46; 9-11), which was born with the transposition of European models (mostly French, via the Portuguese—a travel from the centre, through the semi-periphery, then to the periphery). Aluísio Azevedo’s classic naturalist novel *O Cortiço*, for example, would be the child of Émile Zola’s *Assommoir* (Moretti 131): It exemplifies the recourse to a French aesthetic and European values transposed to a Brazilian setting, with Brazilian characters. Although this connection became freer from the European standards through Brazilian modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is still important that the novel (like much of Brazilian poetry, movies, and other forms of art and storytelling) is a European import.

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<sup>2</sup> Roberto Schwarz (born in 1938) is a literary critic and professor of Brazilian literature, literary theory and comparative literature, focused on the works of one of Brazil’s most important national writers, Machado de Assis. Antônio Cândido (1918-2017) was a sociologist and literary critic, whose works described the origins of Brazilian literature. Haroldo de Campos (1929-2003) was a poet, literary critic and translator, creator of the “transcreation” concept in translation theory, which calls for a recreation of the original work in translation, going beyond translating words between languages. All these Brazilian thinkers shaped Brazilian literary criticism and theories in the 20th century, and their work as professors in foreign universities took Brazilian literature beyond its national borders.

## Brazilian Regionalism

Just like the dichotomy between local and universal can be applied to world literature, a similar dynamic can be found in Brazilian literature: the polarization of regionalist and national literatures. According to Reis: “The term *regionalista* (regionalist) denotes a literary work that focuses on a certain region and on its features (geography, nature), as well as on the kind of social and historical background that has that region as a frame” (703). In practice, this means a work that is set in rural or idyllic places, away from the big economic metropolises. The regionalist style is characterized by the local peculiarities, like regional belief systems, traditional practices, and dialects (Chiappini 155).

Before delving further into regionalism, let us examine its alternative, cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan narratives are above all urban novels. They are set in the metropolitan economic and political centers of the country. For Brazil since the end of the 19th century, this primarily means the cities of São Paulo (economic centre and largest city) and Rio de Janeiro (cultural centre and second most populous city), in the southeast region. Cities like Belo Horizonte (also in the southeast region), Brasília (the capital of the country since 1960), and Porto Alegre (in the south) tend to be overrepresented. The rural areas around these cities and most parts of the north, northeast and centre-west regions are peripheral to what is considered the broad national conversation. Countries and regions also have their own micro world-system within them, with places and populations belonging to a local core and a local periphery. Transposing this model to Brazil, we can conceive of the big southern capitals (like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro) as cultural cores, with the north and northeast being pushed to the peripheries.

It is not a coincidence that Dalcastagnè's analysis of books by national authors from three major Brazilian publishing companies between 1990 and 2004 showed that more than 60% of the authors reside in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, while the whole northern region is only represented by 1,2% of authors (32). Dalcastagnè's study also showed that 72.7% of authors are men and 93.9% of all authors are white<sup>3</sup> (31). The characters in the books were similarly analysed and 62.1% were found to be male (35), while 79.8% of all characters were white (45). Noticeably, 15.9% of the novels had no relevant female character (36), while 56.6% of the novels had no major non-white character (44). Dalcastagnè thus revealed that the national cosmopolitan Brazilian novels predominantly represent white, male, and urban south-eastern perspectives.

Chiappini considers regionalism as a universal phenomenon, both as a literary tendency and as a movement of writers who defend setting their works away from the urban values of national capitals and economic metropolises (153-154). In Brazilian literary production and studies, concern for regionalism was considered outmoded until recently, but has had a rebirth in the last couple of decades, as a response to a globalized world (154). Those novels tend to focus on conflicts brought on by modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and the advances of capitalism and to value the local, rural culture, either in a more realistic or a more idealized way. For this reason,

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Brazilian racial categories are not considered in the same way as in North American countries. For example, Milton Hatoum, a man of Arab decent is considered to be white in Brazil, and not necessarily so in Canada or the United States—although he would not be considered white in those countries anyway for being born in Brazil, and therefore considered Latino.

modernist thinkers of the 20th century considered regionalist novels to be “backwards” or “reactionary” (156), a thought that oversimplifies and diminishes a rich cultural means of expression. Although the critics of this movement disagree, this does not mean that the regionalist novel cannot show universal themes, after all, the universal manifests itself in the private sphere in most literatures, be it regionalist or cosmopolitan (Chiappini 158), and the local can serve as a mirror for the global.

### **Milton Hatoum**

Milton Hatoum is a Brazilian writer of Lebanese parentage born in Manaus in 1952. His childhood city is featured in his first novels. In his teenage years, his family moved to Brasilia, after which, Hatoum lived in Madrid, Barcelona, Paris and Berkeley. He now lives in São Paulo. As an author from a Brazilian periphery (Manaus, on the north), writing about peripheral characters, Hatoum managed to undermine division and reach the wider Brazilian audience of the south, without pandering to an exotic narrative associated with regionalist literature that sometimes is the only viable way to reach the cultural and economic centres of the country.

Hatoum’s first novel, *Relato de um Certo Oriente* (*Tale of a Certain Orient*, in its English translation), was published in 1989. It won the prestigious Brazilian Jabuti prize the following year. His second book, *Dois Irmãos* (here

referred by its English language title, *The Brothers*<sup>4</sup>) was published in the year 2000. It too won the Jabuti prize the next year. By 2019, he has published six novels and two compilations of short stories and essays. Throughout his career he received four Jabuti prizes (1990, 2001, 2006, and 2008), one Prêmio Portugal Telecom de Literatura<sup>5</sup> (2006), and was honoured with the Ordem do Mérito Cultural (given by the Ministry of Culture as recognition for contributions to Brazilian culture) in 2008. The official website for the author lists translations of his works published in 12 languages and 14 countries (“Milton Hatoum Homepage”). His books were twice nominated for the IMPAC-DUBLIN prize. His articles and essays about literature were published in magazines and newspapers in Brazil, Spain, France and Italy. Hatoum’s short stories were published in magazines in the United States, Mexico and France, and in anthologies in Germany, Mexico and England.

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<sup>4</sup> The book *The Brothers* is Hatoum’s most adapted work. It was made into a play in 2008, and in 2015 it was made into a graphic novel by artists Gabriel Bá and Fábio Moon, published by Dark Horse Comics in the United States. The graphic novel adaptation won the Harvey Award (Best American Edition of Foreign Material) and the Eisner Award (Best Adaptation for Another Medium) in the United States, and a HQ Mix prize (Best Adaptation) in Brazil. In 2017, Rede Globo aired a miniseries based on the novel which received critical and popular acclaim and boosted the book sales (according to Brazilian publisher Companhia das Letras and Nielsen Media Research, the title received a 500% increase in sales) (Gente iG).

<sup>5</sup> The Oceanos Prêmio de Literatura em Língua Portuguesa, formerly known as Prêmio Portugal Telecom de Literatura, is considered to be the equivalent of the Man Booker Prize for literature written by lusophone writers in any country that has Portuguese as an official language. The first prize winner takes a sum of R\$100,000, the equivalent of about \$25,000 USD in the exchange rate of December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

## Literature and Periphery

The term ‘world literature’, since its inception by Goethe, was used to refer to books and texts that traveled, through translation or otherwise, to different spaces and between communities. With globalization, the phenomenon of movement of cultural products and merchandise became even more common and widespread. The ideology of capitalist globalization puts forward the idea that it can promote a fair and egalitarian development, namely:

The premise of ‘combined unevenness’ developed here repudiates at a stroke the idea-linked, presumably, to the political mantra that ‘globalisation’ is a tide lifting all boats—that the ‘world’ of world-literature is a ‘level playing field’, a more or less free space in which texts from around the globe can circulate, intersect and converse with one another. It is remarkable how pervasive this idea of a ‘level playing field’ is in contemporary literary critical discourse (WReC 22).

Though the term ‘world literature’ seems to be democratic and egalitarian, in practice what is considered to be world literature is mostly produced in English or French, and travels outwards from the hegemonic powers of Europe and North America to peripheral countries. Some postcolonial work is valued, but generally in relation to its position to the colonial power. Most literature that is produced in the Global South is considered ‘local literature’.

As an example of how literature in translation is viewed in English markets, according to *Publishers Weekly*’s Translation Database, between 2010 and 2019

there were 6,824 books translated (and published) from foreign languages to English. Of those, 1,334 were translated from the French, 879 from the German, and only 168 from the Portuguese. This number includes books from Brazil and Portugal, but also from former Portuguese colonies like Mozambique and Angola, and is not restricted to books that are contemporary or recently published in the original language.

Pardo writes that about half of all books translated worldwide were written originally in English, the language that occupies the 'hyper-central' position (278). French and German are in a central position and represent 10% to 12% of translations; eight semi-peripheral languages, like Spanish and Italian, contribute to 1% to 3% of the international market. Finally, all other languages do not reach 1% of the translation market, and are considered periphery literature (278-279). Central languages export books (and by consequence stories, characters, and thoughts) to the peripheries, but the peripheries rarely export their works to the centre, or even to other peripheries without the mediation of a central language.

Of course, translation by itself is not enough to address the consequences and legacies of colonialism. Both the translator and the foreign reader can be embedded in Eurocentrism and have a role in perpetuating a colonial mindset instead of plurality and understanding. The same goes for literary works about or set in the peripheries, not all are created equal. If the author is not concerned in deconstructing the model of European development, the result can be a mere affirmation of the colonizer's gaze, and not freedom from its constraints. Brune writes that translated Brazilian literary works tend to pander to the exotic, the cosmopolitan, or both at the same time (19). Works that

featured peripheral areas with more sensibility were deemed untranslatable because of the language particularities used (7). Brune suggests that this is the reason why the author Jorge Amado (with highly sexualized characters and interracial romance) and Paulo Lins' *City of God* (which would allow foreign "audiences to absorb representations of violence and poverty from a mediated distance") were widely translated and well received internationally (6-7). Although they are valid literary works, they reaffirm stereotypical views of the country and fail to convey the complexities and nuances of the reality in the nation.

Damrosch notes that the majority of works cited in MLA articles between 2006 and 2015 are from hegemonic countries, written in languages such as English, French and German (Figure 1). The only Brazilian author on the list is Clarice Lispector, who Damrosch calls "the greatest Brazilian woman writer ever" ("What Isn't World Literature?"), on the "Lower Major" tier of cited authors. She shares this tier with Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz (who writes in Arabic), and Georges Perec, a French writer without much canonical expression.

Gonçalves raises concerns about the global reach of works written in languages that are not those of hegemonic countries in his study of "translated literature against the systems of domination" (250). As he puts it, other Brazilian authors highly successful abroad and in translation stripped their text of any criticism or critical reflection of the Brazilian reality, to appeal to an international market: "(T)he commodification of culture, more specifically the use of literature to conform to the materialism and consumerism of Western society, ends up obliterating the revolutionary potential that supposedly accompanies artistic productions" (250). This would therefore diminish the value of Brazilian

novels as agents of reflections relevant to the world, bringing it down to just a product to be consumed and discarded by western audiences.

The power dynamics between the core and the periphery in capitalist societies lead authors like Hatoum to be categorized by critics (even inside Brazil) as ‘regionalist writers’ (Gonçalves 257). So it is for Hatoum, who does not consider himself a regionalist author. His narrative is focused on peoples of the Amazon but this doesn’t make his novel any more regional than those set in Rio de Janeiro, Toronto or Paris. Every work of literature is connected to one space, but his doesn’t mean it can’t be read and understood by other cultures, or that it can’t be considered world literature. In the current world literary hegemony, those who do not conform to standards of capitalist modernity can be interpreted as primitive, and consequently deemed regional.

Regionalism in Latin America was born as a genre in the post-independence period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and acted as a way to build a national identity adaptable to regional differences (Kettner 5). Hatoum, in a postcolonial context, doesn’t show the local population as a victim of global capitalism, but as perpetrators of this system (15). He breaks the classical regional depiction by including the issue of immigration in the region (9). His “regionalism” is not only local, it integrates the Amazon to a global context, set in a time of international capitalism, social change and tumultuous challenges of large-scale migration (183). Hatoum reveals the Amazon region not as a pristine isolated place, but as it is, connected to the global network.

If world literature is ‘unequal’, as Moretti claims, we can’t expect all novels to comply with the homogenised standards, even if all colonized territories took away

something (usually the form) from the art of their colonizers. In looking at the similarities we should keep in mind what makes them different—despite being ‘worldly. This is what I will argue in the next section.

## **Analysis**

*The Brothers* tells the story of a Lebanese family living in the city of Manaus between the 1920’s and the 1970’s. Although the fact that it centers on an Arab family is relevant, one could argue the novel is not a story about immigration or culture clash. This is a story about family dynamics and Nael’s search for individual identity.

Manaus is a city situated in the Northern region of Brazil. It is the capital of the state of Amazonas and stands in the meeting of the rivers Negro and Solimões (the Amazon River). Manaus was founded by Portuguese colonizers in 1669, but it flourished in the late 19th century with the economic development that came with rubber extraction in the region. During its economic development, the city created major cultural and infrastructure constructions and features, like the Amazonas Theatre, the Manaus Harbour, bridges, electric energy (only the second city to implement it on Brazil) and public transportation. It was also during this period that it attracted immigrants from countries like Portugal, Italy, France, Germany, Japan and the Ottoman Empire (Arabs and Turks). The economic prosperity started to decline in 1910, when local rubber production began to face competition from Asia. The Amazon river, commerce, and the many cultures and nationalities of its Manaus’ inhabitants feature heavily in the novel, as well as the memory of its economic prosperity and more glamorous times, as well as the decline of Manaus and Brazil in the second half of the 20th century.

The narrator is Nael, who tries to piece together the stories of this Lebanese family to ascertain where he might fit in it. Going back and forth in time, mixing scenes he witnessed with tales he was told, Nael depicts the lives of the couple Halim and Zana, their children Yaqub, Omar, Rania, and Domingas, and the family's Indigenous servant, who is also Nael's mother. Nael sets his story to paper in a first person account of his adulthood, after the family has disintegrated, that looks back on his youth and to a time even before he was born—: The narrator's present is bleak: Halim, Zana and Domingas are dead; Yaqub left and does not keep contact; Omar lives a vagabond life in Manaus, with no house to return to; and Rania remains trying to keep the family store alive. As he ages, Nael navigates jobs from domestic work to teaching. He has economic mobility but not physical mobility: he expresses no desire to leave Manaus and constantly evades Yaqub's invitations to come to São Paulo.

The structure of the narrative follows the flux of Nael's memories. They don't necessarily flow in chronological order, instead his narrative jumps between moments in time, exploring the natural shifts of a mind that remembers and tries to make sense of the interactions among the multiple people involved.

Yaqub and Omar are identical twins, the namesakes who give title to the novel, with vastly different personalities. One is calm, intellectual, quiet; the other is passionate, loud and a reveller. From a young age their fights would get physically violent, fuelled by Zana's preference for Omar (who in infancy was sickly and more fragile than Yaqub). Their rivalry mimics the ancient dispute between Cain and Abel. Omar's violence can be associated to Cain's, the murderous brother, but Yaqub also embodies 'wicked'

traits: his extreme jealousy of his brother's position as the favourite and his calculated acts to take vengeance on his brother make him less of a model than the biblical Abel. Both brothers participated in tearing the family apart, and although Nael has a preference to Yaqub, to whom he feels a connection, he is also forced to admit Yaqub was a failed saint.

Rivalry between brothers is a theme as old as the Bible, and has probably existed anywhere siblings can be found, for as long as they have been found. From princes trying to inherit their father's kingdoms to rivals fighting for the attention of a love interest, from Dostoyevsky to Tolkien, in ancient poems and modern soap operas, sibling rivalry is one of the most persistent tropes of narratives in all forms.

The double has also been a source of great fascination throughout time and space. As Nael looks at the twins, sometimes he can't help but imagine they mix into each other, even when they try as hard as they can to distance themselves from one another. Whether twins, doppelgangers, or split personalities, the doubles often appear in the imagination of many different cultures around the world. In Hollywood, this trope is used in genres such as romantic comedies and horror movies. The Brazilian novel inserts itself in this global discussion of duality, in a way to project ideas of morality and conflicts that are common to all cultures.

Anyone familiar with psychoanalytical theories would see how the Oedipus complex figures in Hatoum's story. There is an incestuous sexual act described in the novel between Rania and Nael, but the whole text is full of scenes with implicit sexual desire and overt sexual vernacular between family members. Rania has her fair share of scenes dressing up for her brothers, or sitting in their lap. For

example, Nael describes how Rania was “sensual” [117] in the presence of her brothers, and how they looked like a couple together, told from Zana’s perspective, who can’t contain her jealousy over the boys (especially Omar). In an inversion of Freud’s theories, the parents show an unhealthy projection towards their children. Zana is unreasonably possessive of Omar, and Halim resents his children because he feels that they took his wife away from him. Rania is beautiful but refuses all men’s attention, she only touches and cares for her brothers. When Zana’s father dies, Halim says she “cried like a widow” (Hatoum 56). Zana’s overzealousness of Omar stifled his development, rendering him a perpetual teenager. Her suffocation of Omar drove Yaqub away, virtually tearing apart the family she had envisioned and created.

Finally, the postcolonial criticism present in the novel hindered its success as international literature for its unappealing musings on the Brazilian reality. Postcolonialism is associated with peripheral areas of the world and is a dominant theme still present in 21<sup>st</sup> century literature. Most nations have some sort of connection with colonialism (as colonizers, colonized, or both), and texts about the issue (fictitious and historical) travel widely and are read internationally. In *The Brothers*, Domingas is the most explicit example of colonization. Her story of being a young native girl, raised in a catholic orphanage and resigned to a life of servitude, is not unfamiliar to North American audiences. Uprooted from her people at an early age, her son is surprised when he hears her sing in *Nheengatu*, a language he assumed she had forgotten (Hatoum, 240). The colonial efforts tried to erase all traces of indigenous cultures, like language and traditions, but there is resistance and not all is lost for Domingas.

The predominantly white, capitalist model of modernity, that values a European ‘civility’ is embodied in the struggle between the twins, Yaqub and Omar. Yaqub, the educated sophisticated brother, leaves Manaus for the southeast and builds his life in ‘civilization,’ away from his immigrant family and the place where he was born. Omar, the ‘savage’, refuses to adapt to change and ends up lost in a home that no longer shelters him. Yaqub is prejudiced against his own origins, eager to accomplish a cosmopolitan ideal (Gonçalves 251). If Yaqub and Omar are shown at least having some sort of choice in this ‘civilizational’ endeavour of Manaus, Domingas doesn’t have the same privilege. She is the one colonialism and capitalism try to hide or sweep away, as she doesn’t fit the standard of European modernity, and never will.

Nael is the most evident character of the narrative that seeks belonging and finds marginality throughout the novel. It is not a coincidence that most of what the narrator knows comes from Domingas and Halim, two characters on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their native and foreign dichotomy. Domingas is an uprooted Indigenous woman whereas Halim is a Muslim Arab immigrant. Marginality is even present in Nael’s living arrangements. He is the “son of the house” (with no apparent father), but doesn’t get to live *in* the house with the rest of the family. His mother’s employers sometimes treat him with care, and sometimes as a servant. Nael is neither native nor white, not Lebanese but also not fully Brazilian. His in-between identity is more present in this globalized world than in the less-connected past of his youth. Nael’s experience reveals that the immigrants reflect the stresses of globalization and modernity due to the growing number of displaced communities.

Nael searches for his identity outside of himself, talking much more about other people than about his own experience. The author waits until the second paragraph to discover the book is narrated in the first person. Nael starts by talking about Zana's final months, and finally admits "I saw her" almost at the end of the first page (Hatoum 11). The truth of his name is only revealed in chapter nine (of a total twelve chapters): The one who named Nael was Halim, choosing the name after his own father. It is in this scene that Domingas reveals to Nael she was raped by Omar, but slept with Yaqub willingly (241). Either of the two brothers could be Nael's father, yet neither admits it. The duality of the brothers (physically identical, but one openly violent, the other cunning and controlling through a civilized façade) can be transposed to a wider extent if we think of Nael as a bastard colonized Amazon, and the brothers as the colonizers. Colonization is invoked in the text by two facets: the violence, often committing genocide against the indigenous peoples, and the "kind" civilizatory white men's burden.<sup>6</sup> By acting how they did, both Yaqub and Omar embody Nael's father, at the same time.

Nael can also be a foil for the author. Hatoum chooses for his epigraph a poem by the Brazilian author Carlos Drummond de Andrade (one of the most important poets of the 20th century). The words describe a house being sold with all the "furniture, the sins and the nightmares" still inside. It is representative of the family in the novel, whose

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<sup>6</sup> The term "white man's burden" was first used in a poem by Rudyard Kipling in 1899 and became a recurrent phrase to justify European imperialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It implies that imperialism was motivated by the good intentions of white people to "benefit" people of colour and bring "civilization" to places and cultures considered uncivilized.

home is sold when the family falls apart. It is also an affirmation of Hatoum's place as a Brazilian author, no hyphenation needed (Lebanese-Brazilian, or Northern-Brazilian). Like Nael, the author is torn between nationalities and languages, but he stands firmly in his mixed identity as Brazilian.

### **Conclusion**

Through Moretti's distant reading, what seems foreign and exotic in Brazilian literature at a first glance can reveal familiar themes. It is useful when reading translated works from peripheral cultures. Where applying close reading would not be possible, it allows the reader to focus on the tropes and make sense of the novel without the initial prejudice of "I won't be able to understand this because I don't know the region or the customs well enough". The novel *The Brothers* fits well in Damrosch's and Hiddleston's definitions of world literature: It reads well in translation, it is a type of writing that traveled through multiple spaces and languages, and it is literature that mixes elements from different cultures. In theory, all it needs is readers willing to read it, and all the pieces fit together. Hatoum's text also proves that peripheral literature does not need to be homogenized or to conform to Western standards to be translatable and relatable. A non-pasteurized literature, with 'local' demands and issues, can be appreciated without falling in the trap of being made to appease the foreign, colonizer gaze, or the demands of a homogeneous and standardized global market. World literature theory, although born with noble, democratic ideals, where literature from all around the world can be read and studied equally, still has a long way to free itself from Eurocentric thoughts

and perspectives to really appreciate and include the world in its considerations.

## Appendix

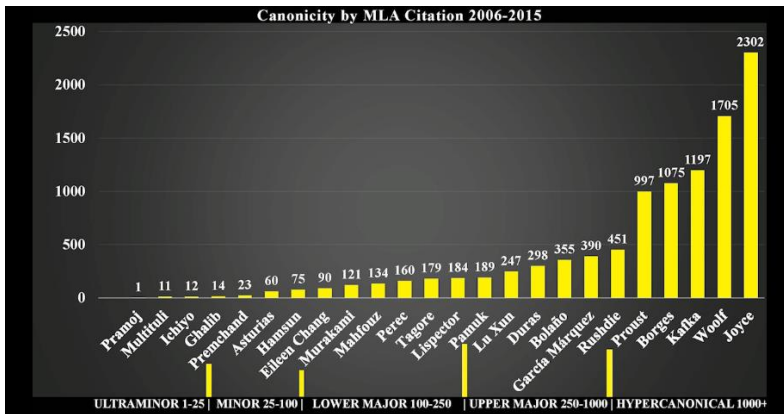


Fig. 1. Canonicity by MLA Citation 2006-2015 from David Damrosch, “2016 IWL: David Damrosch, ‘What Isn’t World Literature? Problems of Language, Context, and Politics’.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Delia Ungureanu, 6 August 2016, 46:00 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfOuOJ6b-qY>.

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