Collecting to the Core-Portugueses Linguistic, Literacy and Cultural Travessias

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Collecting to the Core — Portuguese Linguistic, Literary, and Cultural Travessias

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Column Editor’s Note: The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rclweb.net). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

“As the early Portuguese explorers navigated a vast ocean to discover a new world and Guimarães Rosa’s ‘travelers’ crossed the serras…, so do language learners journey into uncharted territories of knowledge, embarking upon a travessia that will take them to new cultural horizons.”

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Os Lusiadas (The Lusiads), by the oft-cited master of the Portuguese language Luís de Camões, and The Devil to Pay in the Backlands (Grande Sertão: Veredas), by the distinguished twentieth-century Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa, are important departures for those who embark on the journey of learning Portuguese.2,3 Both of these works often appear in foundational reading lists along with more recognizable authors like Homer and James Joyce. Their inventive use of structure and language makes their respective distinctions in the Portuguese and Brazilian literary canons incontrovertible. As cultural capital these works extend beyond basic literary and linguistic premises and establish the trope of travessia (the long journey).4,5 Clarice Lispector’s 1977 novella The Hour of the Star (A Hora da Estrela) reinforces and builds on these cultural foundations.6 Because of their intricacies and astute sociocultural references, these works are difficult, if not impossible, to translate or understand out of context. As a consequence, they are quintessential challenges for Portuguese language learners and emerging Portuguese readers, including native speakers. In the classroom, providing masterpieces like the above alongside accessible popular adaptations produced in television, film, or graphic media can create pathways for deeper cultural immersion. This essay makes a case for assembling diverse materials and formats to support Lusophone literacy — defined here as linguistic, literary, and cultural understanding of the Portuguese language. Brazilian examples dominate this essay, but they should be treated with corollaries in other Portuguese-speaking countries.

Portuguese speakers are diverse. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers navigated down the West African coast, around the Cape of Good Hope, along the southeast African coast to Calcutta, and also around the Cape of Good Hope, along the navigated down the West African coast, which depicts the heroine’s journey from the destitute Brazilian northeast to the flush surrounds of Rio de Janeiro. While there she balances hopeful prophecies with inauspicious torments and observations illuminated in modern prose. Literacy is not simply repetition of words or grammatical structures. It is the ability to retrieve and adapt information with reference to its cultural significance. The term travessia resonates as a trope that surrounds a protagonist across the narrative trajectory, discussed here. The concept echoes the Portuguese seafaring accomplishments and failures as presented in Os Lusiadas. It emerges in postcolonial negotiations of transatlantic and transcendent dental matrices addressed in part through the meandering dialog of The Devil to Pay in the Backlands.5 It also reverberates through the personalized reflections on the exotic and the mundane encountered in The Hour of the Star.

The epic sixteenth-century poem Os Lusiadas weaves in and out of the Portuguese people through a fantastical account of explorer Vasco da Gama’s voyage from Lisbon to India. As the foremost example of Portugal’s Renaissance literature, its cantos present the Portuguese people as protagonists in a series of difficult and victorious encounters with mythological figures, African and Asian contemporaries, and the sea itself.7 Guimarães Rosa’s The Devil to Pay in the Backlands maps the intersection between a tumultuous psycho-spiritual journey presented by way of dialog unfolding on the scene of a mental and physical sojourn through the semi-arid, sparsely populated Brazilian backlands, infamous for devastating drought, lawless bandits, and historic rebellions. An exemplary manifestation of Brazil’s New Novel (the twentieth century Latin American novel), this chapterless work introduces a uniquely Brazilian vocabulary and grammar against the backdrop of the country’s unforgiving, linguistic, and psychological tour de force.8 The Hour of the Star is equally complex, offering a meditation on writing and vulnerability. It migrates along an awkward interstice among the narrator, the heroine, and the story itself, which depicts the heroine’s journey from the destitute Brazilian northeast to the flush surrounds of Rio de Janeiro. While there she balances hopeful prophecies with inauspicious visions, always struggling to connect with others. Lispector states that the story is about “an anonymous misery.”9

Providing these canonical works of literature alongside popular surrogates like the comic book Os Lusíadas Em Quatro Volumes, the mini-series Grande Sertão: Veredas, and the film A Hora da Estrela facilitates critical discussions of travessia along with the feasibility of translating linguistic and narrative innovations into graphic and audiovisual frames. Os Lusíadas Em Quatro Volumes, not available in translation, is a graphic novel by Brazilian illustrator Fido Nesti.9,10 This contemporary work repackages one of Camões’s ten cantos with revised snippets and comprehensible comic frames. Reading the comic version enables Portuguese language learners to access segments of Camões’s verse with images. While certain language gems are lost in this format, the graphics offer struggling readers a contemporary vision of the fantastical — and sometimes prejudicial — portrayals in the original poem. These encapsulations of African cannibals, Persian scribes, and Indian warriors open new doors for commentary. The Globo miniserie Grande Sertão: Veredas follows Guimarães Rosa’s protagonist Ribolasto as he wanders across the hinterland and narrates his history, with special attention to stories of banditry, retribution, love, and death — some of which feature his own experiences.11 One of the stories repackaged in the twenty-five-chapter television adaptation offers an interesting twist on Ribolasto’s relationship with a fellow bandit, Reinaldo, also called Diadorim. In the novel this character stands between the hero and his desired love. The television adaptation unveils Reinaldo as Maria Deodora, who pretends to be a man in order to join the bandits as an alternative to her unhappy existence as a marginalized woman in the hinterlands. While it doesn’t convey the narrative and linguistic genius of the novel, the miniserie does depart from the text in ways that open new topics for understanding. Similarly, the film adaptation of The Hour of the Star directed by Suzana Amaral misses the reflective and inventive narrative structure in Lispector’s novella, but its focus on the heroine Macabea’s migrant experience and her failed attempt to escape poverty offers important opportunities for discussions of the “anonymous misery” Lispector noted, not to mention gender inequalities.12 The film allows students to explore what the author means by its anonymous misery and how the film and book alternately reflect this.

These popularly accessible revisions of Os Lusiadas, The Devil to Pay in the Backlands, and The Hour of the Star trade experimental literary and linguistic inventions for visual renderings which re-create enough of the actual stories to inspire popular investment in the literary cultural capital of these works. At the very least, the literary adaptations familiarize students with the protagonists and general plots to facilitate additional context and discussion. In spliced frames they offer glimpses of the intricacies and sociocultural issues these works address. When offered in conjunction with the actual literature, these adaptations present diverging pathways for deeper immersion into myriad cultural cues. Most importantly, when provided together, these masterpieces and their adaptations create intersections that lend to a more informed literary and cultural criticism. Like most authors writing in the Portuguese language — with one noted exception, Fernando Pessoa — Camões, Guimarães Rosa, and Lispector fall outside of the Western canon despite their acclaim and accomplishments as writers.12,13 It is no surprise, considering the limits of the Western canon. Portuguese is an interesting case, however, because it exists culturally inside and outside of Western contexts. For this reason it is often difficult to classify and hard for many discovering learners to locate without some provocation. Graphic novels, television miniseries, and full-length films might be just the incitement necessary...
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to introduce challenging Portuguese literary texts to emerging Portuguese readers and language learners. Once in that space, the journey can unfold within uncharted territories to reveal myriad new travels and diverse cultural horizons. Facilitating this kind of educational exploration requires library resources beyond the book to other forms of cultural production such as music, film, television, children’s books, and graphic novels. ✪

Endnotes
7. Tolman et al, Travessia.

To Blog or Not To Blog — Librarian Bloggers

Librarians blog. They share opinions and processes with their colleagues in a peer to peer networked global community. Blogs gained popularity in the 1990s and are now an accepted communication tool for many professions. While the use of blogs differ by professions — critique, chronicling, hypotheses, opinion and observations, new developments — there are similarities and differences between academic blogging and librarian blogging.

The Guardian published an article in 2013 by Pat Thomson, Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies at the University of Nottingham, UK, and Inger Mewburn, Director of Research Training at Australian National University. The article, “Why Do Academics Blog? It’s Not For Public Outreach, Research Shows” sums up an informal study of one hundred academic bloggers into two key findings: “Firstly, many bloggers are talking together in a kind of giant, global virtual common room. Over at one table there is a lively, even angry, conversation about working conditions in academia in different parts of the world.” “Secondly, we have come to see blogging as a variation of open access publishing. Academics can get to print early, share ideas which are still being cooked and stake a claim in part of a conversation without waiting to appear in print.” Visit https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/02/why-do-academics-blog-research.

Librarians, as academics, certainly fit into the discussion of blogging as a “virtual common room,” the tone is lively, but librarian blogs are generally more helpful and guidance-focused than academic blogs. Let’s look into some of the ways librarians are using this social media tool to advance librarianship.

During 2016, I curated a feature of selected scholarly blogs to be published in the Choice Magazine’s tablet edition. One of the subjects I was selecting was Library Science and I identified five to six scholarly blogs each month from the collection of blogs included in the ACI Scholarly Blog Index.

From this exercise, I saw that librarian blogs seemed to naturally fall into several recognizable categories: technology, the profession itself, librarian practices, and product reviews. Marshall Breeding, an independent consultant, and his blog, Library Technology Guides, reports on the latest product and vendor developments, and keeps the library profession informed. Library Stuff, written by Steve M. Cohen, Senior Librarian, Law Library Management, Inc., and Letters to a Young Librarian, by Jessica Olin, Library Director, Wesley College, focuses on professional development. Olin’s recent blog post: “Writing (and Righting) Library Policies” is a good example of providing guidance to younger professionals.

There is a generous number of librarian blogs on technology topics, all warranted with different points of view, on how to approach incorporating technology into library service, discovery, analytics, and communicating to the user community through various library websites. Jason Griffey’s blog, Pattern Recognition, is a good starting point for looking at technology and public policy. Griffey is Head of Library Information Technology at the University of Tennessee and a Fellow at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. David Lee King’s blog, David Lee King, looks at social media, trends, technology, and libraries. A recent post, “One Big Social Media Prediction for 2017,” sums up King’s views on social media channels and libraries’ use of them for communication. King is Director of Digital Services at Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library.

Scholarly blogs in the Library of Congress Classifications of librarianship, information science, technology, and the history of scholarship are all worth reading to keep up with the trends in librarianship and participate in what’s being discussed in the “virtual common room.” ✪

Column Editor’s Note: All of the blogs mentioned here are included in the ACI Scholarly Blog Index along with other Library and Information Science blogs. — PS

Endnotes
7. Tolman et al, Travessia.

*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.