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[Review & Interview]: Arab Brazil: A conversation with Wail Hassan.

[Interview and Introduction] Ken Chitwood

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Arab Brazil: A Conversation with Wail Hassan

Interview and Introduction by Ken Chitwood

In my 2021 book *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean*, I wrote that Brazil's Muslims – who have a rich history and wide recognition in the country – balance between “elsewhere” and “here,” less because of their own self-perceptions or preferences, but more due to their social location within Brazil's national discourse. Thus, it was with great interest that I took up Wail Hassan's *Arab Brazil: Fictions of Ternary Orientalism*. Professor of comparative literature at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Hassan examines a century of culturally significant Brazilian literary fiction and popular television shows (*telenovelas*), analyzing how “the figure of the Arab immigrant, the outlines of Arab culture, and the presence of Islam” are represented as “loci of anxieties and contradictions” in the nation's national narrative of cultural *mistura* (mixture). (2) The result is what Hassan calls “ternary Orientalism,” wherein “Arabness and Islam work paradoxically as sites of otherness...and similarity.” (Ibid.) Or, you might say, being between *elsewhere* and *here*.

Whereas I had a vague sense of this reality from my time in Brazil, Hassan's work provides a careful interrogation of popular fiction and mass media melodramas to undergird his insightful theorization of what “ternary Orientalism” is and how it functions. Particularly powerful is his critique of the idea(l) of Brazilian *mistura* and how racist and anti-Muslim hostilities interwoven throughout the country's popular and political culture reveal the inherent fault lines and unrealized potential thereof. Key to this critique of *mistura* is Hassan's framing of what he calls the country's ternary – or triangular – Orientalism. On the one hand, Hassan argues, “faced with immigrants who do not fit easily” within the tripartite notion of mixture (Amerindian, European, African), Brazilian intellectuals, politicians, and cultural producers, “have appropriated Euro-American Orientalism to make sense of the Arab presence in Brazil and to define the country's place in the world.” (17) The result is an orientation toward Europe and the United States (the North) as touchstones for Brazil's national identity, to the detriment of Indigenous, Afro, and Asian Brazilian identifications. (293)

On the other hand, Brazil's own brand of Orientalism is distinct from binary forms based on East/West dichotomies, channeled as it is through the South American nation's

“relation to *two* others”: the North *and* the “East” or “South” (e.g., African and the Arab world). As Hassan writes, “the East/West dichotomy intersects with the North/South distinction that sets Brazil, Latin America, and what used to be called the Third World as a whole (now dubbed the Global South) apart from Western Europe and the United States.” (20) Thus, the Orient is utilized in Brazil as both a “refraction of colonial discourse, imported to serve local needs” *and* as “a sort of cultural and/or political ally when Latin American writers and politicians seek to resist Euro-American norms.” (21)

For example, in Chapter Two, Hassan critiques the work of Brazilian novelists Cecílio Carneiro and Permínio Asfora and how – through their respective novels *A fogueira* (1942, *The Bonfire*) and *Noite Grande* (1947, *Long Night*) – they frame images of admirable Arabs and undesirable Arab immigrants within the politics of *mistura* as well as racial and ethnic criteria for citizenship, which take whiteness as their baseline. Extending these themes in Chapter Five, Hassan looks at Milton Hatoum’s *Relato de um certo Oriente* (1989, *Tale of a Certain Orient*) and *Dois irmãos* (2000, *The Brothers*) and how they position *mistura* as a form of cultural assimilation predicated upon the erasure of Arab customs, language, and religious practices.

In addition to analyzing works of literary fiction, Hassan also takes up Brazilian *telenovelas* like Glória Perez’s well-known *O Clone* (2002-2022, *The Clone*) or the more recent *Órfãos da terra* (2019, *Orphans of the Earth*), co-written by Thelma Guedes and Duca Rachid. In looking at how the latter frames Brazil’s attempts at tolerance and cultural mixture in the context of a “deepening anxiety about religious difference and a powerful undercurrent of Islamophobia.” (27) The result is a recasting of the notion of undesirable immigrant from ethnicity (Arab) toward a racialized form of religion (Arab Muslim). Hassan’s analysis here undergirds how, as Schuyler Marquez put it, in a context where 64 percent of the population considers themselves Catholic, 22 percent Protestant, and experiencing a marked rise in Pentecostal and charismatic affiliations, “Islam continues to be viewed as an ethnic religion with roots from ‘elsewhere’ and thus embedded in debates about ethnic and cultural authenticity.”¹

Altogether, Hassan’s *Arab Brazil* is a well-researched, nuanced, and penetrating look at how the cultural politics of Brazil continue to construct Arabs as non-normative

outsiders, despite their role in mainstream culture and generally advanced political and economic status.

In the following interview, Hassan elaborates on some of these themes, sharing more about his own intellectual trajectory, areas for further consideration in the wake of his work, and how his provocations might encourage readers to reconsider the myths and machinations of mixture (or purity) that we encounter in our own research and lived contexts.

KC: How did you come to research the representations of Arab and Muslim immigrants in Brazilian literature and popular culture? I am particularly interested in your commentary about how you belatedly came to this topic and how it “shouldn’t even have been written” according to your academic training and milieu.

WH: That comment is about the fact that research fields in comparative literature are structured in ways that make a lot of sense but at the same time foreclose certain possibilities. For example, modern Arabic literature is often studied in relation to British and French literatures because Britain and France were the colonial powers that ruled in the modern Middle East, impacting culture in the region. This is the case not only in the Arab world, where I grew up, but also in U.S. universities. So, it was entirely predictable for someone like me to study Arabic, British, and French literatures, but not Persian or Turkish or Italian or Spanish. There are exceptions, of course, but they are few and very far between. My graduate training and early publications fell within this pattern, with a focus on postcolonial studies, notably in my first book, *Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction* (Syracuse University Press, 2003). Along similar lines, from around 2001 to 2009, I worked on my second book *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2011), which analyzed the ways in which Arab immigrant novelists and autobiographers responded to discrimination and stereotypes. During that period, in 2007, I came across some translated essays by Latin American writers of Arab descent and was fascinated by their description of the very different status of their immigrant communities in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile. I realized then that I found a new research

project, except that I had to learn Portuguese and Spanish! Not just learn the languages, of course, but I would also have to study the history and literary tradition in each country that I wanted to focus on, since what is called “Latin America” is not a homogeneous entity and each country has its specificity. I had already been to Brazil a couple of times and was enthralled by its enormously rich culture, so I began to learn Portuguese. After four years of language, literature, and culture study both at my university and in intensive summer courses in Brazil, I was able to embark on the research that led to the publication of *Arab Brazil: Fictions of Ternary Orientalism* in 2024. In that sense, my formal training could not have anticipated this major shift in my research, which nevertheless is intellectually consistent with my abiding interest in Orientalism, immigration, and modern Arabic literature.

KC: You discuss the operative idea(l) of the “harmonious mixture” (*mistura*) of the *três raças* (three races of Indigenous, Portuguese and African peoples) in Brazilian society. I find this particularly relevant to my work with Puerto Rican Muslims, who also must contend with the notion of the *tres raíces* in their own contexts. How does this ideology relate to your notion of ternary Orientalism and impact the lived realities of Arabs and Muslims in Brazil?

WH: The recurrence of the number three in the “three-races theory” and my concept of “ternary Orientalism” is coincidental. As you know, the three-races theory, versions of which are found in various countries in Latin America, has been criticized for overlooking other populations, such as Arabs, Chinese, and Japanese, among others. Ternary Orientalism belongs to a different order of theorizing, not so much the make-up of the population as a particular variety of Orientalist discourse that is ternary rather than binary. Briefly, that is, while classic colonial Orientalism is based on an East/West duality that defines Europe’s identity in opposition to an ideological fiction called “the Orient,” in Brazil this European discourse is imported but transformed into a tripartite construct in which Brazilian identity is defined in relation to both Europe (or the North) and “the Orient” (which, like Brazil and Latin America generally, is part of what we call the “Global South”). What I have found is that Brazilian writers oscillate between identification with the “West” (Europe and the United States, that is “the North”) and the

Global South (including Africa and the Arab world), and in the process, they reinterpret Euro-American Orientalism in their own way. That is what I call “ternary Orientalism.”

KC: You highlight the very Brazilian nature of ternary Orientalism in your analysis, but how might this be applied to other contexts in the Americas?

WH: I have not studied other Latin American countries in any depth, so I will leave this determination to those who know more. Each country has its own specificity due to demographic, historical, cultural, and intellectual factors. What I can assert is that ideas and theories are always transformed when they migrate from their place of origin, so I suspect that something similar to what happened to Orientalism in Brazil also occurred elsewhere. The exact form of that transformation may be different from one place to another.

KC: You cover a range of works — both literary and on television. Are there any works that you left out or that you think others might engage with and analyze? Are there any other areas for further consideration or questions left over from your work that someone else might take up?

WH: As the subtitle of the book indicates, I only focused on narrative fiction, both novels and *telenovelas*, leaving out genres like autobiography, poetry, popular song, drama, cinema, and practically all of the Arabic-language writing by immigrants in Brazil. Even within narrative fiction genres, I left out many novels and *telenovelas* that are interesting in themselves, but which do not add much that is conceptually new (at least in my estimation) to the case studies I examined in depth. So, there is plenty of material for other researchers to analyze.

Interestingly, one review published in Portugal has criticized the book for not dealing with poetry or with certain novelists, even though the book’s introduction explains the focus and the rationale for the choice of texts. My objective was not to write a comprehensive literary or cultural history in which every writer of Arab descent in any genre would be mentioned. Rather, I wanted to analyze in depth the crucial stages in the development of the representation of Arabs and Islam in Brazil, from the onset of modernist movement in the 1920s to the present, whether or not those representations

are by writers of Arab descent. The book is a work of literary criticism, not literary history. The reviewer blames me for not writing a book that I never intended to write.

KC: Critiquing the contradictions of modernity, the prevalence of the three-races theory in Brazil, and the ongoing privileging of European identifications in Brazilian society, you call “for a reorientation toward the Global South” in our understanding, and social application, of *mistura*. How might such a reorientation help scholars “finish” the business of *mistura*?

WH: This is a great question. One thing I tried to show in the book is that despite the significant and visible Arab presence in Brazil, knowledge of the Arab world and its culture remains minimal and largely derived from European sources. There is very little direct knowledge based on original research. For example, there are only two small departments of Arabic studies in Brazil, one at the University of São Paulo and one at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. There are individual scholars—historians, anthropologists, etc.—who study the Arab world and are scattered at various other universities, but only in those two departments is the Arabic language taught and degrees in Arabic studies are offered. It is not surprising, then, that *The Thousand and One Nights* and the Qur’an are the only Arabic books most people are able to name, if at all. Likewise, simplistic ideas and clichés about the Arab world that are derived from European Orientalism keep recurring in popular culture: the desert, veiled women, belly dancers, and so forth. In the book, I quote a statement by Jorge Amado in which he wonders why cultured Brazilians should know everything about France and Italy but nothing about African or Arab countries. He argues that this attitude keeps Brazilians in a colonial position vis-à-vis Europe, whereas what is needed, according to him, is a new cultural policy that strengthens relations with other developing countries. That sums it up.

¹ Schulyer Marquez, “Islam in Brazil,” in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions Vol. 1*, edited by Henri Gooren (Springer, 2019), 632.