Luiz Ruffato

Stops: Brazil

(1961 -)

Luiz Ruffato was born in Cataguases, Minas Gerais. His fictional work has been published in fifteen countries. Ruffato has received many awards in Brazil, including the prestigious Jabuti literary prize, the Machado de Assis and the APCA prizes, as well as international awards, such as the Escritor Galego Universal in Galicia award in 2015 and the Hermann Hesse Award in Germany in 2016. Several of Ruffato's works have been adapted to film and theater, and many graduate theses and dissertations have been written about his fiction. His award-winning *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* is among the 25 best books of Brazilian literature of the twenty-first century, selected by a jury comprised of one hundred international and Brazilian jurors on behalf of the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*.

Beginning with his award-winning debut novel *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos* (2001), Ruffato has dedicated his flourishing literary career to portraying the struggles of the working class, including immigrants and, particularly and personally, the Italian diaspora in his native state of Minas Gerais. The book's structure and focus are on a single day in the life of the city of São Paulo, from pre-dawn to deep night, as well as from one end of the city to the other. In the short, unconnected fragments that compose this work of fiction, Ruffato highlights the city's vast spectrum of human diversity that inhabits this monumental urban center.

This dissonant plurality stretches across socioeconomic divides, from the most wealthy and powerful to those most defenseless and underprivileged. The latter often include migrants from various regionals of Brazil, including its drought-ridden northeast, as well as immigrants to Brazil. Within São Paulo's dense, industrial sprawl, members of its populace are often

overcome by rural or ancestral nostalgia that, in turn, ushers them mentally and emotionally back to their places of origin and heritage. The reader encounters, among others, a taxi driver whose directional knowledge of the city does not lessen his longing for his home state of Sergipe; an elderly woman on a city bus who dozes and reminisces about her rural childhood; a drunken apartment dweller who recalls her rural schooling while her father and brothers toil in southern soybean fields; and a man stuck in a traffic jam who recollects past generations in Italy and Portugal (Harrison 2005: 157-158). These aching hearts hold a multitude of placed-based memories. Their remembrances, in turn, prove to be essential survival tactics in a merciless city. As first evident in *Eles Eram Muitos Cavalos*, many forms of aspiration and longing persist throughout Ruffato's fictional oeuvre.

Ruffato's subsequent works of fiction, such as his ambitious five-part *Inferno Provisório*, published in one volume in 2016, underscore gross socioeconomic inequities, from agricultural communities to industrialized cities. The first section of this epic tome, *Mamma, Son Tanto Felice*, centers on Rodeiro, a community of poverty-stricken Italian immigrants in Minas Gerais. These outsiders find themselves caught between two worlds, as well as between rural and urban labor systems. In its totality, *Inferno Provisório* is a saga that documents fifty years in the life of the country during the 20 th century. It portrays the incongruous coexistence of agricultural monocultures and industrialization.

In *Estive em Lisboa e Lembrei de Você* (2009), Ruffato shifts the main character's trajectory from Brazil back to Europe. The novel does so by framing economic inequalities via the theme of Brazilian immigration abroad. This slim book is divided into two parts: the first part tells the story of Cataguases-born Serginho, his downtrodden life in Minas Gerais, Brazil, and his misguided dream of finding lucrative work in Portugal. The second part recounts Serginho's six and a half years as a wretched Brazilian immigrant in Lisbon. In analyzing *Estive em Lisboa*, critics such as Allysson Casais underscore Ruffato's notable attention to Brazilians who travel abroad out of economic desperation and financial necessity, and who, consequently, overstay their status as undocumented individuals. The dream of becoming prosperous enough to be able to support one's family and return to Brazil in comfort is

revealed to be a myth. Rather, discrimination and discontentment caused by a sense of displacement and non-belonging, are a constant thread in Ruffato's fiction as well.

Another Ruffato work of fiction that focuses on the immigrant experience, both abroad and in Brazil, is *O Antigo Futuro* (2022). The narrative is divided into four parts that take place in reverse order through a series of flashbacks. These four sections capture the lives of four generations of the Italian Bortoletto family by corresponding to the following places and dates: Somerville, 6th August 2016; São Paulo, 8th October 1994; Cataguases, 7th February 1967; and Rodeiro, 6th August 1916. Within these sections, one hundred short chapters recount Alex's family story over the course of one hundred years. The first section of the novel documents Alex's harsh life as a Brazilian immigrant living in the U.S. The last section of the book depicts the departure of Alex's great-grandfather from Italy to settle in southeastern Brazil to labor on the coffee plantations. In each section, the family confronts hardship, loss, and incidents of inhumanity. Moments of tenderness and hard-earned achievement embedded in the narratives are few and far between.

As Miguel Rettenmaier points out, *O Antigo Futuro* traces the demoralizing history of manual labor and precarious survival in each of the represented generations: Alex's, his father Dagoberto's, his grandfather Aléssio's, and his great-grandfather Abramo's. Moreover, Ruffato's novel makes clear that these four generational figures, portrayed in reverse order, are also symbolic of a country unable to move forward toward a better future. Instead, as the novel's title and formal structure accentuate, Brazil perpetually repeats the failures of its past.

In 2013, Ruffato was the keynote speaker at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the year the fair highlighted Brazil. In his speech, he presented a scathing critique of contemporary Brazil, based on its many inequities. According to Ruffato, the majority of his country's inhabitants are "deprived of the basic rights of citizenship: housing, transportation, leisure, education and healthcare". Ruffato went on to specify, among others, domestic violence and abuse, sexual orientation intolerance, ethnic genocide, racial and socioeconomic discrimination, and

poor access to education and illiteracy (Nielson 2013: 92-94). While proclaiming the transformative powers of literature, he decried: “We have turned our backs on the other — whether immigrant, poor, black, indigenous, female, homosexual — as an attempt to preserve ourselves, forgetting that in doing so we are imploding our own conditions of existence” (*idem*: 95).

Quotations

A partir da minha experiência pessoal, de neto de imigrantes da província de Padova que chegaram ao Brasil no fim do século XIX, tento compreender a presença (ou ausência) da temática na literatura brasileira, lembrando que o país comporta o maior número de descendentes de italianos do mundo. Desde meus primeiros livros venho refletindo sobre a questão da chegada dos imigrantes numa região específica, Minas Gerais, e sua posterior adaptação, desfazendo o mito que existe, dentro e fora do Brasil, de que os Oriundi chegaram para “conquistar a América” e lá enriqueceram e se fizeram impor como classe social dominante. (“Os Invisíveis”, *online*)

‘Estou aqui tentando ganhar a vida, pra ajudar minha família que ficou lá em Goiás’, e ele, galanteador, ‘Se calhar, estamos todos na mesma situação, meus queridos’, informando que ele também, embora cidadão da Comunidade Europeia, ‘Sinto-me exilado’, angolano de corpo e alma […]. (*Estive em Lisboa*: 75)

O Rodolfo avivou a conversa, ‘Nós estamos lascados, Serginho’, aqui em Portugal não somos nada, ‘Nem nome temos’, somos os brasileiros, ‘E o que a gente é no Brasil?’, nada também, somos os outros, […]. (*idem*: 78)

‘É ilusão, Serginho’, pura ilusão imaginar que uma-hora a gente volta pra nossa terra, ‘Volta nada’, a precisão drena os recursos. (*idem*: 79)

Alex contava agora pouco mais de três anos nos Estados Unidos, tempo suficiente para perceber que aquela ideia de que regressaria em breve não passava de fantasia. Ainda podia ouvir Ruan, primo da cunhada, Rivânia, que o acolheu ao desembarcar do ônibus na South Station, em Boston, dizendo: Todo mundo chega aqui pensando em trabalhar, economizar, e voltar logo, o bolso cheio de dinheiro... Pura ilusão! A melhor coisa que você pode fazer agora é esquecer o Brasil —Forget it! — e, quanto antes, melhor. (*O Antigo Futuro*: 18)

Porém, nos Estados Unidos, ninguém falava com ele. No restaurante, os colegas, que só conversavam em espanhol entre si, excluíam-no das confabulações, visto que não o consideravam latino […] Nas ruas, entretanto, os americanos identificavam-no como hispânico, um corpo estranho, tratado com indiferença e hostilidade. Assim, mais e mais, entocava-se na sua caverna de amarguras.” (*idem*: 56)

Acuados, habitavam o limbo do mundo. Viviam aterrorizados pela possibilidade iminente de serem descobertos, capturados e devolvidos a um país que também os rejeitara. (*idem*: 68)

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