

## THE QUEER GEOGRAPHY OF THE POSTCOLONIAL AMAZON: LITERATURE AS REMAPPING

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### Abstract

Temporal and spatial locations are deeply rooted in relations of power; hegemony has thus been granted the consent to map the globe, ultimately proscribing any attempt at thinking the present historically and pinpointing who are those subjects still occupying the supposed eliminated spaces. Development, on its turn, interferes not only in the economy but in many other institutions and practices; it has altered the historical pattern of the Amazon, and involuntarily invited diverse forms of resistance to these processes to surface. Having said that, this study's general object of research concerns the Amazon and its relationship with contemporary developmentalist enterprises both in the material and ideological level; such object as represented and retextualised within Hatoum's novel *The Brothers* (2000) consist in the specific focus of my literary analysis, which endeavours to allow reflections on Amazonian imagined geography to be articulated.

**Keywords:** Amazon, Literature, Geography

### A GEOGRAFIA QUEER DA AMAZÔNIA PÓS-COLONIAL: LITERATURA COMO REMAPEAMENTO

### Resumo

Localizações temporais e espaciais estão profundamente enraizadas em relações de poder; à hegemonia foi concedida a autoridade de mapear o globo, eventualmente proscrivendo qualquer tentativa de se pensar no presente historicamente e apontando quais são os sujeitos que ainda, supostamente, ocupam espaços eliminados. O desenvolvimento, por outro lado, interfere não só na economia, mas em muitas outras instituições e práticas; ele alterou o padrão histórico da Amazônia e involuntariamente convidou diversas formas de resistência a esses processos a emergir. Sendo assim, o objeto principal desta pesquisa concerne à Amazônia e a sua relação com os processos desenvolvimentistas contemporâneos tanto no nível material quanto ideológico; tal objeto, como representado e retextualizado no romance de Hatoum *Dois Irmãos* (2000) consiste no foco específico de minha análise literária, que busca permitir que reflexões acerca da geografia imaginada da Amazônia possam ser articuladas.

**Palavras-chave:** Amazônia, Literatura, Geografia

All I ever wanted was a world without maps.  
(Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 1992)

### INTRODUCTION: "SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES"

This study's general object of research is the Amazon and its relationship with contemporary developmentalist enterprises both in the material and ideological level, whereas the specific one is Milton Hatoum's novel *The Brothers* (2000). Hatoum's narrative is here scrutinised through the observations of Nael, a narrator who realises the great differences between the twins who foreground the story. While Yaqub is in the process of "becoming more refined", since he grows up personifying "everything that was modern" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 53), Omar does not really care about becoming more educated or civilised, he does

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not yearn for the “changes” that Yaqub so eagerly expects. When he warns his mother that: “everything’s changing in Manaus” she responds ‘That’s true... only you hasn’t changed, Omar’ (HATOUM, 2000, p. 222). In a way Omar’s obstinateness and unyielding reaction to the modern and postmodern foxy mirages devised by Imperialism will be pivotal for him not to succumb to a future that never comes; a meaningless hope that deceives those who surround him but is unable to prevent his attitudes and positioning from historicising not only the possibility of existing in the future and in the past but, more importantly, in a meaningful and evocative present.

Society can be granted with identity democracy and it can come up to innovative possibilities for pondering upon civilisation next steps only if we start doing what the hegemonic chronology of capital accumulation prohibits: “thinking the present historically and [...] summoning the return of a seemingly eliminated space” (HALL, 1996, p. 8). Temporal locations are deeply rooted in relations of power; hegemony has thus been granted the consent to map the globe, ultimately proscribing any attempt at thinking the present historically and pinpointing who are those subjects still occupying the supposed eliminated spaces. Economic relations between peoples have thus been forged rather carefully, giving way to alliances which determined the spatial and temporal constraints of all those who are making businesses. According to Johannes Fabian: “A temporal conception of movement has always served to legitimize the colonial enterprise on all levels; temporalizations expressed as passage from savagery to civilization, from peasant to industrial society, have long served an ideology whose ultimate purpose has been to justify the procurement of commodities for our markets” (1983, p. 95).

As we can see, the chronology that emphasises the “passage from savagery to civilisation” entails several changes in the lives of marginalised who become gradually aware of the paradox of living in a “seemingly eliminated space” (HALL, 1996, p. 8). Here we should look at the concept of classical and neoliberalism as defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; that is, standing for the idea that “the dispersion of power that results from a free market economy based on private property protects the liberty of subjects against encroachments by the state”<sup>2</sup>. Curiously, this evinces the fact that contemporary culture prohibits at the same time as it unshackles; the liberal world that supposedly liberates subjects through the imposition of free market, shaping a profiteering mould wherein these subjects have been popped in, has controversially set them free from their freedom,

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transforming their history into a past that can no longer be achieved materially, physically, but only recollected by a lingering but innocuous nostalgia that permeates their murky existence.

The autonomy the system of insertion and liberation gives to some is fairly distinct from the one given to others, for the freedom of commerce does not necessarily result in the freedom of subjects; actually, and as I hope to demonstrate, it goes pretty much in the opposite direction. This notion of liberal practices is understood here as put forward by Escobar (2009); that is, as standing for the economic behaviour adopted by “the advanced countries, particularly the United States, with the need to find overseas investment opportunities and, at the same time, markets for their goods” (ESCOBAR, 2009, p. 429). Affecting the globe and impinging upon the lives of real people, finding markets and investment opportunities have dramatically affected those who had never asked for such markets or investments. Therefore, and for this ambitious project to be successful, “economic development, trade liberalization under the aegis of the nascent giant corporations, and the establishment of multilateral financial institutions were to be the main instruments to satisfy these requirements and advance the new strategy” (ESCOBAR, 2009, p. 430). This new strategy, the artificial linearity that places the Amazon in the past and more urbanised regions in the future implies that marginalised subjects belong to the wilderness, to the rural landscapes, to a place uncorrupted by developmentalist intercourses. In this sense when the Amazon goes through development and is inserted into its appropriate temporal box it is not its conditions that are enhanced, but the tentacles of the social dominance which determine its destiny.

This is so for the effects of developmentalism are mesmerising insomuch as, in the words of Escobar, “certain types of social dominance may be analysed as the product of the interconnection between the introduction of dominant discourses about the economy, their inscription in institutions and practices (e.g. through development), and their effect on local historical situations, including the resistance to these processes” (ESCOBAR, 2009, p. 438). Development interferes not only in the economy but in many other institutions and practices; it alters the historical pattern of the Amazon, and involuntarily allows diverse forms of resistance to these processes to surface. Those who resist processes responsible for instituting the normative are the postcolonial subjects who, forced to limit their existence to a temporal and spatial configuration which is regarded as queer, end up becoming capable of providing epistemes that transcend the narrow positionings brought forward and commended by

normative institutions; the colonial moment had and has depended on the developmentalist linearity not only to survive but to be deemed justifiable.

The postcolonial moment, resulting from the fragments and scars left by such problematic enterprises, is a moment whence developmentalist chronology is put into question, when that which must be scrutinized and, possibly, discredited can no longer be that which deviates from the pattern, but the notion of a pattern itself. If there is something that marks contemporary heterogeneity, such thing is what Foucault (1976) calls “the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses” (p. 28). Normativity and hegemony are now being thus threatened by this general feeling that “the ground is crumbling” beneath their feet, “especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest to us, to our bodies, to our everyday gestures” (FOUCAULT, 1976, p. 30), such as the industrial approach towards time and space. Foucault highlights that “alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques”, such as the ones uttered by the Amazonian marginalised subjects, “the facts were also revealing something: beneath this whole thematic, through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (FOUCAULT, 1976, p. 31). And it is exactly these subjugated knowledges which we shall no longer fail to acknowledge.

### **THE BROTHERS: A VEGETATING TIME**

Hatoum’s novel can be described as a “tale of the intricate conflicts within an Amazonian Lebanese family—the parents, Halim and Zana are of Islamic and Maronite Christian stock, and held together by a durable and violent sexual passion that began when she was 15”. If their daughter Rânia is nontoxic and controllable, their twin sons, “Omar and Yaqub, who hate each other and cannot be reconciled” are basically the reason for the wrecking of the family. Its members are characterised by “the illegitimate son of the family’s native servant, Domingas”, who “inserts himself quietly, observation by observation, into the family and the events” and would ultimately prove to be “the true heir, in a sense, both of the family and of Manaus”. Initially Yaqub is seen by this untrustworthy narrator as “Halim’s ‘good’ son who is sent back to a Lebanese village for a time and returns a stranger”, ultimately leaving to São Paulo as to become an engineer. Omar, on the other hand, “much loved by his mother, is a no-good slob who lies in a hammock and consorts with prostitutes”.



In the novelist's view, Hatoum manages to "use the energy of the repeated stories of all cultures"; that is, Omar and Yaqub "are like the two rivers that can't mingle; they are also like the biblical pairs of brothers, Esau and Jacob, and behind them Cain and Abel, whose stories are paradigmatic in Judaism, Islam and Christianity"<sup>3</sup>. Apart from these examples one could also think of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Nathaniel Hawthorne's "John Inglefield's Thanksgiving" (1837), Mark Twain's "Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins" (1875), Machado de Assis' *Esau and Jacob* (1904), and Ben Elton's *Two Brothers* (2011). This tale of the twin brothers is, it seems, universal, but in this specific case readers gradually learn how the traditionally oversimplified dualism between them no longer applies when it goes to the complicated ideological and physical separation of the twin brothers Omar and Yaqub in Hatoum's novel. These brothers are therein no longer simply a manifestation of the victim vs. villain polarity; they are both victims of a same enemy.

Incorporating the regime of the military, Yaqub's image becomes one of primary importance for the narrator: "He [Yaqub] was already smart in mufti, so you can just imagine how he looked in his white uniform with gold buttons, his epaulettes decorated with stars, his leather belt with a silver buckle, his spats and white gloves, and the shining sword he gripped in front of the mirror in the drawing room" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 31). A metaphorical connection, conscious or not, between the portrait of Yaqub and the portrait of Brazil is gradually articulated by Nael's observations. Yaqub sustains his pastoral image, that of "the good shepherd" (MARX, 1964, p. 3), as an ideological icon, admiring his reflection as representative of a great and shining future, which he is willing to fight for—even if that means functioning as a hammer in the hands of the regime. Just like the future of the country, Yaqub's own image, covered by beautiful and glowing details, is nothing but a façade. The romantic surface that grants him the privilege to imagine a new beginning for the country might seem pure and innocent, but the shining sword that accompanies the package makes us remember that all that symbolic exuberance only thrives because it is implemented through violent means: in the end both the sword and the progress are only capable of shining when blood is spilt in the process.

The only comfort both Yaqub and Nael have learned to envisage is that which is directly related to financial profit. In this sense, watching the behaviour of Halim—the brothers' father, who never saves a penny, who is "not stinting on food, on presents for Zana

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[his wife, and the brothers' mother], on things children asked for" the narrator asks himself: "How was he going to get rich? He invited friends over for games of tabule, and it was a real feast, nights that went on into the early morning, with endless food" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 49). Yaqub's family as an institution attempting to survive, and whose ultimate endeavour for this purpose is to categorise their world within the temporal and spatial frame imposed by hegemony, becomes immobile due to such learned cynicism; members of institutions with supposedly pre-given framings have accepted to regard their interactions in the limited way they are supposed to; in the case of those who understand the hegemonic order as a pattern to be followed, anything or any person who go against such an order must be reinserted in the system, by will or by force; and this process takes place both consciously and unconsciously. Here the reader can easily notice that the narrator—for endorsing Yaqub when criticising Halim due to his inability to make as much money as any good entrepreneur would in his position—is not at all devoid of bias.

Omar, on the other hand, is one of those who have no chance of being reinserted in the new Amazon; the fact that he is knowledgeable and proud about who he is and wants to be, the fact that he had no need of money "to be what he was" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 121) since he still lived on the money of his parents (taking advantage of his hegemonic condition as Nael or Domingas would never have the chance of doing), ends up obstructing his capability of allowing development to rebuild his character in this new industrial era. However, if we are to understand and try to reposition the margin in the postmodern globalising world, it is not Yaqub who has the answer either, he is just too tamed to ask any questions. Abandoning his past, his history, and his culture—in his quest for his universal citizenship—the brother's ability to contribute with a distinct view, a conflicting perspective, becomes growingly remote. Nael is by and large impressed by "Yaqub's obstinate dedication to his work [...]. He spent a good part of the night working, with the table in the living room covered with graph paper, full of numbers and drawings" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 195). Having no time to think critically and/or panoptically about the development of the Amazon, due to his obstinate dedication to his work, in a way he could only understand the notions of revolution, development, growth, profit, progress, etc. in their specific terms; culturally and socio-politically the bias has overwhelmed him. Yaqub has fallen into the trap set by Neo-Imperialism: ultimate alienation.

Worried about his "numbers and drawings" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 195), but disregarding more subjective facts of the present, Yaqub, the "mathematician" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 22), is infatuated with the idea of progress as based on what Colás calls an

“economic means of production devoid of any valorization of political and cultural practices [...] as fundamental to social transformation” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 14). One’s positive reaction to the military intervention in a marginalised region, one’s notion that it was asking to be occupied, allows one to embody the figure of the good shepherd, to understand the pastoral gardening of the land as the only chronological direction it would ever be able to take. For Yaqub, social transformation is the natural result of economic transformation; he does not look around, he does not see what Nael sees—and slowly starts to ponder upon—when the narrator walks through the outskirts of Manaus and experiences the maintenance of monarchy in supposedly democratic realms. As an Amazonian flâneur, “wandering aimlessly around the city, crossing the metal bridges, roaming in the areas beside the creeks”, the narrator describes Manaus periphery as consisting of a “secret world”, of “the city we don’t see, or don’t want to see” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 73). The boundaries separating the centre of the Amazonian capital and its outskirts can be thought of as an analogy for the centre of progress—developed countries—and its margins—developing ones. The existence of two cities, the city we don’t see and the one that was ripe for growth, suggests that developed centres need the underdeveloped margins (such as the centre of Manaus needs its outskirts to sustain itself); to put it bluntly: one cannot exist without the maintenance of the other.

In this sense, if Yaqub can decide whether or not to look at what surrounds the city centre, at the dirt that capitalism needs to hide, Nael has no choice whatsoever, he has to go to the city we don’t see when he is asked to, and, as a result, he ends up developing a more extensive perception about the developmentalist landscape: “He’d [Halim] taken me to a small bar at the very end of the Floating City. There we could see the shanties of the Educandos, and the huge creek separating this amphibious neighbourhood from the centre of Manaus; it was the busy time of day” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 114). Nael realises how, at the same time that glamorous houses are appearing in Manaus, there are also those other things which are so unpleasant that they are kept in distant areas surrounding the centre in order not to jeopardise the metropolitan outfit. Nael, while wandering aimlessly around the city notices that this secret world is filled with people who are “vegetating like packs of squalid dogs” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 73); comparing them to squalid dogs and amphibians the narrator reminds readers that these are animalised beings, still trying to move from their savage to a more civilized condition, but whose transitory condition is not seen by the narrator optimistically whatsoever. He does not know where they are heading to, but, no matter where, it does not seem to be very promising. The image of vegetating people who had to improvise

everything to survive is very meaningful since the transition of a vegetating person is not something that one covets; the prospects of those who vegetate are the prospects of the institutionalized Amazon: their future is likely to be much less cosy than the painful and miserable present they are being forced to acknowledge at the moment.

These people's condition is paradoxical and thus potentially capable of challenging the hegemonic logic: notwithstanding the fact that they are kept in a hidden and secret world due to how unpleasant and hazardous they might be for the reaffirmation of the prestige of hegemonic linearity, they are also a pivotal piece for such linearity effectively function. In the words of Galeano: "The strength of the imperialist system as a whole rests on the necessary inequality of its sectors, and this inequality assumes ever more dramatic dimensions" (1997, p. 3). Hence the fallacy of hegemonic chronology; the neighbourhood Nael observes is expanding, notwithstanding the clear difficulties that he mentions, as an evidence of the dramatic dimensions the system assumes. Such dimensions are everlasting; the colonial and neocolonial system has to promote a repetition of events in a supposedly smooth spatial and temporal cycle. In this sense the moment when Nael observes "the children who one day would be taken to the orphanage Domingas hated" (HATOUM, 2000, p. 73) can be read as a token of historical reverberation; Domingas fate, their fate, and probably most of their descendants' fate all confirm that Amazonian past, present, and future are intertwined moments and not categorically separated from one another.

Such as our memory lingers on, prohibiting the past to be lost, so does the suffering of the margin represented in *The Brothers* (HATOUM, 2000) by Nael and his mother; it is through their blemished insertion in the hegemonic narrative of development that the hidden side of its utopian portrayal is unveiled. There are many other Amerindians, caboclos, and immigrants who are still suffering the consequences of expansionism in regions where it has never been invited; the improvement expected for so long never gets to those who need it; they die without spotting any possibility of freedom, aware they will also be lost in some place in the past. For both the narrator and his mother their insertion in the civilized world has always meant one step forward and two steps back; for the Amazonian landscape on the whole, even though in different levels, this seems to be applicable. Perhaps Galeano was right when he said that "places privileged by nature have also been cursed by history" (1997, p. 256).



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## FINAL REMARKS: A CULTURALLY MEDIATED TRUTH

Halberstam believes that it is only after we destabilise the meaning of capitalism, as done by Nael, that “we can begin to see the multiplicity of noncapitalist forms that constitute, supplement, and abridge global capitalism; we can also begin to imagine, by beginning to see, the alternatives to capitalism that already exist and are presently under construction” (2005, p. 12). If Yaqub’s role has proven to be that of instituting, endorsing, and reinforcing global capitalism, if he appears in *The Brothers* as entitled to be one of the protagonists of progress, the queer perspectives elaborated by *The Brothers*’ marginalised characters (especially Nael) are successful in doing the opposite. This array of alternatives to capitalism presently under construction that postcolonial subjects provide is now available because, as suggested by the ideological conflict between the narrator and his mother’s final responses to their marginalisation, despite the unquestionable correlation between the colonial and the postcolonial Amazon, these two distinct periods, perspectives, and possibilities of transformation, albeit interdependent, cannot be understood as defining interchangeable historical moments. This is so for, if the former is thoroughly permeated by binary social, political, ecological, and racial conflicts, the latter is also marked by an opportunity for a relativisation of generally taken for granted discourses that had both created and nourished such dichotomies in the first place; that is, if the colonial is where the binary divide regarding past and future is put in the spotlight, the postcolonial is when this and similar binarisms are put into question.

Indeed this is exactly what is done by those whose deviating perspectives mark them not as enemies of hegemonic chronology but as evidence of its intrinsic impracticality. Such a disruption in the normative colonial logic is now possible “because the relations which characterised the colonial are no longer in the same place and relative position that we are able not simply to oppose them but to critique, to deconstruct and try to go beyond them” (HALL, 1996, p. 254); that is, the postcolonial has not only provided us with a reflection upon the colonial institution but has also given us the opportunity to subvert its supposed tenability, reasoning and, consequently, its credibility. While hegemony materialises as a symbolic protagonist of progress, the margin is the peripheral character of some sort of counter-progress emerging from the postcolonial: a rich ideological room that, in the novel, allows the ones whose lives deviate from the main theme to retell what has been told, inasmuch as the whole narrative becomes discombobulated by their version of events. What marginalised

discourses seem to evince is that to oppose is important, but to critique is essential. In what he calls this postcolonial moment, Hall explains that the transverse, transnational, transcultural movements, which were always inscribed in the history of colonisation, but carefully overwritten by more binary forms of narrativisation, “have, of course, emerged in new forms to disrupt the settled relations of domination and resistance inscribed in other ways of living” (HALL, 1996, p. 251).

As seen, pre-assigned meanings of domination, resistance, freedom, and autonomy are thus disrupted by the transverse movements upheld by the subjects who, inscribed in the history of colonisation, are deeply marginalised in the colonial and neocolonial processes permeating the redimensioning of marginalised regions and peoples. In the terms of normativity, thus, if his mother was ultimately “lost in some place in the past” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 263), which was “a time that was dying inside [Nael]” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 265), the narrator was likewise lost in some place in the present. Nevertheless, he takes advantage from this vacuum wherein he has been forced to describe what development destroys rather than what it constructs; he rewrites what had previously been overwritten by hegemonic narrativisation. The narrator’s experience gives shape to epistemological deviances from hegemonic discourses that mistakenly attest the supposed superiority of hegemonic culture and performs a new, transnational, and transcultural movement that escapes from this logic of capital accumulation. His ideological shift, the fact that he initially endorses developmentalism and later problematises it, is a token that such redimensioning regards perspectives that are indeed presently and gradually under construction.

Accordingly, notwithstanding how complicated it might be, such deconstruction of hegemonic supremacy and of its supposed social and economic organisational flawlessness is an inevitable step in the postcolonial moment since, as Halberstam has observed, “little more than technology and sheer economic exploitation seem to be left over for the purposes of explaining Western superiority [...]. It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of its Other” (2005, 35). As demonstrated by *The Brothers’* narrative, the temporal fortress leaves the Amazon in no time and place for no temporal possibilities are acknowledged by hegemony if not its own; Western superiority is therein granted not due to a higher quality of condescendence, but rather to the power to strike down and destroy; the West is a hunter, like Yaqub, that, unexpectedly, “pounces like a panther” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 257), preying on the game. Moreover, just like the hunter has to allure the prey through his/her disguises—

which make him/her look as part of the hunting scenario, so do the ones who, by becoming so attached to the epistemology of development, in the end cannot be disentangled from its inherent axioms.

The Amazonian landscape is meaningful right now: the underdeveloped world exist at the same time as the developed one does, and is not less close to the “future”, this “never-ending fallacy” (HATOUM, 2000, p. 263) that still manages to deceive us. If marginalised regions sometimes might look as if it is in the past of thoroughly urbanised landscapes, which are much more symptomatic of our contemporaneity, this is so because, as well observed by Wallace and Armbruster, “any human perception of nature is culturally mediated rather than an inherent truth” (2001, p. 213). Accordingly, the chronological order of our supposed development, from savage to civilised, is far from being an inherent truth. Amazonian natives are not what we were once; they do not represent our past and, fortunately for them, we do not represent their future.

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