

## Mediating Brazilian Culture: Richard Katz's Travel Writing about Brazil

By Jennifer E. Michaels\*

*The renowned German-language travel writer and journalist Richard Katz (1888-1968) was part of the diaspora of desperate refugees fleeing from Hitler. Katz arrived in Brazil via Lisbon in 1941 and remained until the mid-50s. In his four travel books about Brazil Katz helped his German-speaking readers, most of whom knew little about Brazil, understand its history, culture, people, animals, and plants. He was aware of the difficulties of depicting such a vast and varied country. Katz chose what he called an inductive method, namely observations of details that could shed light on the whole, and he used works by Brazilians to support his views. Because of his long years living in Brazil, he understood the country well. I will focus here on the following topics. Having escaped from Nazi racial persecution Katz admired Brazil as a melting pot where different races blended together. He was fascinated by how African religions evolved and adapted in Brazil and he attended several religious ceremonies in Rio and Salvador. As both an animal lover and an avid gardener he delighted in Brazil's flora and fauna, which he described vividly, and he also addressed such environmental problems as deforestation.*

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The renowned German-language travel writer and journalist Richard Katz (1888-1968) was part of the diaspora of desperate refugees fleeing from the Nazi regime. Katz arrived in Brazil via Lisbon in 1941 and remained there for over twelve years until homesickness led to his decision to return to Europe. He published four travel books about Brazil: *Begegnungen in Rio* (1945, Encounters in Rio); *Auf dem Amazonas* (1946, On the Amazon); *Seltsame Fahrten in Brasilien* (1947, Strange Journeys in Brazil); and *Mein Inselbuch: Erste Erlebnisse in Brasilien* (1950, My Island Book: First Experiences in Brazil); and he translated Arthur Ramos's book *As Culturas negras no Novo Mundo* (1946) into German as *Die Negerkulturen in der neuen Welt* (1948).<sup>1</sup> Katz immersed himself in many aspects of Brazilian culture: its people, its history, its artists, its progressive and humane treatment of lepers (he visited two leper colonies, one near Belém in the state of Pará and the other near Belo Horizonte in the state of Minas Gerais), its eradication of yellow fever in Rio, to mention but a few of his interests, but I will focus here on three topics that recur throughout his Brazilian texts. Having escaped from Nazi imposition of racial "purity" Katz admired Brazil as a melting pot where different races blended together, though he was not blind to discrimination against black and indigenous peoples. He was fascinated by the impact of African culture on Brazil and by how African religions evolved in Brazil and he attended several

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\* Professor, Department of German, Grinnell College, USA.

<sup>1</sup> I use the following editions: *Begegnungen in Rio* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Rentsch, 1945); *Auf dem Amazonas* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Rentsch, 1946); *Seltsame Fahrten in Brasilien* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Rentsch, 1947); *Mein Inselbuch: Erste Erlebnisse in Brasilien* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Rentsch, 1950). Future references to these works are taken from these editions and appear in the text.

religious ceremonies in Rio and Salvador. As both an animal lover and an avid gardener, he delighted in Brazil's flora and fauna (though not in all its insects), which he described vividly, while at the same time discussing environmental problems such as deforestation and the threat to different species.

Although he is not well known today Katz, who like other famous German-language writers such as Franz Kafka and Franz Werfel came from Prague, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was one of the most successful travel writers writing in German in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the interwar years, a time in which the end of hostilities led to a desire to travel to escape from the memories of the war, there was a lively public interest in travel narratives (Fussell 1980: 9-15). Because severe economic problems prevented most Germans and Austrians from traveling, travel books served as a way of traveling vicariously (Plonien 1995: 5), a situation that contributed to the popularity of Katz's over thirty travel narratives. In the last decades critical interest in travel narratives has grown, particularly in the context of post-colonial studies which has viewed travel writing as "an exemplary record of cross-cultural encounters between European and non-European peoples" (Clark 1999: 2). This interest has led to a renewed focus on travel writers whose once popular works had been forgotten.

With the rise of Hitler, Katz, who was Jewish, fled to Switzerland, but feeling unsafe there, decided to move to Brazil, a country he had visited previously on his earlier travels in South America. After two unsuccessful attempts when despite having a transit visa for Spain he was turned back by Spanish border guards Katz managed to reach Lisbon, from where he escaped to Brazil. In contrast to Franco's Spain, through which he traveled, entering Portugal was for him like entering paradise. While waiting for his ship to Brazil Katz began to learn Portuguese. After struggling to learn it, he eventually became fluent in the language, immersed himself in Brazilian culture, traveled widely in Brazil, and became a Brazilian citizen. He loved Brazil and its people and had many Brazilian friends. He observed that nowhere else in the world had he found so many open doors and hearts as in Brazil (Katz 1946: 214).

Throughout his books, Katz demonstrated that he was a keen social observer, aware of the nuances of social distinctions, and was relatively free of the cultural biases often evident in travel writing. In his depictions of Brazil, Katz avoided to a large extent the Euro-imperialism that marred much of travel writing in Europe and the United States, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His was not an imperial gaze when he looked at Brazil. Mary Louise Pratt points out that cross-cultural encounters or "contact zones," which she defines as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other," are often characterized by "highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" that stem from colonial ideology with its "accounts of conquest and domination" (Pratt 1992: 4, 7). Because of his love of Brazil and its culture Katz avoided such asymmetrical relations. He did not reify Brazilians by "constructing the alien as an object to be studied" (Shankar 2001: 53), but rather sought to see people as individuals. In fact, on

several occasions in his texts, he was critical of European behavior in Brazil as well as the European gaze at Brazil. Emigrants and refugees who came to Brazil and did not even try to adapt or learn the language were often targets of Katz's ire (Katz 1950: 210-11). He deplored the Eurocentric attitudes of writers about Brazil, such as those who blamed the inhabitants of the Amazon for causing their own suffering through their laziness, a view common to much of travel literature about the Amazon. Katz noted scathingly that these Europeans should have to work just one day in this hot unhealthy climate and they might change their minds about laziness (Katz 1946: 265). Katz contrasted Brazilians working hard in the burning sun with the European sitting in the shade eating fruit ice while watching them work (Katz 1946: 265-67). Katz also deplored European dismissal of black religions in Brazil as primitive and superstitious. He observed that many religions incorporated dance and music into their ceremonies, and that the mixing of magic and religion and the need for miracles were common to many religions. The point of view, he emphasized, was decisive here. For example, believers considered healings in Lourdes to be miracles, yet dismissed similar healings in famous Candomblé temples as magic (Katz 1947: 240-41).

Katz viewed his role as a mediator between Brazilian culture and German-speaking countries. He tried hard to present as accurate a depiction of Brazil as possible, assessing both its positive and negative developments, and he wrote with clarity, wit and with a for German-speaking writers untypical humor to help his German-speaking readers, most of whom knew little about Brazil, understand its history, culture, people, animals, and plants. He was sensitive to the difficulties of depicting such a vast and varied country. Many travel books, he believed, relied on first impressions that were often superficial or wrong (Katz 1950: 45) and had the disadvantage of seeing the country through the eyes of a stranger: even though the travel writer had left home, he had not left his skin (Katz 1945: 79). To try to avoid such pitfalls Katz chose what he called an inductive method, a modest method through which he tried to capture details accurately in one small piece of Brazil, for example the island Paquetá in Guanabara Bay, his first home in Brazil, that could shed light on the whole (Katz 1950: 226). He stressed that he would only attempt to depict what he actually saw: his work would thus be impressionistic with no pretensions to being complete (Katz 1950: 201). But even this method had its pitfalls. As he watched the sun rise over Guanabara Bay he reflected that each sunrise was different, and even his description of this one sunrise with all its vivid colors was inadequate since it only conjured up the visual and failed to reach the other senses, such as hearing the waves lapping gently on the beach or smelling the salt water (Katz 1950: 26-27). Because of his long years living in Brazil, he understood the country well, but he frequently drew on Brazilian sources to check his own impressions. In his texts he also translated passages from Brazilian sources as a way of coming close to viewing Brazil through Brazilian eyes and incorporating the point of view of the "Other". Even this method was not perfect, he noted, since some subjectivity inevitably crept into the

translator's version and there was also the difficulty of learning the language fluently enough to be able to translate its nuances exactly (Katz 1945: 79-81).

Having fled from Nazi racial ideology, Katz praised Brazil's melting pot of different peoples (Katz 1950: 49). He was impressed that despite many different skin colors Brazilians treated their fellow citizens as friends (Katz 1950: 14). Their friendliness extended to animals and to all those, such as refugees, who were vulnerable (Katz 1950: 57). He observed approvingly that the imperative form in Brazil was rarely used, but was replaced by the more polite subjunctive (Katz 1946: 22), a reflection, in his opinion, of Brazilians' innate politeness and respect for others. In Rio peoples from all over the world met, overlapped one another, and blended with each other. People lived and loved together. Katz saw this mixing pot as nature's experiment: here nature mixed together out of all its bottles, he observed (Katz 1950: 222).

Katz's interest in black contributions to Brazilian culture led him to an interest in black religions in Brazil. In this he was inspired and informed by his friend Arthur Ramos, at that time the greatest living authority on black cultures in Brazil. He was drawn to Ramos's book, *As Culturas negras no Novo Mundo* (1946), which investigated black cultures in Africa and the following diaspora caused by slavery, by its author's insistence on tolerance and equality and his refusal to view races hierarchically.<sup>2</sup> Katz noted that few works had enriched him as much as this one (Ramos 1948: 13). Ramos refuted the notion that blacks were inferior by pointing out that black cultures in Africa were equal to some European cultures and surpassed others (Ramos 1948: 14), and his goal was to promote understanding and respect for all peoples on earth. In an interview, Ramos declared that in the field of anthropology Brazil was a living lesson that countered pseudo-scientific Nordic racial theories. In a country made up of a mixture of Portuguese, blacks, and indigenous peoples, to talk about racial inferiority, he stated, was not only an attack on science, but also a crime against our own national existence (Ramos 1948: 15).

From Ramos Katz learned about African customs and religions. Rio, Katz observed, was not only Europe or America but also Africa, and he noticed a strong African influence on music and dance: some of the Sambas, for example, resembled the magical dances performed in Umbanda ceremonies (Katz 1945: 15-16, 20).<sup>3</sup> He also pointed out that the African impact on Brazil blended traditions from the many different African tribes torn from their homes and brought to Brazil as slaves. He visited a temple of the Umbanda religion and discussed how in Rio in particular this religion from Africa mixed together belief and superstition, medicine and magic, Catholicism and fetishism, animism and spiritualism. This was not a value judgment, he emphasized, merely an observation (Katz 1945: 21). He noted that this religion might seem strange to Europeans, but it was also strange that Christian pilgrims climbed

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<sup>2</sup> See Katz's translation and introduction: A. Ramos, 1948, *Die Negerkulturen in der neuen Welt* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Rentsch). Future references are taken from this translation and appear in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Although Katz used "Umbanda" to refer to this religion, he also frequently used the now pejorative "Macumba."

the many steps to a pilgrimage church on their knees (Katz 1945: 29). On Ramos's advice, Katz flew to Salvador to investigate Candomblé. Before setting off, he read not only Ramos's work but also a classical work on Brazilian blacks by Nina Rodrigues. Katz presented an overview of Candomblé's theology and practices and its many gods. Although religious practices varied from temple to temple, they had in common that their rituals involved the possession of participants by Orishas (deities), healing, dancing and drumming. Since the religion had room for other gods, Catholic saints and indigenous gods were often incorporated. The cosmos of Brazilian blacks, Katz remarked, teemed with gods as the Brazilian jungle teemed with insects (Katz 1947: 197-200). On his first visit to a temple in Salvador, he did not try to give an organized narrative of the ceremony, but rather reproduced the fragmentary notes he made while he was there. This stylistic device gives immediacy to his experience and helps the reader experience the ceremony. Katz realized intuitively that presenting the ceremony analytically would force the strangeness of a different world into the thought structures of the West and thus destroy the ceremony's magical components. Katz thus avoided fitting the "Other" into western criteria and structures (Dewulf 2007: 36-37). Katz conveyed the overwhelming power of the drums, the dancing, and the cries of those falling into a trance, an integral part of the ceremony since is represented a condition of grace in which a god took possession of the person (Katz 1947: 223). The variety of different religious traditions in Candomblé were reflected on the altar he saw, where among other artifacts there were figures of Catholic saints, crucifixes, small cans of cooked rice, plates of palm oil, and bracelets of cowry shells.

Katz was not, however, blind to discrimination. He believed that prejudice against blacks, like many other prejudices, stemmed from mistakenly equating being different with being worse (Katz 1945: 22). Citing Arthur Ramos, he pointed out that in Africa many sophisticated cultures once existed (Katz 1945: 21). He stressed that one must guard oneself from racial pride as from the plague (Katz 1950: 83). In several works he addressed the history of slavery in Brazil. Millions of blacks from nearly every African tribe were transported under harsh conditions to Brazil, mostly to Salvador, Brazil's largest slave market. In Brazil, slavery was abolished in 1888 by Dom Pedro II, later than in other countries. Despite discrimination, Katz believed that blacks in Brazil, who when he was there held, for example, university positions and served as army officers, had more opportunities than in the United States (Katz 1945: 103). With their blood and their tears, Katz stressed, black people made the flourishing of Brazil possible (Katz 1947: 111).

Although he devoted less space to them, Katz also talked about Brazil's indigenous peoples, quoting often from Brazilian sources. He noted that indigenous peoples formed only a small part of the population and that their greatest impact on Brazilian culture had to do with language, in particular names of places, plants, and animals. The various sources Katz quoted present a rather negative picture of the native peoples: in the earliest accounts they were viewed as cannibals and savages; in later ones as lazy, living in a

fossilized culture (Katz 1945: 110-119). Some authors went to the other extreme and romanticized them as "noble savages" living close to nature, much as the German author Karl May romanticized the Apache. Katz, however, presented a more realistic and sympathetic view. We Europeans, he wrote, destroyed them with slavery, with alcohol, and above all with diseases such as smallpox and tuberculosis against which they had no resistance. When the Spanish conquistadors first came they were amazed at the large numbers of indigenous peoples living on the Amazon riverbanks. Katz quoted from a report by Father Antonio Vieira that when the Portuguese conquered a region south of the Amazon delta in 1615 it was thickly populated. When he returned in 1652 the area was empty of people due to disease or being killed (Katz 1946: 133-34). Those who survived withdrew into the farthest reaches of forest. Katz briefly described indigenous religions, noting the belief in the god Tupã as creator of the world and his oldest son, the sun. Katz viewed this creation myth with its accompanying rich cosmology as the most highly developed religion among South American indigenous peoples (Katz 1946: 135-37).

As an avid animal lover and gardener, Katz left vivid depictions of the riot of colors of Brazilian flowers such as hibiscus, bougainvillea, orchids, and gardenias in the various gardens. He described some of its fauna especially parrots. Katz owned three parrots of which he was very fond despite the travails they caused him. He vividly described trees such as coconut palms, mango trees, Brazilwood trees, and breadfruit trees and was especially impressed by the royal palms in Rio's Botanical Garden, in his view the most beautiful botanical garden in the world (Katz 1950: 101).

Katz also wrote about the Amazon, a topic that appeared frequently in previous travel writing. In many such travel accounts, it was treated as a mythical place of "exoticist fantasies," as "a happy hunting ground – for the 'tropical traveler': the adventurer-hero, or, perhaps better, the would-be hero of the gung ho type." Such accounts were filled with clichés and stereotypes, and the writer's experience was often transformed into "the stuff of high melodrama" (Holland and Huggan 1998: 76-81). Early travel narratives between 1500 and 1700, particularly those by Spanish and Portuguese travelers, "set a framework for the European imagination that most subsequent writers employed." They described the vast Amazonian landscapes, "the elusive presence of native peoples," and "the lure of marvellous discovery," and by so doing "inspired an aesthetic of extremes." In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, scientists, often employed by the colonial government or by others with economic interests in the region, catalogued plants and animals and people and their cultural practices (Whitehead 2002: 127-128). To counter such scientific accounts, a new myth of a "mythically pristine Amazonia" was created that was blind to the fact that this supposedly undisturbed nature was "the consequence of the violent and catastrophic actions of colonial culture on the ecology of the Amazon itself and on the native peoples who once lived there" (Whitehead 2002: 131).

By using his modest inductive method and concentrating on what he saw himself Katz avoided many of the above pitfalls and devoted most of the text to his own observations on his return journey from the Rio Negro to the mouth of the Amazon. His focus was on the river itself and the forest and settlements on its banks, not on the Brazilian state of Amazonas. He included passages from earlier travelers that he translated and he consulted Brazilian sources to check his impressions because, as he observed, the Brazilians knew their river better than a foreigner (Katz 1946: 288). He was aware of the difficulty of describing the Amazon region because it was so large and grew from reality into the fantastic, from observation into amazement. As he pointed out, the Amazon gave rise to a literature of hyperbole that used large words as grandiloquent, florid, and ornate as the vegetation, books of pompous pathos that seemed to be written with a liana rather than a pen (Katz 1946: 48).

Katz described the abundance of life: the plants, the parrots, the herons, and the flamingoes and he was amazed that gulls followed the ship as if they were on the open sea rather than one thousand miles inland. He depicted the lush vegetation, the gigantic trees with their gigantic crowns, and reflected that the Amazon greenhouse climate made trees out of plants that would be shrubs in Rio. Brazil, he pointed out, had thousands of native tree species, whereas Germany had at most thirty-six varieties (Katz 1946: 73). Most of the colors he saw came from the leaves, since the orchids and flowering crowns were too high to see (Katz 1946: 74). At first sight the forest seemed monotonous, but if one looked closely trees alternated with mangrove swamps and there were differences in colors and sizes. Although he heard many birds and animals he only saw a few because of the dense vegetation. This was not the situation with insects: as he wryly noted one did not have to leave one's bed to describe the insects (Katz 1946: 215). He discussed the many varieties of ants, the leaf-cutter ant being the worst since it stripped plants of all its leaves (Katz 1946: 203). Katz also talked about views of the piranha in travel accounts as a bloodthirsty fish to be feared, yet those living by the Amazon were not afraid of it, a reflection in his view of the tendency in Amazonia to amalgamate truth and fantasy (Katz 1946: 105). He devoted a section to turtles once plentiful, but now threatened by extinction because of over-harvesting, like the millions of seals that used to inhabit Brazil's seacoast (Katz 1946: 77).

His journey to the Amazon also made him reflect on its economy and its impact on people. At the time he was there, the area was thinly populated with indigenous tribes and with lumbermen and rubber tappers. He described in particular the harsh conditions facing a typical tapper, many of whom were fleeing drought in the North East. It was a lonely life. In this hot unhealthy climate people became ill with malaria or with liver or other diseases. On a typical day, the tapper left his hut at three in the morning to make cuts in the widely dispersed trees. This first round took about six hours. The tapper then returned later to collect the sap and at night smoked it into a football size ball. This happened day after day after day. Many were homesick for the North East, but the tapper was always in debt to his boss and could not leave. Despite Brazil's progressive labor laws, such kinds of serfdom still existed since laws

were hard to enforce in such a vast region. Because of the climate and the hard work, these men looked like old men when they were only forty. In contrast to the life of the tapper, however, many others became rich during rubber booms, as demonstrated by the elaborate theater in Manaus, whose marble and paintings had to be imported up the river. Katz summarized the many contrasts when he wrote: certainly there are blue butterflies, but also malarial mosquitoes; certainly plants thrive, but so do grasshoppers and leaf-cutter ants, certainly some people get rich, but others perish (Katz 1946: 199).

Earlier than most writers, Katz addressed environmental problems. He pointed out the near extinction of the turtle and the seal and deforestation in the Amazon and in the Atlantic rainforest, a concern that is particularly pressing today. On his first visit to Rio in the interwar period trees still covered the hillsides, but now more and more had been cut down. When he traveled by train to São Paulo he noticed that, once past the coastal range, the country looked like an African steppe with hardly a tree. Previously, this was rain forest, trees with enormous trunks between which humming-birds flew, and tapirs, monkeys, and parrots abounded. Then the railway opened up the land and trees were cut down. Despite attempts to prevent such desecration, the devastation of the forest continued and led to a loss of animals because their habitat was gone (Katz 1947: 21-22).

An unexpected positive outcome of what was otherwise for many refugees from Hitler a painful and sad exile was that some exiles such as Katz wrote about their host countries and thus helped people in Europe understand and appreciate cultures of which they were largely ignorant. In Katz's case, his long stay in Brazil gave his readers insights into a wide variety of Brazilian culture, not only into expected topics such as the exuberance of carnival, but also into slavery, black religions, peoples, history and many other topics, presented by someone who knew and loved the country. Katz's legacy in the case of Brazil is that he functioned as an effective mediator between Brazilian culture and German-speaking cultures.

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