



NEW FICTION, POETRY, AND MEMOIR

FRANK STEWART

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MĀNOA

BECOMING BRAZIL

MĀNOA means, in the Hawaiian language, “vast and deep.” It is the name of the valley where the University of Hawai‘i is situated.

Front cover: *O sol no céu da nossa casa*. Photograph by Marcio Rodrigues. **Back cover:** *Ashaninka Tribe*. Acre, Brazil, 2016. Photograph by Sebastião Salgado.

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Becoming Brazil _____

SAMPLE



BECOMING BRAZIL

New Fiction, Poetry, and Memoir

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Sebastião Salgado
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Editor's Note

Brazil is a vast and complex nation with a history, geography, and people not easily summarized. It embraces the great Amazon rainforest—covering nearly fifty percent of the country's land area—as well as the famous coastal city of Rio de Janeiro. The northeast comprises immense, dry hinterlands (the *sertão*); in the central region of the Pantanal is the world's largest wetlands; and in the south are rolling pastures and farmlands. Over two hundred million people live in Brazil, including people of indigenous, European, African, and Asian descent, and newly arrived travelers from other Latin American countries and throughout the world. It shouldn't surprise us that many Brazilians question whether their country and countrymen share a common identity, or even a single reality.

Literature and art give us a way of experiencing the many realities of Brazil. With this in mind, the editors of *Becoming Brazil* have brought together works of prose and poetry by about two dozen authors, juxtaposing stories of the country's diverse people in places urban, rural, and remote. Depicted in this collection are the machinations of the military in Brasília during the recent dictatorship; the cultural practices of the caiçara fishermen of Paraty; and the violence that too frequently befalls residents of Brazil's impoverished favelas. Each is the reality of some aspect of the country, and through these stories—written in innovative styles and multiple genres—our comprehension of an ever-changing, ever-becoming Brazil is enriched.

As early as BCE 10,000, indigenous peoples lived on the eastern half of the South American continent. Vast distances, nomadism, and geographic obstacles such as mountains, rivers, and jungles prevented these tribes from assembling into large, unified civilizations, as indigenous peoples did in the Andes and in Mesoamerica. Following the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500, many of Brazil's indigenous peoples were pressed into felling brazilwood trees, for which the country was named. Later on, sugar became a lucrative commodity, but the indigenous slaves responsible for cultivating it refused to labor under their colonial overseers. Consequently, millions of West African slaves were brought onto the plantations. When the profitability of sugar declined, slaves were forced to mine for gold and diamonds in what is today the interior state of



Sebastião Salgado
Ashaninka Tribe. Acre,
Brazil, 2016

Minas Gerais (“general mines”). Mining attracted a great influx of people from many places, and created a social, cultural, and linguistic melting pot. In the succeeding decades, more immigrants arrived from Portugal, Italy, Germany, the Middle East, and Japan, adding to the country’s complex ethnic mixture.

In 1808, the Portuguese crown, under threat of Napoleonic invasion, fled across the Atlantic and reestablished itself in Rio de Janeiro. Here, the Portuguese royal family would remain for the next thirteen years, and their presence raised the former colony to higher and higher levels of prominence. When the court was restored to Lisbon in 1821, prince regent Dom Pedro I stayed behind to rule Brazil. A year later, he proclaimed independent nationhood for the country and established the Brazilian Empire. In a region with so many geographically and culturally distinct territories, war and rebellion were inevitable; the empire nearly fractured many times but was kept intact under the leadership of the monarchy. The most notable figure of this era was the erudite emperor Dom Pedro II, whose nearly sixty-year reign coincided with a number of significant developments, including the Paraguayan War and the abolition of slavery.

Disaffected military officers deposed Dom Pedro II in 1889 and founded the Brazilian Republic. Their ruthless power grabs and authoritarian rule would serve as a model for Brazilian governments well into the twentieth century, such as those of Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s and the dictatorial military junta that held power from 1964 to 1985. Each regime rationalized its authority by citing evidence of national progress: modernized economies founded on industrialization, the emergence of an urban middle class, and Brazil’s increasing prestige in international affairs. It was not until 1985 that a democratically elected government came into being.

The trauma of political strife concerns several writers in *Becoming Brazil*. Their works are meant to challenge conventional narratives about the past and examine the relationship between individual memory and the nation’s officially sanctioned history.

In his fictionalized history “The Lonely Sailor,” José Luiz Passos retells the life of Silvino de Macedo, a nineteenth-century naval insurgent whose role in an unsuccessful revolt against the Republic resulted in his execution. Passos uses nonlinear, shifting perspectives and hearsay to upset the historical “facts” associated with Macedo’s story.

Why is it so important to describe the appearance, nature, and origins of our rebels? Still a better question might be the following: why would it *not* be relevant to understand how the history and the physical form of our victims change according to who observes them?

As the events leading up to Macedo’s death unfold, Passos reminds us that what we know of Macedo’s life—and by extension what we know of history—has been “crafted by chroniclers.” The truth, Passos suggests, is unstable, suspended “in a varied mesh of versions.”

More recent history is at the center of Marcelo Rubens Paiva's memoir, *I'm Still Here*, an excerpt of which is printed here. One afternoon in 1971, the Brazilian military seized Paiva's father—a well-known politician and opponent of the dictatorship—from the family home in Rio. The father was never seen again, nor was his body ever recovered. What happened and how he died have remained a mystery, even as new information has gradually come to light.

Memory is alive. A detail of something experienced can be remembered years later, take on a relevance that it didn't have before, and denote something that was previously more representative. We think today with the help of a small portion of our past.

With time, my father's arrest (like my mother's and my sister's) acquired another meaning, other forms of proof, witnesses, rereadings.

For Paiva and others like him—Brazilians who suffered tragically at the hands of the dictatorship—history remains unfinished, with many details still subject to revision.

Outsiders and those on the margins of society also appear in *Becoming Brazil*. Eliane Brum's "Burial of the Poor" narrates the true story of Antonio Antunes, a poverty-stricken man from Rio Grande do Sul whose wife suffers a devastating miscarriage. Brum describes the family's life before and after the event, showing how poverty is primarily to blame for their misfortune, as it is for so many others who are without hope.

In his essay "Dead Time," Henrique Yuichi Komatsu writes of the alienation felt by others who have been excluded from Brazil's mainstream society. An employee of the judicial system in a remote part of Mato Grosso do Sul, Komatsu describes how the region's history of lawlessness, land disputes, and violence against indigenous communities has never been acknowledged by the authorities, leaving despondent residents with unfulfilled hopes for justice. Their alienation, he writes, is like his own. A Brazilian of Japanese descent, he has always lived between two disparate cultures, without a proper place in either. In processing the residents' legal claims, he concludes that—despite its identity as "a country that is constantly being rediscovered, obsessively opening up new internal frontiers"—Brazil marginalizes large portions of its immigrant and indigenous populations.

Weary from the heat of the plains, asking myself questions deprived of the emotions that ought to accompany them, I realized one day that ever since I was a child, whether Brazilian or Japanese, I had been learning how to live among spirits, how to handle the nonexistent.

Alongside the literary works in *Becoming Brazil* are black-and-white images by acclaimed Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. In the selection printed here, Salgado expresses his solidarity with members of indigenous tribes and the workers in gold mines in the far northern states of Acre and Pará. The

photographs offer us an additional vision of Brazil's geographically and culturally remote places.

In September 2018, several months after we began production on *Becoming Brazil*, a fire destroyed the Brazilian National Museum. Countless artifacts of immeasurable value were destroyed, including forty thousand items associated with more than a hundred ethnic groups—the world's largest archive of indigenous Brazilian culture and history. As a result, this volume took on added significance to us and became a project in which to represent—through the voices of writers—the resilience of the country's diverse people, its long history, and what Brazil is still becoming.

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