

Introduction to Politics and Identity in Lusophone Literature and Film

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Patrícia I. Vieira,

"Introduction to *Politics and Identity in Lusophone Literature and Film*"

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.3 (2009)
Thematic Issue, *Politics and Identity in Lusophone Literature and Film*
Ed. Patrícia I. Vieira**

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Patrícia I. VIEIRA

Introduction to *Politics and Identity in Lusophone Literature and Film*

The articles brought together in the thematic collection *Politics and Identity in Lusophone Literature and Film* in 11.3 (2009) of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* reflect upon issues of identity -- both in terms of a national or regional community and of transnational groups defined by gender or race -- in the work of Portuguese and Brazilian writers and filmmakers from the late nineteenth to the second half of the twentieth century. Notwithstanding the disparities in their discussions of the topic, all articles question the existence of monolithic, fixed identities. They stress the fluidity of the concept and underline its contingencies as a construct that is defined by a community in a specific time and space, often in response to particular social and political circumstances. The articles also highlight the different stylistic strategies employed by writers or filmmakers in their various approaches to the subject. In order to contextualize the more specialized analyses that follow, I describe briefly and schematically the setting of discourses on identity in the recent history of Portugal and Brazil.

Debates about national identity have shaped the Portuguese and Brazilian intellectual arena in the last two centuries. In Portugal, the idea of nationhood has been associated with the colonial project from the fifteenth century onwards. The decline of the country's overseas empire that culminated in the independence of Brazil in 1822 led the Portuguese ruling class to focus its colonizing efforts on Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, Portugal's presence in the southern part of the African continent and, more specifically, the country's project of uniting the territories of what is now Angola and Mozambique into a single region, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific under Portuguese sovereignty clashed with British economic interests and prompted Great Britain to deliver an ultimatum to the Lisbon government in 1890, thus forcing Portuguese military forces to retreat from the region. Portugal's compliance with British demands was perceived by Portuguese intellectuals as a national humiliation and has arguably been responsible for the fall of the Portuguese monarchy and the beginning of the First Republic in 1910. The Portuguese colonies in Africa were later a cornerstone of the Estado Novo (New State), a totalitarian regime led by António de Oliveira Salazar, who ruled over Portugal for nearly forty years. The protracted colonial war fought by the Portuguese against the various independence movements in these colonies from 1961 onwards drained the country's economy and was one of the factors contributing to the 1974 revolution that introduced democracy in the country.

After 1974, in the mournful aftermath of the loss of the empire and still working through the traumas of the colonial war, Portugal has had to re-define its identity as a post-colonial nation on the economic and political periphery of Europe. In fact, scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos have argued that Portugal has always occupied a semi-peripheral position, remaining, on the one hand, a predominantly rural society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the context of a highly industrialized Europe and, on the other hand, standing, as many of its European counterparts, at the head of a colonial empire. The New State propaganda film *A Revolução de Maio* (The May Revolution) I analyze in my article emphasizes the virtues of an agrarian lifestyle and of a hierarchical, patriarchal, and morally conservative social setting. Conversely, authors Eça de Queirós, José Cardoso Pires, and José Saramago, whose work is discussed in other articles in this issue, have grappled with the validity of rural life, industrialization, and European integration as competing national projects in various moments of Portuguese history and have contrasted these with a utopian societal arrangement with socialist contours.

If the overseas colonies, particularly Brazil, have played a key role in the shaping of Portuguese national identity, Portugal has also been implicated in the definition of Brazilian nationhood. After the independence of Brazil in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the intellectuals of the ex-colony were faced with the task of forging an idea of "Brazilianness" that would distance the newly created country from its former colonizer. As in other Latin American nations, Brazilian literary and artistic Romanticism strove to highlight the differences between the European and the South American natural, cultural, and even ethnic landscape, emphasizing the contribution of the Indigenous population of the region to the cultural fabric of the country, while remaining highly indebted to European artistic

models and values. As Doris Sommer points out, romanticist writers depicted a watered-down version of the Indigenous subject, who was praised only insofar as she/he renounced her/his cultural heritage and adopted European customs and religion.

Brazilian Modernism, an artistic movement whose beginning in 1922 coincided with the 100th anniversary of the country's independence, is usually considered to mark the emancipation of Brazilian culture from European models. It generated a notion of Brazilian national identity marked by racial hybridity and cultural heterogeneity. A conservative version of this plurality was to be the foundation for the idea of national identity during the regime of Getúlio Vargas, between the 1930s and the mid-1950s. The emphasis during the Vargas populist government was on a unified, glorified view of the nation where different social groups coexisted in harmony. Conflicts, most notably tensions caused by social inequalities or racial discrimination, were brushed aside as attempts to destabilize the state. This period also saw the development of the concept of "racial democracy" first put forth by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. According to Freyre, the nature of Portuguese colonialism led to a much higher degree of miscegenation than other forms of colonial rule. This, in turn, resulted in a large number of mixed-heritage individuals who did not fall into pre-defined racial categories, which, so the myth of racial democracy goes, created the conditions for social mobility and for the emergence of a society that is virtually free of racial tensions. The idea of racial democracy was often used to camouflage actual forms of racial exclusion prevalent in Brazilian society.

The 1950s and 1960s in Brazil saw the emergence of numerous artists and intellectuals who questioned the notion of a cohesive and frictionless society. One of the articles in this collection discusses the work of João Guimarães Rosa, who depicted the regional specificities of the Brazilian backlands in his texts, while another article analyzes a novel by Clarice Lispector, a writer who often stressed the pervasiveness of gender and social inequalities in the country. While the years of military dictatorship (1964-1985) meant a return to an official view of national identity that emphasized unity and the absence of social tensions as the government attempted to stifle any form of dissent, the post-dictatorship period witnessed the rise of a myriad of voices that denied the existence of an unproblematic and all-encompassing Brazilian culture and claimed specific regional, racial, sexual and political identities.

Fernando Arenas argues that in the decades following the fall of the dictatorship in Brazil, as in Portugal, there was a progressive exhaustion of grand narratives of liberation -- Marxism or sexual liberation, for instance -- that had fuelled counter-culture movements in the two countries. However, this does not mean that there was a passive acceptance of a homogenizing and leveling view of society. Rather, Arenas identifies a proliferation of micro-narratives of identity that are often post-national in scope and that stress the ethical implications of processes of community formation and identity politics. One of the articles included in this issue focuses on how author Márcio de Souza undermines traditional conceptions of "Brazilianness" in his texts by describing the social reality of the Amazon region. Two other essays discuss the shift identified by Arenas, by tracing the evolution in the understanding of race and gender in Brazilian film and literature, respectively.

The papers selected for this thematic issue of *CLCWeb; Comparative Literature and Culture* comment on the subject of identity by employing a variety of critical approaches and disciplinary methods. While some rely on a close analysis of one specific literary piece or of the oeuvre of a single author, others opt for a comparison of various texts or films that address the same theme. A few of the articles contextualize their subject within wider intellectual debates in Brazil and Portugal, whereas others choose to concentrate on a detailed interpretation of certain aspects of cinematic and literary works. The diversity of the essays mirrors the heterogeneity of literary, filmic, artistic and political approaches to the elusive topic of identity in Portugal and Brazil.

The first two articles in this collection concentrate on different conceptions of Portugal's identity as a nation on the outskirts of European economic and political development. Pedro Serra analyzes in his article "Aesthetics and Ideology in Queirós's *A Cidade e as Serras*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/2>> the image of Portugal in texts from the last stage of the literary career of nineteenth-century Portuguese author Eça de Queirós, more specifically in his novella *A Cidade e as Serras* (The City and the Mountains). Serra argues that the description of Portugal as a predominantly rural nation is pitched against the backdrop of an industrialized Europe suffer-

ing from the excess of technology it generates. Eça contrasts the European hypercivilization driven by capitalism to the traditionalism of Portuguese society. According to Serra, this juxtaposition allows the author to criticize both social models. And Patrícia I. Vieira, in her article "Truth as Ideology in *A Revolução de Maio*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/3>>, also touches upon the perception of Portugal as a primarily rural country, whose hierarchical society is determined by religious and patriarchal values, a view disseminated by the authoritarian government of the New State. In order to ensure that the people adhered to this version of what the country should be, the authorities made use of various forms of propaganda, including propagandistic films. I discuss competing views on the role of propaganda, as well as on the status of truth and of artistic creation, advanced by the political and artistic leadership of the New State and end with an analysis of the 1937 propaganda film *A Revolução de Maio* (The May Revolution), which praises the regime and warns the public against the perils of communism.

The next two articles focus on Brazilian authors who highlight regional specificities within the larger context of the Brazilian nation. In his article "The Geopolitics of Amazônia in Souza's Fiction" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/4>> Thomas O. Beebee discusses the relevance of national territorial control as a means to ensure the unity of citizens within a particular territorial space, to the formation of Brazilian national identity. Beebee then contrasts this emphasis on national territorial control with Márcio Souza's representation of the Amazon region in his writings, where the area is portrayed as a haven for capitalism, attracting individuals from many nationalities in search of a fast and easy route to wealth. According to Beebee, Souza depicts the Amazon as a socio-cultural space that is almost independent from the rest of Brazil and that serves as a material basis for the projection of both Brazilian and foreign economic and political utopian projects.

Paulo da-Luz-Moreira discusses in his article "Guimarães Rosa's 'São Marcos' and Race and Class" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/5>> another form of Brazilian regional identity, namely that of the Brazilian backlands, as they are described in the work of writer João Guimarães Rosa. Da-Luz-Moreira's analysis of the short-story "São Marcos" underlines the contrast between the worldview of the poorer people from the backlands, imbued with magical belief, and the values of those of a higher social standing, many of whom were educated in large cities and had therefore lost touch with the socio-cultural reality of the region. Da-Luz-Moreira argues that Guimarães Rosa's short story narrates a process of learning through which the protagonist, who stands for a modern, enlightened version of Brazil, comes to respect conjure as an aspect of backland culture that he had hitherto depreciated.

In the next article of the collection the focus is on an example of literary works that depict the degrading living conditions of the rural population in Portugal under the Salazar government. David Frier points in his study "Rhetoric and Context in Saramago's *Levantado do Chão*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/6>> to a departure from orthodox Neo-Realist writings in the work of Nobel in Literature 1998 José Saramago. According to Frier, Saramago moves beyond the tenets of Neo-Realism in that, in his novels, he utilizes literary and other themes that originate not only in popular culture but also in artistic productions that have been created for the upper classes. By putting these references at the service of a politically committed leftist literature, Saramago reinterprets their meaning and concomitantly inscribes the political struggle of the underprivileged into a larger frame of reference that encompasses the entirety of Portuguese cultural and intellectual traditions.

The last two articles of the collection address the topic of racial and gender identity at different moments of Brazilian history during the second half of the twentieth century. In her article "Variations on the Brazilian Orpheus Theme" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/7>> Marília Scaff Rocha Ribeiro discusses the way in which the *topos* of the Greek myth of Orpheus has been taken up in the depiction of Afro-Brazilian culture in cinema. Ribeiro concentrates on two films that deal with this topic -- *Black Orpheus* (1959) by French director Marcel Camus and *Orfeu* (1998) by Cacá Diegues -- and highlights their different approaches to the theme, which denote a shift in discourses on race and ethnicity both in Brazil and abroad from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century. And Paula Jordão, in her article "From Diaspora to Nomadic Identity in the Work of Lispector and Felinto" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/8>>, compares the portrayal of female identity and sub-

jectivity in the work of Brazilian writers Clarice Lispector and Marilene Felinto. Jordão's exegesis of two narratives by these writers shows how, despite their disparities, both undermine stereotypes about gender and strive to delineate a nomadic female identity that, in eluding established categories, is open to change.

The articles of the thematic issue are followed by a "Bibliography of Works on Lusophone Culture and Identity" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss3/9>> compiled by Patrícia I. Vieira, to provide an overview of cultural studies including items on music, film, national identity, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity in Brazil, Portugal, and Lusophone Africa. Last but not least, I would like to conclude by thanking Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, editor of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, for his support of the publication of the present articles on politics and identity in Brazilian and Portuguese comparative cultural studies.

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