

## World literature and national literatures in Portuguese

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In order to assess how relevant the concept of world literature may be when we look upon national literatures in Portuguese, we must first look upon specificities of their historical and cultural context (this article expands upon arguments in Buescu and Valente 2023). The identification of Portuguese nationhood with empire is central to its literature since the Renaissance, chiefly through the central place that Luís Vaz de Camões's epic *Os Lusíadas* (1572; Eng. trans. *The Lusiads*, 1655) has occupied in it. Through maritime expansion and colonization, this has become a central problem for the affirmation of the national literatures of the new nation-states that emerged since the 19th century: the language in which texts were written was literarily linked with the imperial project underlying their development. Eduardo Lourenço (2003), the preeminent 20th-century theorist of Portuguese national identity, repeatedly called attention to this, emphasizing how loss of empire is the predominant leitmotiv from Camões onwards.

More recently, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's seminal essay "Between Prospero and Caliban" (2002) is very helpful in understanding cultural relations in the Portuguese speaking space. The thrust of the argument deals with the peculiarity of Portugal's place in that it is not only a former colonial center, but also a semi-peripheral country in the European and world contexts, itself subjected to indirect (and sometimes direct) forms of domination by imperial powers such as the United Kingdom or France. The independence of Brazil in 1822 and the colonizing power's economic reliance on remittances from immigrants to its former colony are an example of asymmetric power relations between two Portuguese-speaking spaces where postcolonial relations do not directly follow the same patterns that have been observed in other contexts.

It may be productive to include dimensions that are attentive to other, non-elite driven forms of cosmopolitanism, such as Silviano Santiago's ([2008] 2017) concept of the "cosmopolitanism of the poor", referring to the circulation of texts and cultural practices between Black Brazilians and Black Africans in attempts to recover a common heritage destroyed by centuries of slavery. In the Brazilian context, this stands in contrast to the traditional cosmopolitanism of white elites, who in the 19th century,

as Roberto Schwarz ([1990] 2001) has stated, sought to implant in their native country, in the periphery of capitalism, liberal ideas developed in very different political economic and cultural contexts – again France and the UK. Santiago’s and Schwarz’s reading is useful for understanding the predicaments of the Portuguese-speaking case beyond the specifically Brazilian national context, since it addresses socially differentiated forms of cosmopolitanism, as well as problems similar to those pointed out by Santos in the Portuguese national context and in the Portuguese-speaking cultural sphere.

These are some of the theoretical concerns that lay the groundwork for a specifically Portuguese perspective onto the field of world literature, but a good example of a praxis-based knowledge production that contributes to the understanding of these issues is Helena Buescu’s Comparative World Literature (CWL) project. I take here Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s (2019) reintroduction of the concept of *praxis* in world literature in order to address a need of approaching the field with a greater emphasis on materiality and practice in order to consider plural world systems rather than a singular one. The project at hand is such a case, and a brief summary of it contextualizes the examples taken from national literatures in Portuguese which will be discussed for the remainder of the article.

In CWL, Buescu aimed to put together an anthology of literary texts, both originally written in Portuguese and in translation, entitled *Literatura-Mundo: Perspectivas em Português*. This work acknowledges the specificities of a viewpoint based in Portugal in the first decades of the 21st century, taking into consideration that any other geographic, political, or historical viewpoint would yield a different set of concepts and interpretations. To account for this, the project is divided into six volumes, split into three distinct sections. These sections are structured around common themes rather than national borders, allowing for comparative analysis across different cultural identities. Despite this, Portugal and its literary tradition remains the central reference point for this anthology.

The first section (two volumes) gathers all literature written in Portuguese, in various regional forms such as European, South American, African, and Asian Portuguese, as well as texts written or transcribed in Portuguese-based creoles, ranging from Cape Verdean Creole to Macau’s Patuá or Malacca’s Kristang. The second section (two volumes) takes into consideration not just language, as in Part 1, but Portugal’s geo-historical and political relationship to Europe. Finally, the third section (two volumes) explores another aspect of comparative world literature through both historical and chronological examinations and thematic comparisons.

While this project was based on praxis-driven knowledge production, Buescu introduced an accompanying theory to connect it to the field of world literature: Aby Warburg’s “law of the good neighbour” in organizing his famous library, which is part of her longstanding attempt to reclaim a stronger role for the tradition of comparative literature in world literature debates (Buescu 2013, 2020). The process of selecting, editing, and translating the texts that eventually became part of this anthology led to the physical approximation of works that would not otherwise be brought together, possibly enabling felicitous readings due to the structure of the volumes. Some

of the examples taken from Portuguese-speaking literatures covered in the following section are either included in these volumes or could very well have been, were it not for the material limits and inevitable exclusion that come with the act of anthologizing, as pointed out by Emily Apter (2013).

This opens the issue of “Lusophonia”, a much-maligned concept as discussed by João César Castro Rocha (2013): it often levels the variations between different national literatures or, which is worse, it elevates one specific national literature above all others. Using a name in the singular to describe a language in which difference (be it historical, political, geographical, and cultural) is of the utmost importance, seems in fact difficult to accept. It is more fruitful to think in terms of various Lusophonias, in the plural.

### MULTIDIRECTIONAL INFLUENCES IN THE PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING LITERARY SPACE

From this perspective, it proves beneficial to examine certain texts that exemplify this plurality. In Brazilian literature, texts such as José de Alencar’s *Iracema* (1865) seek to contribute to the creation of a national literature while drawing from the European tradition of exoticism and from North American responses such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). In the case of Alencar, this occurs by retelling the encounters of the first European settlers and the native Guarani, in a process that jump-starts Brazilian literature:

Brazilian literature arises in a multiplicity of relations with Portugal, a colonial power devalued itself relative to other European cultures; with those other cultures themselves, England, France, Germany; and with the United States, a postcolonial culture still under construction. These multidirectional relations coincide with, though they may not cause, a Brazilian tendency to bypass (or co-opt) dualistic oppositions one of whose terms must be eliminated. Yet this eclecticism may also be seen as an early and constitutive example of the characteristically Brazilian creation of a national cultural identity out of a patchwork of “influences” that refuses nothing and transforms everything. (Wassermann 1994, 189–190)

This eclecticism depends on the situation as described by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, where the language where texts are produced stands in a sort of middle ground, a global semi-peripheral space, where as much as it coalesces around new centers formed by national criteria, it must still grapple with other, more central languages and literatures. This lays the groundwork for 20th-century modernist aesthetics such as that of the “Anthropophagic Manifesto”, where the myths of ritual cannibalism seeking to absorb the strength of vanquished enemies are transposed to the practice of appropriating aesthetics coming from Europe, such as Oswald de Andrade’s *Macunaíma* (1928).

Interestingly, the circulation of texts and ideas is not one-sided, as Alberto Machado da Rosa (1963) and Paulo Franchetti (2007) argued regarding the relations between Machado de Assis and Eça de Queirós, the two preeminent 19th-century novelists in Brazilian and Portuguese literature respectively. Machado is perhaps the best-known case of an author who consciously addressed the place of Brazilian

and Portuguese-speaking literatures in the power dynamics of a global literary field. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) has been a staple of world literature courses and theoretical studies about Brazil, mostly due to its Sternian influences. Critics have pointed to the crucial role of that book in changing Eça's style from a turgid, Zolaesque naturalism to his later, more accomplished works, just as Machado's reading of Eça's *O Primo Basílio* (1878; Eng. trans. *Cousin Bazilio*, 1889) had turned him away from his early romantic phase. The pattern emerging here is one where texts in the Lusosphere may influence each other in dynamics that bypass more rigid understandings of the post-colonial situation, as they grapple with how they stand in relation to other literatures produced in cultural centers whose place is solid. Taking a fresh look at these literary structures through the lens of current global literary discussions offers a more nuanced understanding of how national literatures with a shared language, formed through colonization, can progress beyond established disciplinary frameworks that may have enforced strict power dynamics just as they were trying to dismantle them.

This can also be observed in the Angolan novelist José Eduardo Agualusa, whose novel *The Book of Chameleons* ([2004] 2011) is set in contemporary Angola and deals with national myth-making, or to be more precise, how individuals in new nations set about mythologizing their pasts. The protagonist, Félix Ventura, sells fictional life stories to those that approach him, complete with diplomas, photographs, and other documents. Any person can claim to have been whatever suits their present condition. The other two main characters, José Buchmann and Ângela Lúcia, are, like Ventura, as deeply affected by the Angolan civil war as they are by experiences in Lisbon, New York, Cape Town and other global cities, thus contesting monolithical readings of national (and personal) history. This has been deemed a form of "accomplished cosmopolitanism" (Schor 2015, 62) that may replicate the erasure of racial issues that took place under the myth of "benign" Portuguese colonialism. I may add that Agualusa's novel also presents the possibility of understanding and criticizing that erasure in the framework of larger systems of exploitation, including to the present date. The proximity of Angola to South Africa, the contentious relation between the two countries, and the presence of European and American settlers and adventurers, emerges as part of the fictional biography Félix Ventura conjures for José Buchmann:

The town of São Pedro da Chibia, in the Huíla province to the south of the country, had been founded in 1884 by Madeiran colonists. But there were already half a dozen Boer families [...]. Cornélio Buchmann, who in 1898 had married a Madeiran girl, Marta Medeiros, who gave him two sons. The elder of the two, Pieter, died in childhood; the younger, Mateus, was a famous hunter, who for years acted as guide to groups of South Africans and Englishmen who came to Angola in search of thrills. He was past fifty when he married an American artist, Eva Miller, and they had one son: José Buchmann. (Agualusa 2011, 48)

We find here Madeiran and Boer colonists, South African and English tourists, and an American artist. This is a more complex picture of colonization that goes beyond the limits and borders of a colonizing nation-state and a colonized territory that achieves nationhood.

We can find a parallel to this phenomenon in the literary works of Luís Cardoso, a contemporary East Timorese author. His native country, a former Portuguese colony, was occupied by Indonesia between 1975 and 1999, and Cardoso lived in exile in Portugal during part of that period. His novels, such as *Crónica de uma Travessia* (1997; Eng. trans. *The Crossing*, 2002) and *Olhos de Coruja, Olhos de Gato Bravo* (Owl eyes, cat eyes, 2001) are uniquely positioned to explore cultural identities that have been shaped by both Western and Eastern forms of imperialism. Cardoso achieves this by delving into oral traditions of the precolonial era, recasting the adaptability of such traditions as a form of survival and resistance over the centuries. Once again, experiences of colonization and a form of resistant or critical cosmopolitanism go beyond the framework of a more traditional understanding of the process, as can be seen in references to the Japanese invasion during World War II, or to East Timor's fraught relationship with Australia due to oil reserves in the Timor Sea. These incidents further enhance the cosmopolitanism of his characters, whose interests are commonly independent of European influence or interference. As such, his works represent a form of world literature that is more ambivalent towards European or Western heritage. While acknowledging colonial violence in its traditional sense, Cardoso's works also offer ways of constructing personal and national identities that go beyond simplistic readings of the past. Through his literature, he demonstrates that personal and national identities can incorporate multiple variables, including those beyond Western influence.

#### COSMOPOLITAN THEMES IN PORTUGUESE WRITING AND FILM

As to Portuguese national literature, there is a singular constancy of these concerns at the heart of the canon. Consider, for instance, Gil Vicente's plays *Frágua d'Amor* (The forge of love, 1524) and *Templo d'Apolo* (The temple of Apollo, 1526), which celebrate the marriages and alliances between the House of Avis and the House of Habsburg. During the reign of Charles V, the notion of empire as a universal power gained strength. In these plays, Gil Vicente constructed the role of Portugal in relation to this political body, as the crown, held by John III, pivots from empire-building in Africa and India to Brazil. *Frágua d'Amor*, in particular, includes a Black character, Fernando, whose belonging to a new, reforged nation is contested due to the color of his skin. These texts are among the first instances in Europe of working issues of race and nationality as the Atlantic slave trade was starting. Vicente displays an early awareness of that semi-peripheral condition of Portugal: as it moves to an alliance with the most powerful European dynasty, it must deal with the emergence of new Portuguese-speaking subjects marked by the experience of empire.

Camões, of course, is at the center of this narrative, and *The Lusíads* (1572) have been extensively covered in this respect, but his correspondence, of which only four letters have arrived to us, are further evidence of the circulation of texts and individuals in the Portuguese-speaking space and how this movements relate to a world perspective. Two letters are especially interesting: one sent from Lisbon to a friend in the Portuguese countryside, and another sent from Goa to another friend in Lis-

bon. Camões discusses the role of literary knowledge, particularly the Italian tradition, in describing the city of Lisbon. In the Goan letter in particular, Camões complains about the pointlessness of his deep knowledge of the Petrarchan tradition of the sonnet in a context where no one speaks Italian, thus rendering his abilities worthless from a social – and especially amorous – point of view.

In the following century, António Vieira, a Jesuit priest and master of Baroque prose, dealt with the same predicament as he sought to shore up European support for a new Portuguese dynasty in the wake of the restoration of Independence in 1640, after 60 years of Habsburg rule. This was also the time when sugar production in Brazil, powered by an enslaved workforce, was becoming central to the colony's economy, and his sermons and letters where he denounces the evils of slavery while at the same time advocating its economic necessity for the standing of Portugal in the European context attest to this (Alden 2003).

The centrality of *The Lusians* can be observed again in the Romantic period, starting with Almeida Garrett's narrative poem *Camões* (1825), which depicts the Renaissance poet upon his return from Asia to Lisbon. Garrett wrote the poem during a period of exile in England and France, and liberal ideas inform the text, as seminally studied by Ofélia Paiva Monteiro (1971). In the first canto, Camões's formerly enslaved servant António o Jau [the Javanese] is barred from entering the city due to the color of his skin and the assumption of his different religion. It should be noted that Jau has no voice, and his devotion to his master-turned-friend is akin to that of Friday for Robinson Crusoe, a rendition which fails to fully address the issues presented by the episode in question. Camões parlays with a boatman to allow Jau to enter Portugal, turning the scene into the enactment of a negotiation on who should be allowed into Europe by ship. Jau, a person whose identity has been shaped by European and Eastern empires, poses difficulties for the authorities. He is eventually let in due to a deft use of the word "friend" and by appeals to Rousseauian notions of the universality of human nature – Jau is, indeed, an avatar of the "good savage". In this way, Garrett touches on the topic of migration from spaces touched by European imperialism, one of the key concerns of world literature, just as he attempts to rewrite Portuguese literature and history in the vein of European Romanticism.

Moving over to realism, Eça de Queirós, who spent most of his adult life as a diplomat in the United Kingdom and France, displayed an acute awareness of Portuguese cultural dependence on France and England and economic dependence on Brazil, no longer a colony by his time but a key source of remittances from Portuguese immigrants and capital extracted by businessmen usually in the service of Northern European interests. The novel *O Primo Basílio* (1878) is a perfect example of this: the titular character has become rich through the rubber trade in the Paraguay river basin, but his investors are French and he spends most of his time in Paris and London. He seduces his married cousin, Luísa, during one of his stays in Lisbon, for she is enthralled to his European tastes and South American money. These are the material underpinnings to his cosmopolitan worldview, as championed by Teresa Pinto Coelho (2009).

Fernando Pessoa, the preeminent Modernist poet in Portuguese, displays a marked interest in issues of national identity, discussing in letters and newspaper articles the concepts of provincialism and cosmopolitanism in what concerns cultural attitudes affecting the Portuguese elite. In an interview published in 1923 in the *Revista Portuguesa* magazine, he boldly claims, “The Portuguese people are, essentially, cosmopolitan” (2020, 27), whereas in “O Caso Mental Português” (The Portuguese mental case, 1932), he argues that the Portuguese intelligentsia is fundamentally provincial, beholden to foreign tastes and ideas, thus inverting assumptions between popular culture and elite culture, opining the possibility for a cosmopolitanism from below.

As issues of migration grew in collective awareness globally, other art forms turned as well to the representation of textual and physical circulation. In the Portuguese context, fruitful rereadings of European literatures can also be observed in films, such as in Pedro Costa’s recent *Vitalina Varela* (2019), which tells the story of a Cape Verdean woman who comes to Portugal in order to attend the funeral of her estranged husband, who had emigrated to Lisbon years before and whom she has not seen since. The concept of homebuilding or homecoming is central to the film, and, together with the memorable scene where Vitalina Varela emerges from the airplane that brought her, has led critics to see it as indebted to Greek myth: from the very moment we see her disembark, with the camera gracefully tracking her frayed feet glissading down the steps, it is clear that the film is invoking the epic register. Vitalina Varela is what one imagines might have been the situation for Penelope, had Odysseus never returned (Nam 2020, 14). Reading experiences of exile and migration in terms of the Greek epic has been a staple of fruitful rereadings of the past during the late 20th century – Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990) is perhaps a more salient case – but in *Vitalina Varela*, issues of language and culture specific to Portuguese once again force us to take into consideration the particular national experiences that occurred in the spaces where the language has been spoken. Chiefly among these is the scene where Vitalina, in an attempt to improve her Portuguese, since she only speaks Cape Verdean creole, joins her priest in the recitation of a poem by the 19th-century Portuguese poet Antero de Quental.

The poem recounts the crucifixion and describes two sides of Christ’s face. One side is turned towards the sun and represents the fraternal and redeeming aspects of Christianity, while the other side is shrouded in shadow and is associated with the Church. This is an example of Quental’s advocacy for “progressive social issues using familiar spiritual imagery” (Montgomery 2018, 34), for Quental was an early adopter of Proudhonian socialism, and his emphasis of the emancipatory potential of Christianity is strongly aligned with that influence. Costa’s film, grounded in a collaborative practice where he facilitates the retelling of the life stories of his non-professional actors, is a way of recovering European discourses that can be helpful in describing the relations between Portugal and its postcolonial subjects in the contemporary world shaped by global migrations. In this respect, the articulation of experiences of mobility and loss in the Portuguese-speaking Atlantic draw from the classical heritage and from an early pan-European discourse in defense

of the downtrodden that, rooted in Christianity, will be transformed into strands of utopian socialism such as those demonstrated in the Portuguese case by Antero de Quental.

## CONCLUSION

Aqualusa and Cardoso in particular exemplify a significant shift in their writings towards localized themes, encompassing both regional and global concerns, which enables us to emphasize the notion of viewpoint in Buescu's conception of world literature within Portuguese-speaking contexts. To this can be added the complexities raised by Lourenço and Santos, which leads to a possible contribution to the wider field of world literature: the cases of national literatures in Portuguese imply a variety of viewpoints that are themselves permanently aware of other critical gazes, those of other discourses emanating from centres of power outside the language space itself. This predicament can often lead to a disavowal of views emanating from inside the space, whereby the national paradigm is reinforced. Nonetheless, there are instances of self-awareness emerging in the literary examples given above as well as in critical studies, or practice-driven projects such as the Comparative World Literature anthology project. Hopefully, this can also lead to a reworking of world literatures in the plural.

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## World literature and national literatures in Portuguese

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The paper explores the concept of world literature in the context of national literatures in Portuguese. It analyzes the historical and cultural factors that influenced the formation of Portuguese nationhood, which has been historically linked with empire and colonization, and how this has affected the development of multiple "Lusophonias" (national literatures in Portuguese-speaking countries). It also rethinks Portugal's semi-peripheral position in the European and world contexts and its relation to other Portuguese-speaking spaces and the wider world.

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