

2006

# Gilroy on the Beach

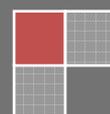
On the Black Atlantic, the Brown Atlantic, and Postcolonial Portugal

Panel *Reassessing the Black Atlantic*, org. Stephan Palmié and Livio Sansone, 9<sup>th</sup> EASA Conference, Bristol, UK, 18-21 September 2006

Miguel Vale de Almeida

MIGUELVALEDEALMEIDA.NET

2008



9th EASA Biennial Conference  
18-21 September 2006, Bristol, UK  
Invited Workshop 03, *Reassessing the Black Atlantic*  
(Livio Sansone and Stephan Palmié, convenors)

Gilroy on the beach:  
On the Black Atlantic, the Brown Atlantic, and Postcolonial Portugal

Miguel VALE DE ALMEIDA  
Dept. of Anthropology and CEAS (Social Anthropology Studies' Centre),  
ISCTE – Lisbon  
[mvda@netcabo.pt](mailto:mvda@netcabo.pt)

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Portugal's National Day (celebrating Camões, the epic poet of the age of discoveries, as well as Portuguese communities in the diaspora), televisions reported the first *arrastão*<sup>1</sup> ever in a Portuguese beach. *Arrastão* refers to the act of rapid raiding of a group (namely people on a beach) by a collective of thieves, generally children and youths. The expression originates in Brazil. The news mentioned a large group (hundreds, literally) of young men from the 'problematic' poor suburbs of Lisbon. This description was implicitly racialized, and some amateur cell-phone camera images did indicate the *colour* of the 'perpetrators', contrasting that of bystanders bathing in the sun. Rumours spread instantly, both on and off the media, generating a sense of confirmation: Lisbon had finally 'exploded'. This explosion was the anticipated outcome of life conditions in the poor suburbs; of their African immigrant demography ; of the misfit character of the so-called second and third immigrant generations; of the perceived growing insecurity due to crimes publicized as having black authorship. The fact that the *arrastão* happened on June 10<sup>th</sup> could also be seen as an indication of politicized rebellion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Superlative form of the noun *arrasto*, derived from the verb *arrastar*, meaning to sweep up, drag, pull, or tow, as in fishing boats that harvest large quantities of fish with a huge net pulled by the boat. A possible translation would be "big sweep".

As a matter of fact, a few weeks later an extreme rightwing group did stage a demonstration against immigration and the *arrastão*. The problem is that by then it was already public knowledge that *it had not happened*<sup>2</sup>. All had been a misunderstanding, so the police and the media were to confirm. A large group of ‘black’ and ‘white’ youngsters had indeed been on the beach at Carcavelos; there had indeed been some conflicts among them; the police did intervene; and large numbers of these youngsters did run across the beach – but they were running *away* from the police. In spite of police denial of the *arrastão*, some media insisted on the version, and social rumour took care of the rest. One can still hear people mention it, as if denials of the event were weaker than the imagination of the possibility of the event – and the ‘reality’ of visual ‘confirmation’ of a ‘dark’ human mass running, jumping over ‘white’ bodies. The conditions of possibility created the possibility of ‘the condition’ (the social event itself).

So Lisbon had at last ‘exploded’ but hadn’t *really* exploded. Let me just quickly mention some aspects of the event that deserve further analysis beyond the scope of this paper: the liminal character of the social place and space of the beach; the exposure of bodies and the visibility of that which is perceived and categorized as ‘race’; the use of cell phones as image-capturing technology and information transmission; the relationship between cell phone users and a media that increasingly resorts to ‘citizen sources’, thus transforming current notions of the public space; the place occupied by Brazil in the Portuguese collective imagination and the eagerness to import the model of the *arrastão*; the social geography of Carcavelos beach as a point of intersection between the Estoril/Cascais ‘riviera’ (an urban periphery that does not perceive itself as peripheral), seen as ‘white’ and bourgeois, and the ‘black’ and immigrant peripheries of

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eraumavezumarrastao.net/>

Lisbon (interpelated as such)<sup>3</sup>; the contradiction between the police as the state's authority and the fact that the public denied the police's denial of the event; the social fear of young black men as those who will supposedly perpetuate the 'problems' arising from immigration; and so on.

Immigration to Portugal – especially of African and/or 'black' origin – is the 'final' moment in a long history of Portuguese involvement in the Black Atlantic and is increasingly playing a crucial role in the reconfiguration of identities in postcolonial Portugal. I will start with the opposite of what could be expected (perceptions of immigration as a 'threat'): immigration can also be perceived as an index of development of the host country. News of crimes committed by 'gangs', reports on expressions of a 'gangsta' culture, the emergence of Portuguese hip hop expressions or, indeed, an *arrastão*, can be conceived as indexes of 'development' and 'europeanization' – *things that happen in rich countries*. One could even add to this, phenomena such as the growth in anti-immigration feelings as well as reactions against these feelings (anti-racist movements and pedagogy, for instance). A more detached observation can detect in all of these elements a practical confirmation of an historical inversion of positionality: from a country of emigrants, Portugal has become a country of immigrants. This trope is actually widely used in Portugal, regardless of its

---

<sup>3</sup> «A praia de Carcavelos é a minha praia urbana preferida porque é a campeã da diversidade. Após as enchentes de crianças de Julho, em Agosto vêem-se mais jovens e crianças d A praia de Carcavelos é a minha praia urbana preferida porque é a campeã da diversidade. Após as enchentes de crianças de Julho, em Agosto vêem-se mais jovens e crianças do que em qualquer outro lado; mas também negros, brasileiros, imigrantes de Leste, gays e lésbicas, muçulmanos e tudo e tudo - pouca betice, é um facto, mas também a há. Noutra dia uns brasileiros começaram a cantar e tocar e, espontaneamente, pessoas deitadas ao sol num raio de trinta metros quadrados cantavam com eles;) Digam lá se não é surpreendente para portugueses? Também noutra dia um casal lésbico namorava, abraçava-se e beijava-se, à beira-mar, na maior tranquilidade. À excepção dos maus hábitos brasileiros, do ponto de vista da saúde, da cerveja e das batatas fritas, estou convencida que naquela praia as sociabilidades de praia em Portugal estão a mudar para melhor. Carcavelos é a imagem da nova suburbanidade lisboeta. Perante tudo isto não é de surpreender que tenha sido a fobia a toda esta diversidade que fez deste local a semente dum falso *arrastão*...» (Anabela Rocha in <http://damnqueer.blogspot.com/2006/08/praiade-carcavelos.html>)

inaccuracy: many people still emigrate from Portugal, but they do it seasonally, according to new logics of social reproduction in the family, from new places (namely towns and cities, not the countryside) and they do it across the EU's open borders and hidden from the state's statistical control.

Perceptions of historical and social change are of course anchored in a comparison – that between developing, democratic and European Portugal, and the underdeveloped, dictatorial and Colonial Portugal of most of the 20th century. Immigration plays a crucial symbolic role here: 'Africans' and 'Blacks' were the subjects of empire and, between 1960 and 1975, the opponents (the 'terrorists', as they were called) in the Colonial Wars in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola; they were the Others, divided, in the colonial polity, between Natives (devoid of any rights), and Assimilated (the very few who could become 'civilized'), in opposition to the colonial 'whites' - the 'Citizens'; they had been the subjects of compulsory labour in the African colonies and, before that, commodities to be sold as slaves throughout the Atlantic world. Now 'they are among us'.

The *arrastão* episode denotes the negative expectations towards 'blackness' in the mainstream media and public opinion in Portugal. *Negro* – or *preto*, or *de cor*, or *africano*, according to different subject positions and relationalities (and not to mention more offensive epithets) are the dangerous words that lurk (as objects of both fear and desire) behind the complex perceptions of immigration, problematic neighbourhoods, crime and insecurity. These social situations (entry in the country, lodging and residence, neighbourhood and street) are highly policed. But they are also mediated by the police, that is, the public perception of what goes on in these real and imagined worlds is itself a matter of police. The police force acts as provider of information, statistician and, of course, main interpreter of data. The notion of 'the gang', for

instance (taken from US movies), couldn't be further from reality but nonetheless colonized (post-colonized?) the imagination. The same happened with the imagery of the *arrastão*, taken from urban Brazil. And when, in late 2005, the Parisian *banlieue* events took place, the question on the streets and in the papers was "when will it happen in Portugal?" You don't have to be a crude constructionist in order to be able to understand that asking the question is the first condition of possibility for that which is asked to happen.

Portuguese postcolonial reconfigurations are caught in a web of contradictions<sup>4</sup> that have a long history. Paramount among these is the popular discourse on the absence of racism in Portuguese society, something that clashes against the quick interpretation of the *arrastão* as part of 'black' criminality. The discourse on the absence of racism is rooted in the colonial history of Lusotropicalist discourse, rooted on a political appropriation of the work of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's by the late colonial regime. Explanations for the supposed absence of racism are anchored in an interpretation of the colonial process, precisely that which we tend to see (and rightly so) as the epitome of a racialized and racist polity. This leads me to the following working hypothesis: perceptions of immigration and of the new kinds of social relations that it enables enhance the critical (as in crisis) tone of the national narrative; this happens when the deep and repressed colonial narrative survives and is resilient vis-à-vis an alternative but weak European narrative.

After fifty years of dictatorship and colonial regime (I stress: in a dictatorial situation) and colonial wars from 1960 to 1975, democracy was formally re-established

---

<sup>4</sup> This is not the place for an analysis of this topic. I have tried to do it in Vale de Almeida, 2000 (in Portuguese) and 2004 (in English) where I have explored the Black Movement in Brazil, the heritage of Lusotropicalism, and the political culture of contemporary *post-lusotropical* debates and social realities in Portugal.

in 1974. In the following two years the colonies became independent. In 1986 Portugal joined the then EEC. The golden period of democracy and capitalist modernization reached its apex with the celebrations of the 500 years of the Discoveries and the opening of Expo 98. This was also the period when immigration became salient, as part of the labour input necessary for the process of modernization financed by European funds. When, in 2005, the *arrastão* happened/did not happen, the Portuguese society had already produced a new categorization of plurality: there are the Portuguese, and there are the immigrants; the latter are divided in 'Africans', mostly *Palops*, meaning from Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa (Portuguese-speaking African Countries), 'Brazilians', and *de Leste* (meaning from Eastern Europe, mostly Moldova and the Ukraine, but also Russia and Rumania). It is the category of African/Palop that is the most problematic and specific, since it is tied directly to the colonial heritage and is highly racialized.

Why did the *arrastão* happen (since it did happen; it just didn't happen there and then)? Because the colonized are, at last, among 'us'. Certainly not for the first time. But amnesia has been produced regarding the significant black population in Portugal up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century – as well as the amnesia regarding pre-Reconquest Arabs and Berbers or pre-Inquisition Jews. This amnesia is just as strong as its opposite, the hyper-visibility targetting contemporary 'blacks'. What this means is that an extraordinary exception has been implanted in the hegemonic lusotropicalist narrative of miscegenation and of the exceptional character of Portuguese expansion and colonization - namely that immigrants are not those with whom 'we' mix. The colonized are supposed to have acquired our language; it was bestowed on them as a gift, to be used in their lands, which are in the current postcolonial situation the constitutive parts of the new empire of compensational geolinguistics called *Lusofonia*.

The narrative of mixture and miscegenation is based on the notion of a gift that turns down the counter-gift: some Portuguese have mixed with Africans; in the process they created Lusotropical societies; they gave the gift of cultural materials, namely language; but nothing cultural was supposed to be given back by Africans. Most of all, no physical movement of people and bodies, from Africa to Portugal, was supposed to happen. Expansion, slavery and colonialism are supposed to have created a Brown Atlantic, that is, an African-based Atlantic cultural interconnectedness based on the infusion of Portuguese language, culture, and 'blood'.

The epitome of this way of seeing, representing, classifying and governing was the legal (but also anthropological, literary, administrative) apparatus that guaranteed and promoted separation in the colonies and between colonies and metropole. Let us call it the Colonial Constitution. The material processes of gathering surplus, raw materials, and labour, were attired with culturalist trappings based on racial classifications that, in turn, became laws that divided people into 'citizens' (from Portugal, 'white'), *indígenas* ('natives', African, 'black', whose culture was to be preserved through separation - compulsory labour notwithstanding), and *assimilados* (assimilated). The latter actually never amounted to more than 1% (they were indeed a 'category project'): people who, through the effort of christianisation, learning the Portuguese language, training in *habitus* of dress, family, work and demeanour (or performances thereof), were to demonstrate that they deserved access to a mitigated citizenship, a mimesis of the colonizer<sup>5</sup>.

When post-colonial Africans migrate to Portugal they do so in order to occupy labour and class positions that deprive them of any added value as localized exotics.

---

<sup>5</sup> Exceptions were Cape Verde, Portuguese India, and Macau, whose inhabitants were deemed to be either like regional variations of metropolitan Portuguese (Cape Verde, which was seen as a variety of the Azorean or Madeiran type) or as representatives of Eastern civilizations (Hindu or Chinese). I deal with this in Vale de Almeida (2007).

They now occupy the margins of the center – in relations of production as in social geography. From their previous colonized indigeneity they keep compulsory labour, now under the guise of clandestine and unprotected work. Their ‘roots’ too are ‘compulsory’ now that indigeneity is glossed as citizenship (in the sense of nationality), that which makes them foreign, that which block their access to citizenship. On top of this it is demanded of them to assimilate, a notion now glossed as *integration*. The former process did not produce more than 1% of the population in the colonial era; the latter – characterized by a similar degree of bureaucratic demands, legal conundrums, and the state’s discretionary decisions, will not produce more than a small minority – those who manage to escape the forms of exclusion contained in the expression ‘problematic neighborhood’ or, in the case of the young ones, ‘second generation’. These are stigmas that accrue to the marginalization in the sphere of work that is shared with the ‘white’, Portuguese, new class of precarious workers. The state’s game of sovereignty can be a game of vigilance over the coincidence between territory, language, and subjection to the state; but it can also be the game of creating culturally competent subjects; or the game of making more complex the procedures that allow the foreigner to have access to cultural competence.

The process of post-colonial reconfiguration of the Portuguese state stands on the creation of a geopolitical space (corresponding to a previous sovereignty) within the globalized world and, at the same time, on a European integration that challenges traditional conceptions of sovereignty. Two new categories of the democratic regime are part of the former: *PALOP* as a euphemism for the ex-colonies in Africa, and *Lusofonia*, a type of ‘linguistic sovereignty’, similar in many aspects to the French *Francophonie*. There is no critique of the implied notions of property, ancestry and linguistic legitimacy; that is why the process replicates to a great extent the culturalism of

Lusotropicalism: it stresses the cultural plane and dismisses the political economy of colonial times; and within the cultural plane it stresses Portuguese ‘gifts’ and underplays African ‘counter-gifts’.

I mentioned the fact that the ‘problem of immigration’ occurs in the historical moment of a shaky Europeanization and that the colonial narrative seems to be the only one available. If this is so, the constitution of subjects in the Portuguese post-colony runs the risk of re-enacting the Colonial Constitution, with its citizens, natives and assimilated in-betweens; it runs the risk of reproducing culturalist lusotropicalisms; it runs the risk of eliding the political economy of forced labour; it runs the risk of seeing race coming back as a statutory symbol in everyday social interaction.

It is however crucial not to exceptionalize – again – Portugal. My second point has to do with a bigger contradiction that characterizes current political economic developments in the world, also known as neoliberal globalization, and the survival of the nation-state nonetheless. Following Benhabib (1994) I refer to the contradiction between, on the one hand, access to civil rights and citizenship through national belonging and, on the other, the growing acknowledgment of the universality of human rights. These two sets of rights blatantly clash in situations of migration. Several human rights cannot be guaranteed when subjects occupy two positions, that of citizens of their original nation-state, and that of residents of the host state. Nationals of the host state are privileged regarding labour rights, public services and the welfare state, as well as in exercising their right to participate in democratic decision-making. Demands for integration / assimilation sound cynical, to say the least, in this situation. Unless of course civil rights and access to citizenship are seen as universal human rights – something that seems to be outright refused by contemporary polities. Besides refusal, there is also silence. There is silence when one asks why the free circulation of

commodities and capitals is acclaimed, whereas the free circulation of people is not. The answer is seldom heard: it is the limitation of the free circulation of people and their becoming citizens of their country of residence that allows for illegal circulations of people *as* commodities.

The more culturalist minded may ask what this has to do with issues of national narrative, sovereignty and the construction of political subjects as citizens. The answer is that the narrative cannot be simply cultural. As a matter of fact, its restriction to culture is a condition for the hiding of the material processes that are part of processes of meaning creation. Attempts at conciliating the above-mentioned contradiction have been disastrous - from republican universalism to state-promoted and communitarian multiculturalisms. As in the Portuguese case of the Lusotropicalist narrative, multicultural narratives have underlying and hidden organic and objectifying premises: the notion that there are several cultures corresponding to discrete populations with origins in specific territories. Separate but equal, meeting only at work or in the marketplace of cultural products. State sponsored multicultural experiments presuppose a regulatory authority that defines who is tolerated and who tolerates. Alternatively, the republican model of universal citizenship does not avoid the juxtaposition of an exclusivist national narrative, as the French case demonstrates in the case of the muslim scarf in schools.

Revisiting Portuguese colonial narratives is an important step in understanding the contours of the ensemble of subjects and citizens who live under the Portuguese State today, especially in what concerns immigration. Symbolic events like the *arrastão* occur in a wider context: that of European integration challenging traditional notions of sovereignty and belonging; and that of the global contradiction between civil rights based on nationality/citizenship, and universal human rights.

To conclude, where is Gilroy on that beach? That beach is one of the shores of the Black Atlantic. But it is, in the Portuguese national narrative, one of the beaches of what I have ironically called the Brown Atlantic. That is: Portuguese expansion and Portuguese colonialism have been, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and more so throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>, narrated as a process of community building, based on the mixture and miscegenation of the Portuguese with the peoples of the Americas, Africa, India and so on. We now know, of course, that there was ideological manipulation involved. But there is also, and there is, hegemony, in the sense that this narrative is deeply embedded in people's perceptions of the Atlantic world and its history. The hegemonic narrative of 'the world that the Portuguese created' has been challenged by the arrival of immigrants from the ex-colonies, by the emergence of a Portuguese Black population, and by a new configuration of class, in which the precarious or non-integrated sectors are highly racialized. To use Gilroy's tropes, the 'routes' of immigration cannot escape their 'rooting' in colonial territories. People of Black African origin in Portugal may have – and they do, in many areas of cultural expression – a common history and a set of common cultural resources that can be glossed as the 'Black Atlantic'; and there is a double consciousness at play. But what is most striking is the series of contradictions between their integration in capitalist modernity (of which labour migration is certainly an important part), their common belonging to a Lusophone world, their diverse postcolonial national origins, and the historical weight of their exclusion as colonized Others. On the European shores – at the beach in Carcavelos – it is the colour of their bodies that lumps them together into a category. 'Race' becomes again an over-signifier. Portuguese late colonialism played with a culturalism that could easily fall

under the category of “new racism” (maybe the ‘new racisms’ that we have been paying attention to in anthropology are not so new). As long as the colonial divide was in place, there could be a national narrative about miscegenation, and a Brown Atlantic created by the colonizers. But once the ex-colonized flow into Portugal as immigrants their claims to belonging are turned down. Black Portuguese, especially those already born and raised in Portugal, will probably have to resort to ‘Black Atlantic’, Anglophone-based and globalized cultural resources in order to resist to or resignify the categorization that targets them.

Benhabib, Seyla, 2004, *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Gilroy, Paul, 1994, *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Vale de Almeida, M., 2007, “From Miscegenation to Creole Identity: Portuguese Colonialism, Brazil, Cape Verde”, in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, C. Stewart (ed.), Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Vale de Almeida, M., 2004, *An Earth-Colored Sea. ‘Race’, Culture and the Politics of Identity in the Post-Colonial Portuguese-Speaking World*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books.

Vale de Almeida, M., 2000, *Um Mar da Cor da Terra. “Raça”, Cultura e Política da Identidade*. Oeiras: Celta.