

Colloquium "António Vieira and the futures of Luso-Afro-Brazilian studies"

The Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Panel "Lusotropicalism and the Future of Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies"

Organizer: Bela Feldman-Bianco; with Peter Fry, Cristiana Bastos, MVA

2-3 May 2008.

"Not quite white": Portuguese people

in the margins of Lusotropicalism, the luso-afro-brazilian space, and Lusophony

miguel vale de almeida

mvda@netcabo.pt

ABSTRACT: Representations of Portuguese ethnicity in colonial territories under British administration (especially when compared to the Portuguese state's representations of its colonized peoples) seem to indicate that hierarchies based on "race", class and/or religion are the core of ethnicity as a power relation; they also illustrate how the colonial "game" was also one of intra-European power relations by proxy of the Tropics. The social location of the Portuguese in ex-British colonies gives a new meaning to the expression "in between". The analysis of these case will allow historians, anthropologists, and critics to dislocate the terms of lusotropicalist discourse, as well as the terms in which luso-afro-brazilian "field" is being set up – especially at a moment when the Portuguese state's project of Lusophony seems to be a mutation, if not a continuation, of Lusotropicalism.

Following my research and work on the genesis of the Afro-cultural movement in a town of Bahia in the late nineties, I have become interested in Lusophone postcolonialism. I have used the expression "postlusotropicalism" to convey (in a fashion similar to the use of "postcolonial") the sense that the Portuguese Lusophone camp (made of state, scientific and cultural institutions, as well as people) is not chronologically "post-", but rather still within a sort of structural Lusotropicalism. This is most obvious in Portugal since this country became democratic, joined the European Union, and started receiving immigrants, namely from its ex-colonies in Africa and from Brazil.

I have developed the hypothesis that there may be a “postcolonial constitution” that is to a great extent a spin-off of the “colonial constitution” that statutorily divided the colonial population into citizens, natives and assimilates, while at the same time it represented the metropole and the colonies as part of the same polity and cultural unit, marked by the historical feat of the expansion and discoveries, Christian evangelization, and the spreading of Portuguese language. Nowadays, the difference between citizens *qua* nationals, and immigrants as strangers is mediated by discussions on “integration”, a word that is often synonymous with the prior semantics of “assimilation”.

In tune with much of the bibliography on modern Portuguese colonialism, comparative colonialism and postcolonial studies in Portuguese (not to mention more classic historical and materialistic perspectives in Anthropology), I accept the assumption that Portuguese colonialism in Africa from the British Ultimatum of 1890 to the end of dictatorship and the consequent independence of the colonies (1974-76) was characterized by its subaltern and subsidiary nature in the context of the world economy and geopolitics, namely in relation to the British Empire (the classical example of this being the export of Mozambican labor to South Africa). Many of us anthropologists who started to study colonialism and postcolonialism have naturally focused on the populations of the colonized or recently independent countries, whether in their territories under colonial rule or in the contexts of migration to the territory of the ex-colonizers¹. A few times, but marginally, we have paid attention to those poor Portuguese who migrated, more or less voluntarily or forcibly, to the colonies. But much more attention has been paid to the massive migrations to Brazil (in the nineteenth- or twentieth-century), to other American territories (the US, Canada, Venezuela), to South Africa or – and mostly – to France and Germany in the 1960s².

This said, what has always interested me the most has been the process of the constitution of a national identity discourse that is based on a specific perception of the history of the

¹ See the recent work of Cláudia Castelo, or Cristiana Bastos’ projects.

² Less attention has been paid to temporary – and unaccounted for – migration that is right now going on, to European countries, and which is perceived as contradictory with the representation of a supposedly developed country. It is “hidden” under the notion of free circulation of labor in the EU.

Expansion, of Colonialism, and of the relationship with the colonized. Not as an historian, which I am not, but rather in order to understand what is sociologically going on in contemporary Portugal and in the countries that belong to the postcolonial and postdemocratic Portuguese construction of Lusofonia and the CPLP. As many others, I have worked on the hypothesis of the mutual constitution of the nation state and the sense of ethnicity of its subjects/citizens, on the one hand, and the colonies and the ethnicities of its subjects, on the other. In order to transform this game of mirrors into a kaleidoscope we need yet another perspective – that of the migration of poor Portuguese during the period of modern colonialism to colonies of states other than Portugal. If we pay attention to that phenomenon we may be able to shed some light on different processes and the possible articulation between them: a) the way in which comparison between colonialisms and their disputes may reveal a symbolic struggle at the intra-European and global scales; b) the way in which that struggle consolidated national identities; and c), the role that the subaltern populations from the colonizing countries played in that process – and not just colonized populations.

So what follows is simply a preliminary exploration of recurrent but consistent traits in the migration of Portuguese labor and people to British colonies between the mid-19th century and the mid 20th-century, and the influence of those migrations in the British representations of Portuguese colonialism and Portugal. How? Through the constitution of a racial, ethnic and class identification of the Portuguese in those contexts.

In 1997 I published a paper on my experience in Trinidad and Tobago while exploring the possibility of doing fieldwork there (before I finally decided to go to Brazil). I was in Trinidad looking for inspiration to start studying Afro-Caribbean issues. The serendipity of the field led me however to meet a young woman with both Portuguese and African ancestry. She had recently published a book on the Portuguese of Trinidad and Tobago and was so enthusiastic about meeting me that I let myself go along, listen to her explanations and stories and read her documentation. Among the many populations that went to Trinidad as indentured laborers for the cocoa and sugar cane plantations, the first to arrive were from the Azores. It was in 1834, the year of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Their status was illegal then and they had been brought from the island of Faial by slave traders. Trinidadian elites wanted European migrants, in order to balance the local racial demographics, but early arrivals – from France, Germany or England – soon took off from Trinidad to the US. The governments of Britain and Portugal then signed an agreement for the migration of Madeirans with two-year contracts,

following a previous experience, in 1935, in British Guyana. The first group of legal indentured laborers from Madeira arrived in Trinidad in 1846. A considerable percentage of the group was made up of people who had converted to Protestantism on the aftermath of the missionary work in Madeira by the Scottish Presbyterian minister Robert Reid Kalley. They were the victims of harsh persecution by the Catholic Church and the State, culminating in violent repression and arrests in 1846.

If in the year of the abolition of slavery the Trinidadian elites had thought that whites were welcome, a few years later they were thinking otherwise: too many European workers could set off the racial balance and the privilege of the white minority elite. In fact, the desire for whitening seemed to be less important when compared to the desire to keep a class structure based on race. Soon the Madeirans were to be replaced by Indians and Chinese (today's half of the Trinidadian population is of Indian descent). At the end of the 19th century there were some 2000 Madeirans who did not renovate their indenture contracts. They either migrated elsewhere when they were replaced by Asians or established themselves locally as an intermediate social group – especially as rum-shop keepers (the Catholics) or as small grocery-store owners (the Protestants). The Protestants were to move to the US and Brazil. The majority of those left behind were Catholic and called for other relatives to come to Trinidad, as free migrants, in the 1930s and again right after WWII. My local friend told me that they “assimilated” at all levels: “cultural, linguistic and racial”.

After 1960 the local census system ceased to discriminate the Portuguese as an ethnic minority, so their descendants could be included in one of three categories – “European”, “white” or “mixed”. Within the Portuguese community, *de facto* sub-categories have been used, according to whether people were born in Madeira or Trinidad; whether they were the product of endogamous Madeiran-born unions (the “creole”); whether this happened in the first, second or third generation; whether they had or not one parent of a different ethnic origin, and so on. According to my friend, those who “feel” Portuguese are those who cook Portuguese food and take part in the social events of the Portuguese clubs. As of the 1980s, the creation of the category of “Portuguese Diaspora” by the Portuguese State has been welcomed by sectors of the Portuguese community in the historical moment of Portugal's reconfiguration as a European Union country.

This is a way out to an old system of classification that, for religious, racial, and class reasons, has marked the Portuguese of Trinidad as ambiguous. They were not considered white by neither whites nor blacks. The white elite considered them “Trinidad-white” and their intermediate status as local shop-owners generated relationships of both proximity and conflict with the poor black population, often indebted to the shopkeepers. Self-representations of the Portuguese, however, did not acknowledge this in the same terms. Rather, as in the example by Albert Gomes, writer and politician, a Lusotropicalist discourse of sorts was implemented: “The Portuguese in Trinidad locked their colour prejudices in their minds so that their loins might be unaffected by them. It is said that the Portuguese colonize in bed; certainly those in Trinidad were assimilated into the population in this way” (1968:9-10)

The Portuguese of Trinidad were placed by the economic and symbolic power structure in the ambiguous slot of “not quite white”. The underlying classificatory scheme was of course 19th century racialism, triumphant in the British empire. The structural ambiguity of the small shop owner can only be surpassed through the loss of the ethnic label or through the rise to big commerce (which did happen locally, for instance with the rum producer and exporter J B Fernandes).

Let us now travel to similar cases. Many British narratives and reports on the colonial Portuguese portray the latter as the poor relatives. These narratives establish comparisons between colonial regimes as ethnic mirrors. The evaluation is sometimes apparently positive, although in a romantic and/or paternalist tone, as when Portuguese colonialism is portrayed as less cruel or less harsh. The explanation for this reading is however the reverse of the Freyrian compliment: the Portuguese would lack “pedigree”. This helps explain why specific forms of cruelty can be pinpointed in Portuguese colonial practices, when compared with the “civilizing” endeavor of the British: they, the Portuguese are half-breeds who generate yet more half-breeds, and proximity leads to both contact, and conflict and cruelty; we, the British, keep things separate, in their place, therefore leading to respect and social order.

An analysis of some anthropological debates in the early 20th century and their reception in Portugal could be an indirect way of showing this: in the framework of the racialism of the time, the Ultimatum, and the Portuguese State’s difficulty in effectively occupying the colonies, many authors dedicated themselves to show that the Portuguese had no negroid ancestors whatsoever. This was stated together with a refusal to subscribe to miscegenation

policies. The Portuguese anthropologists were reacting to the work of authors like Thomas Huxley who in 1879 had established the four categories – Xanthochroic, Mongoloid, Australoid and Negroid – the first corresponding to fair skinned whites from Northern and Central Europe. One significant sub-category was that of the Melanochroic, that is, the dark whites of the Mediterranean, classified as “mixed”. Although Huxley thought it absurd to bring them together under the term “Caucasian”, this was to become the winning perspective in the early 20th century. The Xanthochroic became the Nordic race and the Melanochroic the Mediterranean race, both classified as white by Earnest Hooton and Carleton Coon. But the suspicion was already there. One had to wait for the emergence of Lusotropicalism for this frame to be reversed into a eulogy of miscegenation and the supposed Portuguese skill in pursuing it.

The racist tradition went on, however, in the anglo-saxon and anglo-american worlds in the post-colonial period, for instance in the census categories of the US. Today, “white” in the US officially means being a descendant from the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. But the cultural boundaries separating white Americans from other ethno-racial categories have always been moving and shifting and contested. For instance, in different periods different peoples were not considered white – the Irish, the Germans, the Ashkenazi Jews, the Italians, the Spaniards, the Slavs, or the Greeks. Or the Portuguese, of course. An interesting case of colonial/postcolonial overlap is the well known case of the Cape Verdians in New England. Originating from the creole islands where being more or less African or more or less Portuguese are definitely status symbols, and having migrated still under Portuguese colonial rule (which granted them a regional, not strictly colonial status – even though with different internal consequences for the blacker folk or the whiter elites, who were used as intermediaries in the colonial administration in mainland colonies), they were officially Portuguese, but could be perceived as blacks in everyday American social relations. This created some tension between metropolitan Portuguese and Cape Verdeans, a tension that had its terms changed after Cape Verde’s independence and once some Cape Verdeans started to identify either with their independent creole nation or, in some cases, with Black politics American-style.

The Portuguese, on the other hand, have been engaged in a project of separation from the category “Hispanic”, as they previously have been controlling the “damage” of identification with Mediterranean darkening. The 1976 *Harvard Encyclopaedia of American Ethnic Groups*

still carried a dual classification of ethnic groups in New England: one of the groups, the white, included the Finns, the Greeks, the Irish and the Jews, whereas the second, that of the “Colored” or non-white included the “Negros”, the Portuguese, and the Wampanoags. A regional literary reference could be inserted here: in the famous *Moby Dick*, Melville refers to the Azoreans on board the *Pequod* not as part of the white crew but as part of the set of other non-white characters. North-American perceptions of the Portuguese tend to portray them as cherished workers for their obedience, and for their non politicization. These views and the inherent class framing, generate anxiety in the contemporary Portuguese middle-class. One example from a blog: “I would never move to a country like America because I am sure that I would be seen as a not-quite-white person and would be a victim of racism”³.

Going back to a context similar to Trinidad, the more or less forced migration to many British colonies happened as indentured labor, and issued from the Portuguese islands mainly. Besides Trinidad, other emblematic cases are Hawaii and Guyana. A Marxist or world-system approach would not be inappropriate here. Some American sociologists noted in the late 1980s how ethnicity in Hawaii could be seen as a social construct created during the expansion of the world capitalist system. Local categories would be, in this case, instances of adaptation to and by that expansion: “Haole” refers to people of European origin, while “Local” normally refers to people of non-European origin. Luso-Americans, although of European origin, are considered Locals. Geschwender (et al, 1988) focus their interest on this “anomaly” and explain it with the different origins of the two groups in the world system: the first Europeans in Hawaii came from the capitalist center, brought capital with them and soon dominated the economy and politics; in contrast, Portuguese immigrants came from the periphery to serve as plantation workers. The great class difference made it impossible for the groups to share the same ethnic designation⁴. Simplistic as it may sound, this could certainly be applied to other contexts, including the Trinidadian one.

³ http://gatochy.blogspot.com/2005_09_04_archive.html

⁴ Geschwender, J., Rita Carroll-Seguín and Howard Brill, 1988, “The Portuguese and Haoles of Hawaii: Implications for the Origin of Ethnicity”, *American Sociological Review* 53(4):515-527.

In Guyana, the Portuguese were set apart from both the Black Creoles and the British. The former considered them opportunists and lackeys of the white establishment. The white considered them to be inferior because of their Catholic and Southern European origins, as well as their peasant past in Madeira. The Portuguese apparently considered themselves superior to the Black population. In 1856 and 1898 there were racial riots in Georgetown, during which some Black Creoles directed their rage towards Portuguese stores. The situation changed in the following years, with greater privileges granted by the whites to the Portuguese who, in turn, anglicized their names and set out to speak English as their mother tongue. During the struggle for independence, however, the Portuguese were still identified with British colonialism, as adversaries of the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese fighting for independence. The murder of a civil servant, Arthur Abraham, of Portuguese ethnicity, and the community's resistance to accept a black government, led many Portuguese to migrate to England, Canada and the US. Today they are a small minority and demand to be called "European"⁵.

It seems to be a matter of consistency that the history of Portuguese migration to British colonies or post-colonies is marked by a perception of non-whiteness and non-Europeaness, as well as by the occupation of ambiguous or intermediary status positions in the local social formations. In South Africa, for instance, many Afrikaners referred to the Portuguese as *wit kaffirs*, or white kafirs. Like in the US, the South African case is not strictly related to migration as indenture laborers to plantation economies. It is also a larger scale migration and it went on until more recently. It happened before and under apartheid and was later strengthened by refugees fleeing Mozambique and also Angola after independence. The community is also associated with small scale business, especially grocery stores, catering to the poor black communities. The community – or, more precisely, its business sector - has been of late the target of crime. This led to a truly unheard-of movement of protest by Portuguese community leaders demanding safety and the repression of crime and murders. The ANC counter-reacted, namely in a letter from minister Steve Tshwete written to Sr. Ferreirinha of the group "Projecto contra o crime". The title was "Where was the Portuguese community when the majority of South Africans suffered the crimes of apartheid?":

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_immigrants_in_Guyana

“Our country has had a considerable Portuguese community for some time, including the apartheid years. We know of no occasion when this community marched to the Union Buildings to present a memorandum to the apartheid presidents demanding an end to the apartheid crime against humanity. (...) In the face of countless massacres, you remained silent. You took no steps to express the abhorrence of the Portuguese community of the wilful and countless state murders that contributed to making apartheid South Africa a pariah among the nations. (...) Some among the Portuguese community you claim to represent, came to this country because they did not accept that the Mozambican and Angolan people should gain their freedom and independence from Portuguese colonialism. Accordingly, South Africa became a second home for these people, because our own people were not free. These came here because they knew that the colour of their skin would entitle them to join "the master race", to participate in the oppression and exploitation of the black majority and to enjoy the benefits of white minority domination. It is perhaps because you have not outgrown these white supremacist ideas and practices that you wrote your memorandum, which you delivered to the Union Buildings. (...) You are the only language community in our country that has sought to identify itself as being a particular and special victim of crime. (...) Again, we know of no instance when you addressed even a mild protest note to the regimes that created the crime legacy with which we have to contend, calling for the protection of the black majority”.⁶

Caught in-between, once again – and regardless of our moral judgement about this case.

An excellent essay by Peter Fry (2000) contrasts British and Portuguese colonial presence in Africa and brings that contrast to the present day⁷. He refers the on-going tension between the notions of “assimilation” and “segregation” that define the contrast between the two empires. He criticizes the implicit representation in Perry Anderson’s 1966 famous work – and its definition of British colonialism as normal by contrast with the bizarre nature of late Portuguese colonialism, and the Lusotropical ideological lie that masked barbarian practices. That would have been the solution for a colonial power devoid of capital and incapable of developing the economy of the colonies. Fry however places Anderson’s text within the context of a long anti-Portuguese British tradition characterized by what James Duffy called “a

⁶ <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/docs/portuguese.htm>. See Marcus Tofolli da Silva (Unicamp) work on this.

⁷ Fry, P., 2000, “Cultures of Difference. The aftermath of Portuguese and British colonial policies in southern Africa”, *Social Anthropology*, 8(2):117-143

kind of neo-racial prejudice". The blemish would fall upon the racially mixed peoples, the "pseudo-Europeans" and the "Europeans gone native". I think that this tradition, which was experimented and put into practice in the intra-European struggle for the colonies and articulated with the Portuguese State's subsidiary status in relation to Britain, was transposed to the interpretation of the Portuguese migrants in British colonies and from there to the Anglo-American post-colonial contexts.

It is not just a case of strengthening Homi Bhabha's writings on how the colonizers and the colonized cannot be seen as separate entities, defining each other separately, but rather negotiating cultural identities through an on-going exchange of cultural performances that then offer a mutually recognizable representation of cultural difference. In the cases that I have just alluded to, other social actors need to be included, namely the subaltern layers that did not benefit from colonial exploitation and migrated to the colonies of other empires. There they occupied – in terms of class and ethnicity – an in-between space. But not as communicators, as "in-between" may suggest, but rather more like classificatory pariahs, not quite white also meaning not quite black. They incarnated two ideological systems: the anglo-saxon racial system, and the lusotropicalist. It just so happens that the latter was read upside down in British territories, as an evidence of inferiority.

If by Luso-Afro-Brazilian studies we mean the study of the interconnections between peoples who were exposed to the expansion of the Portuguese State and who still share that history, we have to do at least two things. One, to never forget the unequal power relations that that connectedness established – in the political economy, symbolically, and in the articulation of these two levels; two, to never dichotomize simplistically that unevenness. In order to do this to happen, we need to make our analyses more complex, and in order to do that we need to find case studies that highlight contradiction and ambiguity. Poor Portuguese migrants in British colonies, or, for that matter, rich Brazilians in the media industry in Portugal, or kleptocracy in Angola, or the racial divide in Cape Verde, or political struggles around the agreement for a common spelling rule of the Portuguese language, or an analysis of the debate around racial quotas in Brazilian universities, and so on and so forth – all these are examples of how to pursue the study of the *factual* existence of a political, symbolic, historical connectedness in the LusoAfroBrazilian world without reducing it to sheer political-ideological construction, or to blow it out of proportion to some exceptional culturalist view of Lusotropicalism. Lusotropicalism needs to be seen as a theoretical product with specific

authors and periods; but also as a cultural construct that, as I have tried to show elsewhere, was ripe to happen even before Freyre, and continued as hegemonic representation after the colonial regime's appropriation. The contents of Lusotropicalism provided also classificatory instruments for other colonial powers to categorize Portuguese colonialism. Critical Luso-Afro-Brazilian studies need to be decisively PostLusotropical.