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Miguel Vale de Almeida
AN EARTH-COLORED SEA

‘Race’, Culture, and the Politics of Identity in the Postcolonial Portuguese-Speaking World

Miguel Vale de Almeida
To Paulo
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This book is the English version—it is not simply a translation, since substantial parts have been altered—of a collection of essays on the politics of identity and cultural representation originally published in Portuguese (Vale de Almeida 2000). It analyzes the role of ‘culture’ and ‘race’ in the disputes centered on difference and inequality. The notions of ethnicity, ‘race,’ ‘culture,’ nation, colonialism, and postcolonialism are discussed in the light of ethnopolitical movements, anthropological theory, and official rhetoric on national identities. The structure of the book reflects a trajectory of research, starting with a case study in Trinidad, followed by another in Brazil, and ending with yet another in Portugal. The three case studies, written in the ethnographic genre, are intertwined with essays of a more theoretical nature. The nonmonographic, composite—or hybrid—nature of this work may be in itself an indication of the need for multisited, transnational, and historically grounded research when dealing with issues of representations of identity that were constructed during colonial times, and that are today reconfigured in the power-ridden struggles for cultural meanings.

* 

In 1997–98 I did fieldwork in the city of Ilhéus, in the state of Bahia, Brazil. The research was focused on the emergence of the local ‘Black’ movement, as the participants themselves call it. Since my 1996 book The Hegemonic Male: Masculinity in a Portuguese Town I had been redirecting my research interests from gender and sexuality toward ethnopolitics, ‘race,’ and the politics of identity and cultural representation. Before choosing Brazil as a field, I contemplated Trinidad and Tobago as a possible field for studying ethnic and ‘racial’ complexity.
Chapter 1 narrates my brief experience in that Caribbean country. It is the story of a discontinued research project. However, it sets the tone for the book, since, while in Trinidad, my identity as a Portuguese placed me in a specific social position within the ethnic map of the country. Representations of the Portuguese immigrants in Trinidad highlight the ambiguous nature of the Portuguese diaspora in non-European lands: the colonizing nation was (and is) also a nation of immigrants.

An unexpected journey to Brazil triggered my intellectual curiosity and made me shift the field site from the Caribbean to this former Portuguese colony. Brazil is a challenge for a Portuguese anthropologist: it places him or her in an ambiguous position between estrangement and familiarity, because the language spoken is the same—and yet different—because there is a common history—and yet it is one of colonizers and colonized. Furthermore, the historical experience of the Afro-Brazilian population is, in a way, the outcome of Portuguese maritime expansion and colonialism, especially of its most negative side, slavery. Estrangement and familiarity thus give way to the need to reconsider the history of one’s nation, its narratives, and their political consequences. The study of Afro-Brazilians’ process of empowerment became also the study of the role of colonial experience and mythology in Portuguese representations of nationality.

Chapter 2 provides the ethnography of the Black movement in Ilhéus, Bahia, Brazil. ‘Black movement’ is a local expression that designates both the cultural performances of poor Blacks (music, dance, Carnival, Afro-Brazilian religion, etc.) and their struggle for civil rights and social recognition (through different degrees of involvement in, and connection with, the political Black movement). This type of social movement falls under the category of ethnopolitics, that is, the mobilization of ethnicity (including ‘race’) and ‘cultural products’ for political purposes such as the recognition of cultural difference within the nation-state and the furthering of claims to the social and economic improvement of segments of the population that are oppressed by ethnocentric prejudice and/or socio-economic disenfranchisement. Although my initial intention was to write a book specifically about my research in Brazil, I eventually decided to include my materials in the form of a (longer) chapter in the Portuguese version of this book. In fact, the Brazilian experience set me on the track of studying the postcolonial reconfigurations of identity both in Portugal and her former colonies. This development away from the writing of a monographic work on the Afro-cultural movement in Brazil is further enhanced in the present English version: chapter 2 is now much shorter, in order to allow for an easier dialogue with the materials and discussions presented in other chapters of this book.

Chapter 3 analyzes the roots and ramifications of Luso-Tropicalism (i.e., Portuguese Tropicalism). As my knowledge of Brazilian history and anthropology deepened, I realized that the discourses on Brazilian national identity are intertwined with those on the Portuguese national identity. In particular, the so-called Luso-Tropicalist theories of Gilberto Freyre (1933) explained Brazil as a product of an alleged Portuguese capacity for miscegenation and adaptation.
These theories—which I classify as a type of 'cultural exceptionalism'—coincide with those that, ever since the nineteenth century, have been upheld by Portuguese intellectuals and official rhetoric in order to justify the late colonial enterprise in Africa as the logical consequence of a national essence and purpose in history. Luso-Tropicalist theories have also become commonly held theories in both Portugal and Brazil, as well as among significant segments of the elites in other former colonies. This wishful-thinking narrative of miscegenation has been, of course, useless for the understanding of the conditions of the descendants of Africans in Brazil, the indigenous 'Black' populations in the African former colonies, and African immigrants in Portugal today.

Chapter 4 further discusses the issues raised in chapter 3. Luso-Tropicalist notions deal with concepts such as hybridism, miscegenation and, although not in those exact words, in-betweenness (see Bhabha 1994) and creolization—all of which are the subjects of contemporary debates in postcolonial studies. These issues, however, have a long history of debate—both in academia and in politics—centered on the concepts of ‘race’ and ‘culture’. The object of that debate was, to a large extent, the colonial possessions, its populations and, reflexively, the colonizing nation-state and its peoples. This chapter confronts the paradoxical nature of the concept of hybridism by analyzing its history, particularly in the Portuguese colonial context.

Chapter 5 takes the reader from colonial times and extra-European locations to contemporary Portugal. The social movement of solidarity with East Timor that occurred in Lisbon in September 1999 demonstrated the importance to the Portuguese of emotional and cultural ties to people whom they saw as sharing their language and religion. These commonalities have a clear colonial history and are now being reconstructed around the idea of Lusophony (i.e., the commonwealth of Portuguese-speaking countries), which is taken to be the core of a Portuguese postcolonial identity. In East Timor, diacritical signs such as Portuguese and Catholicism were used in the nationalist struggle against Indonesia. These signs are the cultural patrimony of a local Creole elite and are exaggerated in Portuguese perceptions of East Timor. The colonial and postcolonial ironies of this case of mutual constitution of identity are analyzed.

Chapter 6 is a conclusion of sorts. It explores the relationship between the fields of anthropology and postcolonial studies. The latter is criticized for the lack of ethnographic grounding and for the historical and geographical limitations of its scope (namely, the English-speaking world). The ‘Portuguese case’ (i.e., the social, political, economic, and cultural networks that were produced under the aegis of Portuguese colonialism) may establish a comparative field, provided that a new approach to Portuguese colonialism is implemented. Such an approach should focus on the anthropological aspects of the mutual constitution of colonizer and colonized identities, and this should be done within a critical framework that challenges commonsense Luso-Tropicalist approaches, by stressing cultural and historical specificity rather than cultural exceptionalism.
I could see the ocean from the balcony of my temporary home in Ilhéus and the beach was only a five-minute walk away. The tropical landscape and climate were in perfect harmony with Western fantasies of sensuous delight and idleness. However, I always paid attention to a small detail that seemed to soil this image of tropical bliss: the sea was unpleasantly brown, muddy, earth-colored. I have turned this fact into a symbol. The sea before me was the same sea that the Portuguese navigators had known five hundred years before when they 'discovered' Brazil; it was the same sea that witnessed the arrival of slaves from Africa; the same sea that Afro-Brazilians symbolize as the road back to Africa; the same sea that is used as a symbol in the mythology of the Portuguese national narrative about maritime expansion. That sea is necessarily muddy, opaque, since it contains (and hides) multiple sediments, histories, and meanings, power and powerlessness, nostalgia for the past, and promises of liberation.

* 

The writing of this book and the research it is based on would not have been possible without the help of many people. In Trinidad, Jo-Anne Ferreira was my main collaborator, but also my guide to sources and bibliography and, ultimately, a close friend.

In Ilhéus, I am indebted to the Rodrigues family from the neighborhood of Conquista, the Tombency religious terreiro and the Dilazenze Carnival Bloco. I shall always remember Mãe Hilsa, Marinho, Gleyde, Ney, and Dino as the best and most welcoming of field collaborators. Moacir Pinho, at the Ilhéus’ Foundation for Cultural Activities, introduced me to the activists in the Black movement and the local politicians. All the members of the Council of Black Entities of Ilhéus were extremely open and helpful, namely Mãezinha, Val, Franklin, Sílvio, Jacio, Gurita, and Mãe Gessy; Gerson, although not a member of the council, provided me with useful information on the local ‘racial’ politics regarding Carnival celebrations.

At the local university (Universidade Estadual de Santa Cruz), I am indebted to Professor Ruy Póvoas and the people at Kawe (Afro-Brazilian research group), Capoeira instructor Roberto, and dance instructor Lurdes. A special thanks is due to Jane Badaró Voisin, professor of Portuguese literature, who became one of my dearest friends: I was always welcomed at her home in Itacaré and miss the company of her husband, Pascal, and her children, Rafa and Joana.

In Olivença, the suburb of Ilhéus where I lived, life would not have been the same without the company and help of our neighbors the Magalhães: Cláudio, Elvio, Elvira, Isabel—and also Mestre Ramiro. The same applies to Dona Jó’s food, her adopted child Carmen’s smile and curiosity, and Elma’s housekeeping. In Canavieiras, I enjoyed short vacations at the home of Miguel Mateus and Eveline Brigham, and in Salvador, life became more exciting at Bruno Visco’s.
During fieldwork, my colleague Ana Cláudia Cruz da Silva shared information, data, and research tips without the hassles of competition, and her supervisor, Márcio Goldman (from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and a long time researcher of Ilhéus Afro-Brazilian community) has provided important insights for my work. At the University of Brasilia, Professors Alcida Ramos and Mariza Peirano showed a genuine interest in my work, inviting me to give a lecture on the work in progress. Journeys to Salvador were intellectually stimulating in the company of Pedro Agostinho and Maria do Rosário Carvalho (from the Federal University of Bahia); the same should be said of Cecilia McCallum’s welcoming in Valença and, later on, at a conference she organized in Salvador.

My stay on the field in Brazil was shared with my colleague Susana de Matos Viegas, who was doing research with the local descendants of Indians. We shared a home, everyday life, troubles and hopes, and continue now to share both ideas and friendship. The frequent guests made the field feel more like home: for that I thank my parents; my old friend Rui Zink; Ruy Duarte de Carvalho; Pedro, Mónica, and Catarina; Leonor and Maria; Nuno Porto; and Ângela Corrêa. Most of all, I thank António, who always had the patience and understanding to accept my absences on the field.

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Finally, I dedicate this book to Paulo. I decided to write this version in English when I was visiting him in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was there, too (on a subsequent visit) that I started writing. The book was finished in our new home in Lisbon. My decision to work on this project owes a great deal to the inspiration provided by his energy, friendship, love, and intelligence. That is only a small part of a much larger contribution: that of having turned my life into a much happier event.
1

**POTOGEE:**
**BEING PORTUGUESE IN TRINIDAD**

“Is these Potogees who cause the trouble, you know,” he said. “They have their hands in the stinking salt-fish barrel and they are still the first to talk of nigger this and coolie that.”

(V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*, 1962)

In 1994 I visited Trinidad with the purpose of becoming familiar with what I thought would be a new fieldwork site. I was interested in the Caribbean region because the local social formations were constituted by European expansion. Caribbean societies are products of the world economy of slavery and plantation, not a classical case of colonialism (once, of course, the indigenous population was exterminated in the early days of contact). Trinidad, in particular, is a society in which ethnic and racial diversity and modes of classification are complex and related to historical layers of forced immigration, indentured labor, and ‘voluntary’ immigration. I had no intention whatsoever of studying the Portuguese of Trinidad. But my journey in that country was bound to surprise me: my acquaintance with a local Portuguese-Trinidadian scholar, and the subsequent decision to do fieldwork in Brazil instead, led me into writing this text. It is a text that tries to establish a dialogue between the genre of travel narrative on the one hand, and theoretical discussion on issues of ethnicity and ‘race’ on the other.

**Travel Journal**

In spite of how small the island is, the ride from the airport to the bed-and-breakfast was long. The reason for that is that the taxi driver decided to stop at halfway. He did not tell me why he decided to stop by a cricket field where his
fellow Mormon Church members were gathering for a picnic. I insisted on being taken to the bed-and-breakfast, since I desperately needed a shower to cool off the heat and humidity. But, for him, it would have been natural to stay a little longer. I was to find out later that he was not trying to proselytize, but rather simply performing Trinidadian ‘liming,’ that is, to let oneself linger, whether on a street corner, at home, or in a bar, just to talk for the sake of talking: exchanging information on other people’s ethnic backgrounds; talking about a journey to Miami, Toronto, or London to visit relatives; trading tips on shopping and prices; discussing the merits of different songs in ‘soka’ or steel band contests; analyzing cricket matches; or discussing politics. In sum, in liming you use time not in a ‘productive’ manner, but rather in a ‘socially productive’ way. You create ties and relationships, which also imply exerting social control, as it happens with ‘picong,’ a form of ironic sneering at other people’s physical or behavioral attributes.

After two hours I finally arrived at Ms. Grace’s. Her house is in Diego Martin, a suburb of the capital, Port of Spain. Grace is an elderly woman and a widow, she is active in the Anglican Church, and she asked me a lot about how to put her business on the Internet. My apartment was on the ground floor of her ‘Spanish-style’ house, but I spent my first afternoon talking with her in her veranda covered with bougainvillea. I told her that I was in Trinidad just to get a sense of the place and to explore the possibility of doing research there. But my Portugueseness was to become the focus of her attention. She told me that I must meet the Portuguese of Trinidad. Having said this, she picked up the phone book and looked up Mr. De Nóbrega’s (president of the Portuguese Club) phone number. She couldn’t find it. Suddenly she remembered that a book about the Portuguese of Trinidad had just come out: ‘Let’s call the author,’ she said. On that same day (and Trinidad has a population of over one million—it is not your tiny Caribbean island) I was on the phone with Jo-Anne Ferreira, author of The Portuguese of Trinidad and Tobago: Portrait of an Ethnic Minority. And on that same afternoon, Jo-Anne visited me, with her sister. Our conversation was quite formal at the beginning, maybe because I was perceived as much older—a side effect of precocious gray hair. She gave me a copy of her book. It was the beginning of a relationship with her, her family, and her friends. Let us take a look at her book, which I read in that same evening.

**Portrait of an ‘Ethnic Minority’**

People from diverse ethnic and national origins migrated to Trinidad as indentured laborers on sugar and cocoa plantations. The first to arrive were Portuguese from the island of Faial in the Azores, in 1834, the year of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire—a fact that generated considerable labor shortage in the plantations. The Azoreans’ status was still illegal.

The first governmental attempts at solving the labor shortage crisis focused on Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and freed slaves from the United States. The