

**IS THE DIFFERENCE IN PORTUGUESE
COLONIALISM THE DIFFERENCE IN LUSOPHONE
POSTCOLONIALISM?¹**

***On Toward a Portuguese Postcolonialism.* Ed. Anthony
Soares. Bristol: HiPLA, 2006.**

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The editor of this fourth volume in the *Lusophone Studies* series published by the Department of Hispanic, Portuguese & Latin American Studies at the University of Bristol defines, as its main objective, the charting of “a postcolonial map of the Lusophone world to supplement a wider postcolonial reality that is usually seen through an Anglophone theoretical perspective” (5). The volume’s second and related aim is to displace the tendency to interpret “the particular realities of the Lusophone postcolonial world through the indiscriminate application of theoretical concepts developed in the Anglophone context” (11). According to one of the anthology’s contributors, to apply “Anglo-Saxon” postcolonial theory more or less arbitrarily to Lusophone terrains amounts to a sort of “parroting,” which ultimately “threatens to erase the difference” of Lusophone literature, “rendering [it] into yet another version, and possibly, even an inferior one” (Medeiros 32). As against such “simplistic” reliance “on an Anglophone dictated agenda for postcolonial inquiry” (37), he recommends the elaboration of an “oppositional form of Postcolonial Studies” (35). Ultimately, only the first three articles in the collection seek, in a sustained sense, to accomplish this critical aim.

One text that looms large over this enterprise is Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s seminal essay “Entre Prospero e Caliban: colonialismo, pós-colonialismo e inter-identidade,” which has gained wide currency in Portuguese literary and cultural studies since its original publication in 2001. It would hardly be an overstatement to assert that Santos’s central hypothesis—that the difference of Portu-

guese colonialism must reproduce itself in the difference of postcolonialism in the Portuguese-speaking world—has effectively set the agenda for the as yet incipient field of Portuguese or Lusophone postcolonial studies. Cited by six of the issue's eleven contributors, "Entre Prospero e Caliban" assumes pride of place in this anthology, having definitely emerged as "an indispensable reference" (Villar 169). One of the reasons for this ubiquity, Paulo de Medeiros argues, is that "by representing Portugal as semi-peripheral, [Santos] begins ... to decenter Postcolonial Studies" (35).

Nevertheless, it may well be one of "the strange effects of a certain Portuguese belatedness" (Medeiros 31) that this spirited (and pre-deconstructivist) quest for a critical discourse that would be adequate to its Lusophone examples resonates somewhat oddly with the demands for the decolonization of African literature issuing (ironically enough) precisely from Anglophone Africa in the past century. For all its supposed limitations, then, Homi Bhabha's (i.e., the "Anglophone dictated") concept of hybridity has at least the merit of opening up a "space" from which the colonial subject is empowered to undo the very binaries that this sort of polarized world view reproduces and inevitably sustains. I shall leave aside the outdated question of whether any (theoretical) discourse can ever be fully adequate to its example.

I recognize, of course, that these calls for a postcolonial "cartography" attuned to the particularities and eccentricities of Portugal's colonial project tacitly respond to two crucial lacunae in dominant postcolonial discourses: on the one hand, the latter's nearly exclusive concentration on the space of the British Empire, often leaving out the Americas (notably the Caribbean), as well as most of North and Sub-Saharan Africa; on the other hand, and more conspicuously, the propensity of such discourses to posit the Enlightenment rather than the inception of Spanish and Portuguese colonial domination in Africa, Asia and the Americas, as the chronological terminus of modernity. One of the vital tasks of a Lusophone or Portuguese postcolonialism would thus be the restoration of this history, a charge that assumes particular urgency for Luso-Brazilianists (and that few of the contribu-

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tors to this issue explicitly undertake).

At the same time, the formulation of the central problem of Lusophone postcolonial studies as essentially a matter of generating a more appropriate, or more referential, critical lexicon and methodology re-introduces unavoidably the very “simplistic division between center and periphery” that these critics try so strenuously to “decenter” (Medeiros 39). Since the question of the Lusophone postcolonial, as articulated by Santos, Soares and Medeiros, appears to boil down to a set of demands to counter, in the postcolonial context, the vestigial epistemological effects of Great Britain’s (semi-)colonial domination of Portugal, these metropolitan critics ultimately seek to adopt an unsustainable subject position, that of the colonized. As a result, the subjectivity, indeed the agency, of the colonized subaltern tends to fade from the critical horizon. The “agenda” of Lusophone postcolonial studies thus remains ineluctably overdetermined by “colonized” Portugal’s putative “deficit of colonialism.” And Lusophone or Portuguese postcolonialism comes to signify, in the last instance, a postcolonialism oriented not toward the social and cultural situation of the colonies turned nations but to the dilemmas and vicissitudes of the former colonizing subject.

It is somewhat ironic in this respect that in the concluding essay Medeiros cites, as an instance of “the overwhelming predominance of Anglophone postcolonial theory,” Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), which he faults for not taking “into account Portuguese history and especially the specific elements of Portuguese colonialism” (219-20). I would refer Medeiros to Young’s 2001 study, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, in which the British scholar undertakes exactly such an analysis (see Young 2001, 283-92), and provides an explanation of Amílcar Cabral’s theoretical contributions to postcolonial theory that is certainly more in depth than anything offered in this anthology, where texts by Cabral, as well as Samora Machel, Eduardo Mondlane and Agostinho Neto, are notably absent from the list of works cited. Indeed, the only reference to Cabral I found is cited from a study by an Anglo-

phone critic (15-16). Notwithstanding the cautionary notes of its adherents, then, in the end it becomes difficult to ascertain how this approach can “refrain from engaging in an academic form of (re)colonization of the field of postcolonial studies” (Soares 5).

The most conspicuous index of this “re-colonization” is arguably Santos’s untheorized identification of Shakespeare’s well-traveled figure with “semiperipheral” Portugal. It is not simply a question of replacing Caliban with Adamastor (a figure derived “from Portuguese literature”), thereby presumably taking “a key step in furthering Lusophone Postcolonial Studies” (Medeiros 46). In fact, if we grasp Adamastor as not just a figure of the native loser but as a projection of the Portuguese victor himself, then Camões’s giant would not so much represent “the superimposition of the margin upon the centre” (Medeiros 46) as the exact opposite. (I would propose concurrently that an analogous paradox is at work in John Kinsella’s claim that in the novel *Autópsia de um mar de ruínas* “the Azorean or Portuguese writer” João de Melo is able to employ Angolan Portuguese as “a weapon against the promotion of colonial attempts at subjugation” [166]). This is obviously not the place to reexamine the significance of the Caliban-Ariel-Prospero triangulation to the development of a space of international resistance to colonial and imperial domination in Latin America, the Caribbean, and even Lusophone Africa. Suffice it to indicate that the equation of Portugal with Caliban obfuscates its leading role in the history of conquest and dispossession, which African, Caribbean and Latin American intellectuals understand Shakespeare’s early seventeenth-century play to allegorize. The original *Tempest* retains an indelible trace of this history, in fact, for the original Prospero, lest we forget, was Mediterranean, *not* Anglo-Saxon.

Santos himself has implicitly put to question the Portugal-Caliban identification in a 2001 essay on subalternity and globalization (“*Nuestra America: Reinventing a Subaltern Paradigm of Recognition and Redistribution*”), where he describes, as the most important political task of the next

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decades, the programmatic transformation of countries performing the function of intermediation between the core and periphery of the world's economy (such as Brazil, Mexico and India) into an "Ariel" unambiguously allied with Caliban. If Ariel is thus a figure of transculturation or cultural *mestizaje* as well as structural intermediation, why then is Shakespeare's "airy spirit" a more fitting symbol for Brazil, Mexico and India (which were all *de facto* colonies) than for Portugal, a former colonizing power which, as Santos himself asserts, also occupies an intermediary position between center and periphery? Furthermore, a national culture such as the Portuguese, which Santos defines as "a borderland culture" bereft of any content and marked by significant "internal heterogeneity," should, just like the larger and far more heterogeneous societies of Brazil, Mexico and India, disclose significant internal rifts and disparities. In other words, and to remain within the tropological strictures of the Ariel-Caliban polemic, the Caliban-Ariel-Prospero triangulation would symbolize not only Portugal's structural position vis-à-vis the "core" of the world system, but its complex internal dynamics as well.

One of the key questions we ought to consider, therefore, is who precisely does Santos's Calibanized Prospero, or "very Caliban" signify: the metropolitan capitalist, the colonial administrator, the rich colonial estate owner, the poor *colono* or emigrant-settler? In addition, given the long duration and multifarious character of Portuguese colonialism, what precisely is the temporality of this Prospero-Caliban relation? Does it play itself out in the same way in the seventeenth century as it does in the second half of the twentieth? Is it akin in Macau, Goa, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Brazil? In brief, is this identitarian "duplicity" a metaphysical structure or is it, like Portugal's semiperipheral position in the world system, a product of particular historical processes? These queries only begin to broach the multiple and untenable contradictions that Santos's fashionable hypotheses generate. To be sure, what Soares and Medeiros identify as the fundamental limitation of Anglophone postcolonialism (*pace* Santos), that is, its tendency

(notwithstanding its criticism of homogeneity and celebration of fragmentation and difference) to homogenize the colonial relation despite wide differences among European colonialisms is ultimately a matter of perspective as well.

As Robert Young observes, the differences in colonial history and administration were of scarce importance to anti-colonial revolutionaries for whom imperialism looked very much the same everywhere. Postcolonial critique tends to adopt a similar point of view because it identifies with the subject position of anti-colonial activists, not because it willfully ignores the heterogeneity of colonial history from the colonizers' perspective. Maria Teresa Carrilho underscores precisely this subjacent resemblance in her account of the colonization(s) of East Timor (114-15). And, in a shrewd analysis of a recent novel by Pepetela, Phillip Rothwell alludes to the ideological affinity between Portugal's anachronistic and the United States' postmodern empires, arguing that, in Pepetela's text, the Bush administration's current anti-terrorist rhetoric "is little more than the inheritance, or more precisely, the translation of a discourse favoured by the Salazar machine" (108). It is telling, in effect, that the articles that most cogently illustrate a postcolonial perspective in the collection (David Brookshaw's analysis of José Eduardo Agualusa's fiction, Carrilho's critique of the poetry of East Timor's Celso Oliveira, Hilary Owen's reading of Lília Momplé's short fiction, and Rothwell's examination of Pepetela's *Jaime Bunda*) tend either to circumvent or treat only in perfunctory terms the question of the adequateness of Anglophone postcolonial theoretical models. (From my admittedly partisan viewpoint, neither Onésimo Almeida's personal essay on *Lusofonia* nor Carmen Ramos Villar's analysis of a Luso-Canadian author's poetic production deal specifically with the postcolonial.) Either implicitly or explicitly, the position from which Brookshaw's, Carrilho's, Owen's and Rothwell's critiques are enunciated, regardless of where they are literally published or produced, is "the South."

By contrast, the starting point of Lusophone postcolonialism as defined by Santos, Soares and Medeiros would be not

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just the repudiation of (Anglophone) postcolonial theory, but a radical departure from what has consistently been that theory's main goal, that is, to reconsider the history of slavery, racism and colonization from the standpoint of those who endured its effects. I would insist that it is this question—and emphatically not the putative hybridity, subalterity, inefficiency, and indeed incompetence of the Portuguese colonizer—that ought to figure at the center of Lusophone postcolonialism. Far more pertinent to this inquiry (as Owen's and Rothwell's analyses strongly suggest) is the fact that, by operating under the conviction that social revolution could be imposed from above, radical Lusophone African states were effectively building on the legacy of colonial power. Their revolutionary nationalism thus evinced the contradictoriness that defines emergent national discourses, according to Partha Chatterjee, namely the tendency to reproduce an order of knowledge whose structure of representation corresponds to the very power regimes nationalist thought attempts to reject. In this crucial structural sense, the legacy of Portuguese colonialism is not essentially distinct from the one bequeathed by Anglo-Saxon colonialism. I would therefore respectfully submit that, more than its purported and reiterated differences, it is the commonalities that Portugal's peculiarly brutal colonial enterprise shares with those of the so-called Super-Prosperos that should underpin the elaboration of a Lusophone postcolonial theory positioned in and oriented toward the South.

Note

1. The title of this essay obviously alludes to Kwame Anthony Appiah's seminal article published in *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): "Is the 'Post-' in 'Postmodernism' the 'Post-' in 'Postcolonial'?"