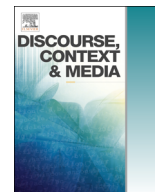




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The empire blogs back: Gendered and sexualized cultural “others” in superdiversified digital trajectories



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of the ongoing processes of constructing and deconstructing sexualized and exoticized othering in Brazilian-Portuguese mediated cultural (mis)encounters and (mis)constructions of the female body against the background of changing geopolitical and socio-economic superdiversifying relations in the postcolonial Lusophone world. Methodologically it tries to respond to a call, by several authors, for more empirically grounded research as a means of addressing the complexities involved in contemporary national-transnational dialogs and identity construction processes. The analysis, while resting on a larger cultural and postcolonial studies' frame of reference, brings this kind of translocal conversation home with an in-depth analysis of digital encounters detected in text trajectories on blogs and social media. The data, approached through the lenses of competing orders of indexicality, indicate that “cultural identity” (as enacted through the exchanges of a handful of Portuguese and Brazilian nationals) is a minefield that has to be understood as interlacing discrepant indexical values: it simultaneously articulates historic rivalries and their rejection. From this point of view, the voices of several of the focused interlocutors seemed to cry out for new meaning-making processes while still orienting to Colonial totalizing dichotomies and hierarchies. This kind of dovetailing adds more nuanced contours to the notion of superdiversity being explored in this special volume, reconstructing it in terms of a permanent and necessary diversity-sameness dialectics – a kind of friction that has been exacerbated in digital contexts. Put otherwise, “colonial empires” are still around as orienting references but, in superdiverse times, not only do they write back but also blog back in multi-territorial discursive trajectories.

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1. (Post)colonial (mis)encounters

The contemporary experiences of mobility, multiplicity, and time-space compression have been reconstructing the traditional perception of social, cultural and linguistic diversity in terms of a general idea of superdiversity (Vertotec, 2007), characterized by the increase in the contact with “otherness” and a myriad of alterities – a phenomenon related to intense migration flows, face-to-face contacts and virtual meetings with distinct nationalities, ethnicities, languages and religions. Everything – people, products, knowledges, information, discourses, identities, etc. – circulate quickly and transglobally, confronting contemporary subjects with a multitude of “others” who are different from familiar and known realms. Conjointly, they enhance encounters and, let us say, *misencounters* of all sorts, promoted by information, media and digital technologies, whose tentacles reach all corners of the

planet. If superdiversity is a distinguishing facet of our time, one could ponder how the above discourse practices – excerpts of recent digital texts, produced in different “national” contexts (Portugal and Brazil) sharing the “same” language – fit in with the idea of superdiverse societies. Taking into account that a shared commonality between the fragments is the recontextualization of long-standing mummified discourses concerning cultural identities, it is fair to ask where the characteristic transit and plurality of the contemporary scenario has gone.

With rather few words, the texts recycle power relations between colonizers and colonized in the era of postcolonial criticism. By so doing they are illustrative of habitualized identity-difference dynamics which produces a host of well-known binarisms (Portuguese vs. Brazilian, European community vs. Latin community, men vs. women, for example). We thus witness the “self” capturing the “other” in stereotyped categories, which constitute typification traps and mutual condensations remounting to a colonial heritage. Such “othering” process – which, by eliminating diversity and contradictions, projects clear boundaries onto identities and alterities – enables us to discern two “national”

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territories, Brazil and Portugal, “united” by the Portuguese language.

Considering this framework, the present work gives visibility to a specific kind of contact on the contemporary communication landscape: media texts traveling transculturally on the web and (re-)shaping cultural identity categories such as “Portuguese” and “Brazilian”. The purpose is to investigate superdiversity in the cyberspace, focusing on (1) the intertextual chains media texts enter into; (2) the semiotic resources and Discourses (Gee, 1999) mobilized in the communication process under scrutiny and the orders of indexicality they orient to (Blommaert, 2005); and (3) their impact upon the fabrication of cultural identities and alterities. In exploring these intersections I seek to approach the following phenomenon: normalized and globalized identities and alterities travel on the web and, by weaving together different temporalities and spaces, they “vibrate” in many sorts of ways; these contacts produce a plurality of semiotically articulated meanings, forming a complex semantic web whose disperse and discontinuous content is difficult to grasp. Complementarity? Interchange? Tension? Shock? What is the nature of such vibration?

In order to project an answer, I track down part of the path followed by the snatches of texts in the above epigraphs. I employ the concept of text trajectory (Blommaert, 2005, 2010) as a theoretical-methodological-analytical strategy to inquire about textual wefts, arguing that it is a fruitful procedure to approach how concrete social actors experience and (re)construct the idea of cultural identity within a scenario of “diversification of diversity” (Vertotec, 2007, p. 1024), in everyday discourse practices – as in digital media, for example.

2. Portugal and Brazil: transnational flows

Throughout the centuries, since the Portuguese empire started claiming the “new-found” Brazilian land as one of its colonized enclaves in 1500, processes of migration have been taking place between metropolis and colony, configuring a multifaceted and multifarious phenomenon. From the first settlements along the Brazilian coast until the 17th century – a period in which the Portuguese, according to the prevailing mercantilist policy, were simultaneously exploring the Asian continent – migration was not very robust and did not make Portugal’s presence very relevant in the Captaincy Colonies of Brazil. The following centuries, however, saw a significant transformation of this state of affairs, which lasted through the end of Colonial Brazil. The trade possibilities and thriving opportunities of economic exploration of the territory (comprising both gold and diamond mining and the development of sugar production in the 18th century) have enhanced large-scale migration. Later, this stream of Portuguese transit to Brazil grows considerably due to institutional and social crises in Portugal, the moving of both the Royal Family (in 1808) and the Portuguese capital to Rio de Janeiro, the opening of the Brazilian Ports to Friend Nations, and the independence of the country in 1822 – events that attracted those running away from political instability and looking for economic prosperity.

Later, as the abolition of slavery (in 1850) imposed restrictions on slave labor, the main working force of the Brazilian economy at the time, a new stage in Portuguese migration took place as the demand for workers for both the growing coffee industry and the service sectors in the flourishing urban centers increased. Therefore, it can be said that the heyday of the Portuguese “trek” across the ocean is concentrated along the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century – an inflow which led the Portuguese to occupy, in a few decades, chief positions in realms such as industry, banking, domestic trade, the estate business, the

consumer landscape, and the rural and urban job markets. Historical studies of that period indicate the emergence of anti-lusitanism and lusophobia practices resulting from the varied interethnic conflicts the co-existence of competing cultural identities-alterities gave rise to (Lobo, 2001; Ribeiro, 2002). However, despite the designated bigotry, these works also show that economic antagonism did not obscure intense interchanges in the field of literature and arts by and large.

From World Wars I and II on, the influx of Portuguese migrants gradually slowed down.¹ This decline, which may be partially explained by policies of immigration control in Brazil, successive economic crises and political turmoil in both countries (Salazar’s dictatorship and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the 20-year military regime in Brazil), changed a bit when in the 1980s Portuguese businessmen, and other professionals, crossed the Brazilian border attracted by the so-called Brazilian economical miracle ideology, proclaimed by the military government (Machado, 2007). Nevertheless, the financial crisis and the downturn in Brazilian economy which threw the country into recession – and whose effects can be felt until the present day – have contributed to the promotion of a contrary flux of people, i.e., the reversal movement of Brazilians crossing the Atlantic to settle in Portugal.

The itinerary redefinition has in many ways altered the 200-year postcolonial relationship the two countries have been maintaining, an era which has basically encompassed two migration waves from Brazil to Portugal. The first one, more technical, so to speak, happened between the 80s and 90s, involving “white” highly qualified Brazilians who migrated to Portugal to work as dentists, computer engineers, advertisers, lawyers, etc. (Fontes, 2013). This movement, which increased steadily through almost three decades, soared after 1998, configuring what has been termed the second wave of migration, a process quite distinct from the previous one. This time the phenomenon was constituted by a more ethnically diverse, though less educated, group of people who migrated to work in less qualified jobs and for lower salaries. Coming along with the rapid growth of the number of illegal immigrants and clandestine networks of prostitution, it determined a substantial rise in the Brazilian population residing in Portugal.² As a corollary, prejudice regarding Brazilian migrants in all institutions (education, health and the workplace) has been escalating, although discrimination against the second group is more flagrant. Some authors (Vieira, 2011, for example) approach this kind of intolerance as being a reminiscent effect of colonial constructions concerning “us” (the center) and “them” (the periphery), which are recycled in the way Portuguese and Brazilians experience a postcolonial scenario – an environment marked by the continuity of colonial, or neo-colonial (as the author puts it), discourses. Neo-colonialism could be one of the ways by which the relationship between Brazil and Portugal can be captured after the latter has joined the European Community.

This brief outline of the migratory movements between two “Lusophone” countries³ suggests that migration is a complex and sensitive affair, crisscrossed by identity processes involving issues of class, gender, sexuality, race, work, and educational background. That put it makes sense to think of migrants’ identity processes as always plural and diversified, although the

¹ According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), around 316.204 Portuguese migrated to Brazil in the 19th century; in the 1980s this number dropped to 4.605 (figures were retrieved from <http://brasil500anos.ibge.gov.br/territorio-brasileiro-e-povoamento/portugueses>).

² As reported by Fontes (2013), in 2002 there were 48.691 Brazilian residents in Portugal. These figures skyrocketed in 2004 to more than 100.000 foreigners from Brazil, of whom 66.000 were illegal aliens.

³ For a detailed account of Portuguese immigration in Brazil check Lobo (2001).

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