



SAMUEL WEEKS

## Cultural dimensions, Lusophone spaces

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*Análise Social*, 202, XLVII (1.º), 2012

ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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*Discussed in this essay:*

ARENAS, Fernando (2011), *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence*.  
Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. ISBN: 978-0-8166-6983-7.

PARDUE, Derek (2008), *Ideologies of Marginality in Brazilian Hip Hop*.  
New York, Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-0-230-60465-0.

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In studies of contemporary globalized media, it is essential to consider the historical, economic, and social contexts of the neighborhoods, regions, countries, and linguistic communities in which cultural production takes place. Two recently published books, Derek Pardue's *Ideologies of Marginality in Brazilian Hip Hop* and Fernando Arenas's *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence*, reveal the degree of interconnectedness between contemporary Lusophone music, film, and literature and the legacies of Portuguese colonial rule. Throughout its history, the transatlantic Lusophone "empire" was one of concurrent dependency and imbalance, as seen in Brazil's reliance upon African slave labor and Portugal's subaltern status in comparison with its vast and resource-rich South American colony. As such, Portugal was reliant on *both* Brazil and its African territories in order to remain an autonomous nation-state, a status that was at times in name only.

Until 1888, when slavery in Brazil was abolished, the country played a dominant role in the “Black Atlantic matrix,” a social and economic space created by Portuguese colonialism and the slave trade (Arenas, 2011, p. 4). Slaves were “reproduced” in Africa, particularly in Angola, for production in Brazil, meaning that the “building” of the latter society entailed the destruction of the former one. During the final decades of colonialism in Brazil (1777-1822), concurrently the apex of the transatlantic slave trade, the colony succeeded in forming its own bilateral relations with Angola and West Africa, firmly rooted in the colonial system but largely independent from Portugal (Birmingham, 2003, p. 89). During this period, many freed Brazilian slaves immigrated to the West African coast, only to remain active participants in the slave trade. After a time of reduced contact between the three regions in the post-slavery era, triangular relations returned to the forefront, catalyzed by widespread Portuguese immigration to Brazil and Portugal’s redoubled colonization efforts in Angola and Mozambique during the mid-twentieth century. In sum, from the fifteenth century on, complex, diffuse, and manifold networks characterized the Lusophone spaces on both sides of the Atlantic, in ways that did not always overlap, connect, or hinge upon the metropole in order to exist.

As they did elsewhere, these historical and economic contingencies converged to form a cultural grammar defined by hybridity, difference, and translatability (Fabian, 1978, p. 317; Hannerz, 1987, p. 546). Both Pardue’s *Ideologies of Marginality* and Arenas’s *Lusophone Africa*, succeed in exploring this interplay as found in the contemporary popular culture of the São Paulo periphery and the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African countries: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe). Pardue and Arenas argue for the importance of studying the production and consumption of music, art, dance, literature, and film in order to understand the social and political framework of such cultural expressions. These media are “performed” in a particular language and help to create a common identity among a dispersed “family” of cultural producers and consumers. The approaches of both authors build upon research in media studies (e.g. Gondola, 1996; Schulz, 2002) that emphasizes the centrality of context in understanding “culture,” while providing a space for the accounts of non-elite practitioners to be heard (Barber, 1997, pp. 3-5; Penglase, 2011, p. 225). The texts explore the critical engagement of cultural producers and consumers with globalization, the legacies of colonialism and marginalization, political underrepresentation, and the neoliberal economy. The conjuncture of these phenomena highlights the role of popular culture in forging powerful connections between “global” and “local” forces. By organizing and coordinating images, sounds, and narratives

around the key themes, cultural producers comment on, and contribute to, an understanding of contemporary realities in Brazil and the PALOP.

Pardue and Arenas carried out their research in areas of profound socioeconomic inequality: the peripheral neighborhoods of São Paulo and the post-colonial milieus of PALOP Africans, both in former colonies (Angola, Mozambique) and metropolises (Lisbon, Paris). In these contexts, the elite and upper-middle class benefit from the material and technological advances of globalization, while the remainder of the population struggles to survive, often lacking essentials such as adequate food, sanitation, education, and housing (Pardue, 2008, pp. 19-24). This process has resulted in dependency, disconnection, exclusion, and starkly uneven development, with many former colonies assuming economic roles similar to those they performed during the colonial era.

Arenas's *Beyond Independence* provides various points of entry into these multifaceted discursive and conceptual fields, reflected in chapters discussing globalization in the PALOP; transatlantic matrix of Portugal, Brazil, and Africa; Cape Verdean "world music"; contemporary Luso-African cinema; and the fiction of postcolonial Angola. The text explores the evolving relationship of the PALOP with Portugal and Brazil since this group of African nations gained their independence in the mid-1970s. Today, Africanness has become a fashionable cultural commodity in Portugal, markedly in music, literature, and cuisine, while Portuguese-speaking Africans express a great deal of esteem and fondness for Brazilians, who possess significant influence in Lusophone Africa through the dissemination of media (particularly soap operas), music, and soccer. As such, Arenas offers context for understanding current cultural and historical developments in the Portuguese-speaking African countries, as a whole and in the individual nations.

Arenas devotes a chapter to the worldwide success in the past twenty years of Cape Verdean artists, focusing in particular on the career of Cesária Évora. He introduces the topic stating that the market hegemony of English-language pop music has led to the "ethnicization" of musics performed in other languages under the category of world music. The presence of an apparatus to distribute this music, coupled with an increased enthusiasm and receptiveness toward sounds considered "original," "genuine," or "exotic" in the postindustrial Global North, have been responsible for the trajectories of Évora and other Cape Verdean artists (Arenas, 2011, p. 56). Her rapid and successful commodification took place within seemingly disparate networks: the Cape Verdean diaspora in Western Europe and the U.S., the world music infrastructure, and the numerous individuals within and outside Cape Verde responsible for the production, presentation, and diffusion of music from the islands (cf. Hoffman, 2008). That Évora records for a French world music record company

adds another dimension to this co-dependent local/global arrangement, in which the French government aids the rise of a Cape Verdean artist, whose albums a Paris-based label in turn distributes to a global audience.

Chapters three and four discuss post-colonial PALOP film and literature, the prevailing themes of which are the despondency and disillusionment regarding the failed Marxist-Leninist experiments in the years following independence, and current ambivalence and disappointment with the “democracy” that arrived in the 1990s and 2000s. These accounts depict the unequal socio-economic and political power structures inherited from colonialism and the replacement of colonial rule with post-independence elites. Such a dynamic can be seen in *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* (from the filmmaker Flora Gomes), which considers the protagonist Vicente’s intensely disconcerting predicament of becoming the exploitative “boss” whom he had tried so valiantly to defeat as a “comrade” in the colonial war of the 1960s and 70s (Arenas 2011, xxv). Gomes portrays a country in a liminal state, one existing between one-party and multiparty governance and between a centralized and “free” economy. Few express hope in any of these systems. Guinea-Bissau is “independent,” but questions abound as to whether life has improved in the years since independence.

Expounding on this premise are Angolan novelists Ondjaki and Pepetela, who depict their society’s betrayal of the revolutionary ideals that brought the ruling MPLA into power in 1975. Not only did the liberation movement entrench itself in the market economy that arrived in the 1990s, but it also allowed political and economic corruption to operate unchecked. In Ondjaki’s *How Many Dawns Has a Night*, the diseased corpse of a “war veteran” becomes an allegory for the Marxist-Leninist state and the wider attempt at building an independent nation. Arenas (2011, p. 182) writes, the “corpse ultimately symbolizes an unfinished national project that has been mired in a fratricidal conflict that was propelled, especially after the Cold War, by the country’s extraordinary wealth.” In *Predators*, Pepetela places his faith in characters who liberate Angola, albeit temporarily, with their conscientiousness and ethical integrity. Unintentionally, these figures fill the void left by the abandonment of the Marxist-Leninist master narrative and offer a glimpse of hope for an egalitarian society that will provide a better future to Angola’s impoverished majority.

In a similar fashion, Derek Pardue’s *Ideologies of Marginality in Brazilian Hip Hop* documents how hip hop is used to inspire hope and build consciousness among youth in the peripheral neighborhoods of São Paulo. As such, hip hop is a proactive phenomenon and an intellectual challenge, asking questions and creating possibilities, as opposed to reactively responding to or describing reality. Pardue emphasizes that hip hop does not merely reveal how the São Paulo periphery “works” or “functions,” but rather shows how the perceptions,

experiences, and difficulties of its creators and consumers are understood in an open, complex, and fluid process (cf. Fabian, 1978, pp. 315-316). Like PALOP music, film, and literature, Paulistano hip hop constantly engages the globalized currents of information and that have made the wider genre the “lingua franca” of global youth (Ventura, 2009, p. 615; Chiasson, 2011, p. 43). While many of these currents bear a strong U.S. influence, hip hop in Brazil resists the simple North/South binary that conceives of globalization as tantamount to Northern neocolonialism in the Global South (cf. Bastos, 2000, p. 818). Pardue shows how practitioners in São Paulo have strategically reorganized infrastructural, economic, and cultural forces to develop an organized, heterogeneous hip-hop scene that engages its counterparts in other countries. This diversity, in turn, has created many opportunities for Brazilian hip-hop artists to reference, derive, and take meaning from one another.

Pardue’s hip-hop interlocutors possess a generative epistemology and employ a meaningful set of practices, such that they have become what they initially sought to be: empowered protagonists in the city as opposed to passive objects on the margins of society. This process usually begins when an aspiring artist immerses herself in one of São Paulo’s numerous hip-hop posses, an act that Pardue (2008, p. 6) compares to Pentecostal conversion: “In their personal introductions, local hip-hoppers directly connect ‘salvation’ to ‘reality.’ Hip hop becomes a cultural matrix with which practitioners attempt to represent and thus change the current state of things.” Activists in the community are adamant about utilizing the genre as a means to educate and exercise citizenship, arguing for improvements in neighborhood infrastructure and funding for programs that help residents engage in civil society. Like their fellow working-class activists, Paulistano hip-hop artists seek to assert their rights by portraying their reality as one of subaltern status. In doing so, Brazilian hip hop has created and codified an ideology that criticizes, and presents an alternative to, mainstream narratives regarding ethnic and class differences (Ventura, 2009, p. 614). Using tropes of violence, death, danger, and crime in their art, performers come to “reclaim,” “occupy,” and even “conquer” the spaces of the periphery in order to express their concerns and enact changes in everyday life.

Discussed at length in *Ideologies of Marginality* is hip hop’s influence in the contemporary debate on race in Brazil. Pardue argues that hip-hop culture has provided a point of reference through which many Brazilians have been able to rethink the role that ethnicity plays in the context of self, community, and citizenship. With reason, Paulistano hip-hop artists unambiguously point to race as central to the “continuous human project of social stratification” (Pardue, 2008, p. 92) at the same time that they strongly associate themselves with the semiotics of negritude: James Brown and Afrika Bambaataa, Afrocentricity,

the syncretic domain of *candomblé*, and the “African”-inspired *capoeira* and its chief instrument, the *berimbau*. That the music industry has provided a structure for the circulation of social critique is something that Pardue cites as a success of the Paulistano hip-hop movement. In turn, the ability to critique national propaganda like “racial democracy” becomes a part of Brazilian hip hop’s *modus operandi* and associates the genre with cultural capital such as awareness and empowerment. In fact, the success of hip hop as the pop-culture face of Brazilian social organizing has led the country’s elite to assume increasingly reactionary stances, best seen in the mass-market 2006 book *We Are Not Racists*, written by a director of the Globo media empire (Pardue, 2008, p. 185).

Pardue is less sympathetic with Paulistano hip-hop attitudes toward gender. The insightfulness with which male hip-hop artists critique race and class is rarely extended to the paradigm of machismo and patriarchy. Gender rarely figures in the genre’s overall project of social transformation, which Pardue believes is due to a lack of awareness of the widespread gendering in hip hop. He states that “in hip hop, the articulation of femininity is normally a subaltern voice, a position of reaction, if active at all. Expressive femininity is marginalized because it appears unnecessary under the hegemonic rubric of machismo” (Pardue, 2008, p. 129). As a result, male performers define “acceptable” gender relations, in which women can only present themselves as accessories to male performance. “Naturally” the “weaker” sex in the “dangerous” periphery, women need to be “protected,” the logic goes. As in the U.S., Brazilian hip hop too often reduces female artists to their stereotypically feminine traits such as “presence,” beauty, vocal range, and dance abilities. In this homosocial, hyper-masculine world, women are found mostly as dancers, background vocalists, or occasional rappers and are obliged to reinforce notions of femininity as subservient and derivative.

Neither Pardue nor Arenas claim globalization to be a homogenizing force, resulting in a “net loss” of culture. On the contrary, they believe that one “diversity” is substituted for another that is more interconnected with the world system. In the case of the São Paulo periphery and the PALOP, foreign cultural influences (e.g., hip hop, world music, etc.) have not impoverished local culture, but have provided instead technologies, symbolic resources, and a new infrastructure for disseminating local ideas and practice. Each country surveyed in these texts has a developed, cohesive, internally diverse national culture that is at the same time a part of the global one. To the authors, the cultural production discussed is not a means of escapism or a distraction from a reality of powerlessness and exploitation, but is rather a complex manifestation of political and historical consciousness. Through the aesthetic experiences of music, film, and literature, the cultural producers and consumers of São Paulo and the PALOP

debate issues of worldwide significance and bring together forms of expression normally considered to be ephemeral, disjointed reactions to “globalization.” The multidisciplinary approaches of Pardue and Arenas provide different angles from which to examine the interrelated practices of global cultural production and the ways they engage contemporary experience in Brazil and Lusophone Africa. In this light, both *Ideologies of Marginality* and *Beyond Independence* will no doubt be valuable additions to the discussion on cultural production in our era of globalization, neoliberalism, and post-coloniality.

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WEEKS, S. (2012), *Review article “Cultural dimensions, Lusophone spaces”*. *Análise Social*, 202, XLVII (1.º), pp. 209-215.