



*Recensão a Legacies of the  
Portuguese Colonial Empire:  
Nationalism, Popular Culture and  
Citizenship, de Elsa Peralta and  
Nuno Domingos, eds.*

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**Elsa Peralta and Nuno Domingos, eds.**

***Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial  
Empire: Nationalism, Popular Culture  
and Citizenship***

**London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney:  
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*Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire: Nationalism, Popular Culture and Citizenship*, edited by Elsa Peralta and Nuno Domingos and published by Bloomsbury academic press in 2023, is a very welcome exploration of the continuities and ruptures of the Portuguese colonial legacies in present-day Portugal and especially in its capital, Lisbon. With a foreword by Benoît de L'Estoile and contributions from the editors themselves as well as from ten other scholars specializing in the subject, the edited collection is divided into three thematic sections: "Empire, Nation, and Memory Politics", "Postcolonial Space, Work, and Citizenship", and "Popular Culture and Everyday Colonial Legacies". What are the specificities that have characterized Portuguese colonialism and its narration in relation to other former metropolises? In what ways are the legacies of the empire felt in the present? How does this affect those who inhabit post-colonial Portugal? These are questions that the book sets out to investigate at both empirical and theoretical

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levels. To do so, it considers the historicity of the Portuguese colonial legacy in many realms of institutional and daily life, urban arrangements, and artistic practices.

In the wake of lusotropicalist ideology<sup>1</sup> and the effects it seems to have had on Portuguese society for a long time – such as the misrecognition of the racism and violence inherent to Portuguese colonialism –, this is a refreshing book to the extent that it questions the now widespread narrative that Portuguese colonialists were more affable and prone to more humane interactions with their colonial subjects. On the contrary, *Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire* emphasizes how Portuguese nationalism has always been entangled with imperialism, the colonial experience having been an integral part of the understanding that the Portuguese nation has of itself. In this sense, it resonates the growth of the anti-racist struggle and adds to the interrogation of how the violence, hierarchization, and discrimination to which colonized people were subjected still affect the positioning of their descendants in current-day Portugal, overdetermining the possibilities of action and experience of those whose bodies, origins, and languages are connected to the colonial experience in the imaginary of the Portuguese nation.

Even though they interrogate these issues, the researchers resist simply subsuming the Lusophone experience to the Anglophone literature on colonialism, racism, and imperialism. I find this salutary. Yet, whereas the effort to look at the singularities of post-colonial Portugal is ethnographically very well-accomplished in the various essays that compose the book, one wonders what the similarities and differences with other colonial experiences are at the empirical and theoretical levels. Nuno Domingos and Elsa Peralta argue that the specificity of the Portuguese colonial experience has to do with Portugal's peripheral

1 Lusotropicalism is the doctrine coined by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre to explain what he considered to be the exceptional character of the Brazilian people. According to him, Brazil was a racial democracy, and this was due to the singular character of Portuguese colonizers, who were prone to miscegenation and conviviality with "other races". Although initially rejected by the New State in Portugal, this Freyrean doctrine was subsequently adopted as a moral justification for the Portuguese presence overseas as part of the strategy to delay decolonization.

position and “structural vulnerability”<sup>2</sup> in relation to other European colonial powers given that it was politically subordinated to England. If this is a core feature of Portuguese colonialism whose effects are also felt in post-colonial Portugal, what are the consequences of its marginal position in Europe to its post-colonial subjects if compared to France, England, or Spain? To answer this question, the ethnographic investment made by the collection invites a different kind of effort, of comparative nature.

One of the most interesting arguments presented in the book is that the conception of “Lusophony” is frequently employed in a post-colonial narrative that attempts to reframe Portuguese imperialism as cultural exchange rather than colonial exploitation. This is beautifully developed in the investigations by Ana Estevens on the use of Cape Verdean Creole in contemporary music, by Rui Cidra on the “music of African diasporas”, by Bart Paul Vanspauwen and Iñigo Sánchez-Fuarrros on the in-flight entertainment system of TAP airways, and by Marcos Cardão on musical hybridisms in Lisbon. In line with the questioning of Lusophony, a further issue one could raise based on the reflections of the authors concerns the presence of other languages in present-day Portugal, something that is recognized by the authors but not ethnographically explored. For instance, what are the understandings of the Portuguese colonial legacy as articulated in Cape Verdean Creole, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, the various languages spoken in Angola and Mozambique and by Southeast Asian migrants? In what ways do these narratives differ from the official narrative of the state as to Portuguese being the medium of connection between the subjects who inhabit post-colonial Portugal and its former colonies?

The historicity of spatialization and the urban practices associated with it are a further focus point of the collection. Elsa Peralta’s chapter on Belém explores how this neighborhood and its monuments embody various historical layers of the celebration of the Portuguese imperial

2 Elsa Peralta and Nuno Domingos, eds., *Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire: Nationalism, Popular Culture and Citizenship* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2023), 12.

legacy, from the celebration of the so-called discoveries associated with the first navigators and the refashioning of the Jerónimos Monastery as an exemplary of the Manueline style to the 1940 colonial exhibition to present-day museums and cultural centers. The reproduction of Portuguese colonial legacies in the public sphere is also discussed by Nuno Domingos in his analysis of the appropriation of the biography of Mozambican footballer Eusébio by the Portuguese colonial state and of the aesthetization of Portuguese modernist architecture in the colonies by the official historiography of colonial architecture. Focusing on the governance of cultural diversity in Lisbon, Nuno Oliveira analyses how urban planning has sought to appropriate the history of this city with a view to marketing, gentrifying, and commodifying Portuguese colonialism in terms of multiculturalism.

Intersectional analysis plays an important part in the investigation of colonial legacies developed by the authors. Eduardo Ascensão calls our attention to the continuity of colonial hierarchies related to race and class in the urban space, the “ghosts of colonialism in the postimperial city” that make themselves apparent to the extent that former colonial inequalities, such as the distribution of white people in the center and racialized people in the peripheries of colonial cities, is replicated in current-day Lisbon. Thus, as was already the case during Portuguese imperialism, the urban space is still divided according to criteria related to race and class. In “Designing Subordination”, Nuno Dias shows how the subordinate role played by young rural women employed in domestic work in elite houses in the city during the New State is now taken by lower-class, racialized female migrant domestic workers. Simone Frangella’s chapter further develops the question of migration as she considers the mutual attribution of stereotypical assessments by Brazilian migrants and Portuguese citizens, in which the prejudices they express are the product of a shared history and different intersectional placements. Arguably, a similar kind of hierarchization happens with the concept of Lusophony to the extent that it attempts to subsume the multiplicity of languages to be found in the colonial situation to the dominant presence of Portuguese, something

that is very visible in the revivalist narratives of the colonial experience in former Portuguese territories analyzed by João Pedro George.

In their afterword, Domingos and Peralta point to the “political and civic urgency of discussing what the Portuguese colonial empire was in Portugal, in the former colonies, and more broadly throughout a global public space interested in understanding colonial experiences and using comparison as a form of historical inquiry.”<sup>3</sup> I could not agree more that this kind of discussion is much needed, and academic work on the subject can surely contribute to it. Yet, in line with the analyses presented by the authors, it is striking that this investigation has been carried out mostly by subjects who, in the current state of affairs, occupy privileged positions in Portuguese society, something that the authors implicitly acknowledge when they state that the distribution of subjects “throughout the social space is subject to a complex logic of social differentiation, directly motivated by the economic, work, educational, and housing place in which they are located.”<sup>4</sup> It goes without saying that this remark is not intended to blame individuals for general structural issues, for the constraints that affect the social structure of a given context are more often than not replicated in its academic settings.

Yet, as I engaged with the very interesting conclusions to which this joint enterprise has come, I could not help but ask myself to what extent the inequalities analyzed in Portuguese society are also to be found in Portuguese academia. This is, of course, also a characteristic of academia in Brazil, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Angola, South Africa, to restrict myself to contexts I have experienced firsthand. However, if one is to radically question hierarchization, it would be interesting to expand the (Portuguese-speaking) voices in this collection by adding to them the voices (and languages) of intellectuals whose background historically situates them at the margins of academic production. For this is one of the ways in which

3 Peralta and Domingos, *Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire*, 239.

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the centrality of the colonial gaze on former colonial territories and its inhabitants can be further displaced. For such a thing to happen, goodwill is rarely sufficient; there must be policies that acknowledge inequalities and seek to address them politically.

As we all share the burden and the opportunity of inhabiting this intriguing, overheated, unequal planet full of interesting things but plagued by war and inflation, it is pressing to find ways to distribute both material and symbolic resources if we are to survive together. In what ways can academia contribute to the narration of history in Portugal with an aim to overcome racialization, peripheralization, and subjugation? This is not the question this collection asks directly, but engagement with the reflections it contains can be a first step towards this goal.

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