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Citation

Pardue, D., & Brandellero, S. L. A. (2018). Introduction: Revisiting Culture and Power in Brazil. *Veredas - Revista Da Associação Internacional De Lusitanistas*, 27(2017), 5-11.
doi:10.24261/2183-816x0027

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/65497>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction

Revisiting culture and power in Brazil

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Sara Brandellero[†]

*It's all mixed up, look here. On the world map, it is with Z
but those who know, never forget, Brasil is with "S"*

Rita Lee and Roberto de Carvalho, "Brasil com S"¹

Brazil does not deserve Brasil.

Brazil is killing Brasil

Aldir Blanc and Maurício Tapajós, "Querelas do Brasil"²

In the late 1970s and early 80s, as the grip of the Brazilian military dictatorship loosened slightly and civil society transitioned into a more favorable position, artists were at the forefront of defining a new society. Musical artists Rita Lee and Roberto de Carvalho asked foreigners to rethink their homeland paradise in the first quote, taken from their 1982 recording. On the other hand, fellow musical artists Aldir Blanc and Maurício Tapajós saw the essence of the country as a "quarrel", an existential conflict over the debt due to Brazil's indigenous roots and insistent presence. Two contrasting perspectives expressed through music with one underlying commonality. Brazil is a product of the encounter, one enmeshed in complex and violent hierarchies.

Currently, Brazilians find themselves in a distinct but comparable moment of unrest, violence and contestation. This bi-lingual thematic issue, with papers in English and Portuguese, stems from a panel organized by members of the Rede Europeia de Brazilianistas de Análise Cultural (REBRAC) on occasion of the first

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¹ "Brasil com S", featuring João Gilberto, was composed by Rita Lee and Roberto de Carvalho and appeared on the album *Rita Lee e Roberto de Carvalho* (1982).

² The song "Querelas do Brasil", a play on the famous patriotic samba "Aquarelas do Brasil" was composed by Aldir Blanc and Maurício Tapajós and recorded initially live in 1978 by Elis Regina on the album *Transversal do tempo*.

international conference of ABRE (Associação de Brazilianistas de Europa) at Leiden University (The Netherlands) in late May of 2017.

The scope of the thematic issue emergent from our panel discussion is to reflect on the place and potentialities of culture in Brazil at this time of crisis, mindful of the dramatic erosion of progressive social initiatives currently underway and the threat to democracy itself. We have witnessed change in Brazil at a rapid pace since the highly polemic impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in a series of radical policy proposals across the spectrum, including education, social security, healthcare, foreign relations and culture. This seismic shift and reversal of many policies, which had defined Brazil's government policies since the early 2000s, has left many Brazilians searching for some sort of response.

Recalling the influential writings of Michel Rolph-Trouillot and Edward Said on culture and historicity, we are reminded of the inseparable links between artistic expression and hegemonic formation. Narration can “silence the past” of Haitian revolutions as well as manufacture common sense regarding the European modern novel, respectively. We offer this thematic issue as a forum to reflect on what ‘culture’ offers in the way of empowerment and a medium through which traditionally marginalized Brazilians can speak, especially given the current evidence of a morally bankrupt state and broken institutions of government.

We understand ‘culture’ as generative, i.e., a variable, dynamic process emerging from the social encounter. Particularly in times of crisis, culture often provides space for narratives and storytelling through which alternative realities can be envisioned. We recast our surroundings, our memories, our imaginations and expectations hoping for recognition and a sustained moment of influence. A grasp at power, an ideological incursion.

We thus echo what our fallen colleague Stuart Hall once posited as a working definition of cultural studies — “yes, it’s cultural power, that’s the crux of what distinguishes cultural studies”.³ Djamila Ribeiro, the Brazilian philosopher and activist, makes it more plain: “when I wear a headdress in the street, people discriminate against me. When some white girl does it, she’s modern”.⁴ The headdress is a manifestation of a complex encounter that is always historically configured and always a product of intersectionality — connecting key issues of identification and self-identification linked to gender, race, among other variables. Djamila in another provocative intervention iterates this, when she asks, “why is the black woman the biggest victim of rape in Brazil?”⁵ Culture and power constitute a relationship that, like any hegemonic formation, is simultaneously precarious and potent. The contestation over the sign is the story this volume’s contributors are telling.

³ See Hall (1997, p. 24).

⁴ See Ribeiro quotes in Tory Oliveira’s article “O uso de turbantes por pessoas brancas é apropriação cultural?” (Oliveira, 2017).

⁵ See Marina Novaes’ interview with Ribeiro published in *El País* (RIBEIRO, 2016).

Culture-as-encounter is not ahistorical nor displaced. At a time when many today struggle to find secure, or even dodgy, footing from which to speak about humanity, democracy, science, truth and rights in Brazil (and elsewhere for that matter), the following papers provide a broad spectrum of perspectives on the relationship between cultural production and power dynamics. They remind us that representation – for example, in the 1960s/70s protest song, the scream of the present-day “marginal” poet and anarchist funk band, in contemporary cinema and migrant literature and the cartoons and social media memes – always involves a complex negotiation of memory, identity, and a rational and sensory perception of our place in the world. A sensoritization of power and legitimacy.

This special issue reflects REBRAC’s broad and inclusive understanding of culture. Founded in 2015, REBRAC is a Europe-based network of Brazilianists, in early stages of their careers as well as established academics. It aims to bring together scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, from literary to media studies, to anthropology, sociology, among others, in order to foster and support research exchange and collaboration on the culture of this complex and enduringly fascinating South American country. This volume brings together articles that (re)visit the place of culture and the power of representations in Brazil from a range of disciplinary perspectives as well as contributions from and of activists who share the belief in culture as a force of political and social transformation.

Article Summaries

In the opening essay of this volume, Sara Brandellero discusses acclaimed contemporary writer Luis Ruffato’s novel *Estive em Lisboa e lembrei de você* (2009). She focuses on its representation of traditionally marginalized sections of Brazilian society, in this case embodied in the figure of the low middle-class migrant worker who attempts to seek a better life in Portugal. In Ruffato’s novel, intertextuality serves as an effective “tactic,” following Michel de Certeau, Brandellero argues, to articulate imaginatively the contemporary experiences of displacement. More specifically, Ruffato engages with a mix of writings from the iconic Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa to trace the journeys of the hapless Brazilian migrant from the interior of Minas Gerais, Brazil, to Lisbon, Portugal. In positioning himself in relation to one of the masters of world literature, Ruffato strives to give visibility to traditionally underrepresented life stories in Brazilian literature and thus implicitly also question cultural hierarchies and claim his own place within not just Brazilian but world literature itself.

The spirit of recasting the word from below continues in the article written by Lucas Oliveira. Rather than a mobility of displacement across oceans, Oliveira describes scenes of intra-urban mobilities and new, innovative spatial productions in the marginalized peripheries of São Paulo. In this essay, Oliveira delves into the contemporary movement known as ‘literatura marginal’ (marginal literature).

While the critical scholarship on the movement is now relatively established, its focus, for the most part, has been on the social and political, which is most clearly on display in the performative events, such as the popular *saraus*. Oliveira's contribution is his "*exegese espacial*", an analysis of the city, in terms of experience and material, which acts as a significant discursive resource for the marginalized authors. He addresses the general relationship between textual creativity, spatial representation and artistic-community participation.

From Minas and São Paulo, the reader arrives in the squatter settlement Flor do Asfalto, located in the polemical zone of Porto Maravilha, one of the several urbanization projects developed as part of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Author Luana Loria concentrates her critical eye on the band Anarkofunk, a music collective based at the squatter settlement, who, in their short-lived existence, preached direct action against the exclusionary state apparatus through song. One is reminded of Frantz Fanon and his insistence that violence is a legitimate realm, in symbolic and material terms, to effect change. The reader witnesses a moment of deconstruction.

At the time of this writing, Brazil is on the brink of the abyss. Threats of military intervention in the name of security ring increasingly closer.⁶ David Treece's essay on the potential symbolic extension of Brazilian political protest songs of the late 1960s and 70s, during the height of the last military dictatorship, inserts the important element of memory and aesthetics in the game of power. Treece tests not only temporal memory but also potential bridges across space. To this end, the reader is transported to a workshop series, entitled "*The São Paulo Tapes: Brazilian Resistance Songs Workshops*", held during the summer months of 2017 in three different locales in London. Treece works through complex issues of "translation" to test what sorts of power sounds and lyrics might possess beyond the score and text, respectively. The article invites readers, even those not proficient in the Portuguese language, to locate vectors of mobilizing affect in the experience of listening to Brazilian protest songs from two generations ago.

The second half of the dossier maintains focus on the symbolic power of cultural forms and underscores the role of historicity, i.e., the collective sense of, in this case, national history. Fernanda Rabelo extends Treece's treatment of the transnational dimension of symbols by critically discussing the mobilization of Brazilian national stereotypes during global sports events, such as the FIFA World Cup (2014) and Olympics and Paralympic Games (2016). Rabelo's choice of the "banana" is a perfect entrée into the topic as, since the judicial coup in 2016, critics across the political spectrum from outside of Brazil are quick to usher out the Cold War semiology embedded in the puppet-like "banana republic."

⁶ Both in September of 2017 and, more recently, in April of 2018, military generals insinuated intervention if the Brazilian justice system did not carry out its campaign against "corruption," an obvious code word meaning that ex-president Lula must be removed from the public sphere. See, for example, Valente (2017) and Odilla (2018).

Authors Antonia Pires, Gustavo Tanus and Filipe Schettini invite the reader to consider culture, power and history from the realm of Brazilian cinema. We return to the draconian era of the military dictatorship and engage with the cinematographer Olney São Paulo. This article suggests a dialogue with Brandellero's opening essay on Ruffato in that both artists, Ruffato and Paulo, employ autobiographical material to comment on the collective. Displacement and torture. A search to reconstruct place. A yearning to remember and survive the present. In the case of Olney São Paulo, the task the authors set for themselves is the recuperation of an almost forgotten storyteller. In so doing, they resist the efforts of the military dictatorship and subsequent regimes to "silence the past" (and with it, Paulo) and suggest parallels with contemporary censorship by state representatives.⁷ In the final essay, Georg Wink zooms in more closely on the meme, the single image-category, which has captivated the attention of millions of Brazilian internet users. More specifically, Wink analyzes what he calls "coup humor" (*humor golpista*) through a series of right-wing images targeting Dilma Rousseff, the democratically elected president who was controversially impeached in late 2016. Ultimately, these Dilma memes illustrate cultural dynamics that have their roots outside of different political affiliations and views on government politics. They articulate gender dynamics and deep seated forms of sexism that aimed to destabilize a recognized leader, whose power – as a democratically elected, progressive female politician – could not be tolerated by those who have traditionally held the reigns of power.⁸

In sum, the essays in this special volume of *Veredas* demonstrate a need to appreciate the special qualities of cultural expressions as Brazilians contest the State and represent themselves to themselves and to outsiders in terms of race, gender and class. Again, we are reminded that the meanings of culture are always located in the encounter in its myriad of formulations.

The relationship of culture and power today echoes the past and predicts the future. Literary critic Rebecca Atencio recently wrote, "in a country where, historically speaking, the State has been slow to address the dictatorial past, art and cultural production have consistently played an outsized role in the reckoning process" (ATENCIO, 2018). The following essays underscore this point, that the game of power often implicates a control over history (and thus historicity) as well as

⁷ See, for example, these journalistic articles: "Deputados aprovam projeto de lei que proíbe nudez em exposições no ES" (DEPUTADOS..., 2017) and "Projeto criminaliza exibição de órgão genital para fins artísticos" (HAJE; MORAES, 2018). They refer to recent legislative proposals in the states of São Paulo, Espírito Santo as well as at the federal level to redefine pornography and essentially silence non-heterosexual Brazilian histories and experiences. This conservative activism was a reaction, more specifically, to "Queermuseu – Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art," an exhibit of the Modern Museum of Art in São Paulo.

⁸ In post-coup Brazil, identity-based hate combines with classic eye-for-an-eye logic in the recent hate memes and posts directed at the murdered city councilor from Rio de Janeiro, Marielle Franco, a gay, Afro-Brazilian woman as well as the first openly gay congressman at the federal level, Jean Wyllys. See, for example, Padilha (2018) and Universa (2018).

how the idea of “Brazil” circulates around the globe. Moreover, the specters of censorship, violence and hate provide a slippery but ultimately productive tension with which Brazilians create cultural forms.

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