Mémoires, migrations, rencontres coloniales
Memórias, migrações, encontros coloniais
Memory, Migrations, Colonial Encounters

RACE AND GENDER

Orlanda Amarilis' *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa*

This paper centres on the work of the Cape Verdean writer Orlanda Amarilis, with special reference to her début collection *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa* (1974). It analyses four stories featuring representative characters, two male and two female, of the Cape Verdean cultural elite living in Lisbon. Their diverse trajectories document the pitfalls of trying to negotiate complex cultural, racial and gender identities in the metropolis. Throughout the collection, Amarilis' female characters show the impossibility of complete integration, thereby questioning not only the sexist and racist assumptions which underpin colonial society, but also the widespread myth of lusotropicalism, which had posited the success of racial integration within the Portuguese empire.

As such, in a context in which censorship was still operational, gender becomes a magnifying lens, through which the asymmetrical relations between men and women point to, and ultimately challenge the prevalence of unequal power relations between colonizers and colonized.

Race et genre. Orlanda Amarilis' Cais do Sodré té Salamansa

Cet article propose une approche de l'œuvre de l'écrivaine capverdienne Orlanda Amarilis, se référant notamment à son premier recueil *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa* (1974). Il analyse quatre histoires mettant en scène deux personnages masculins et deux personnages féminins représentatifs, appartenant à l'élite culturelle capverdienne vivant à Lisbonne. Leurs trajectoires différentes illustrent la difficulté d'essayer de négocier des identités complexes, culturelles, raciales et sexuelles dans la métropole. Tout au long du recueil, les personnages féminins d'Amarilis illustrent l'impossibilité de s'intégrer complètement, mettant en question non seulement les préjugés sexistes et racistes sous-jacents dans la société coloniale, mais également le mythe très répandu du lusotropicalisme, qui avait posé en principe le succès de l'intégration raciale à l'intérieur de l'empire portugais.

Ainsi, dans un contexte où la censure existait encore, le genre joue le rôle d'une loupe, à travers laquelle les relations asymétriques entre hommes et femmes montrent et, finalement, mettent en cause la prévalence des relations de pouvoir inégales entre colonisateurs et colonisés.

Raça e Género. Cais do Sodré té Salamansa de Orlanda Amarilis

Este artigo centra-se no trabalho da escritora cabo-verdiana Orlanda Amarilis, com especial referência à sua recolha inicial *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa* (1974), na qual analisa quatro histórias que incluem duas personagens masculinas e duas personagens femininas representativas da elite cultural cabo-verdiana a viver em Lisboa. As suas diferentes trajetórias documentam as ratoeiras associadas às tentativas de negociação de complexas identidades culturais, raciais e de género na metrópole. Ao longo da sua recolha, as personagens femininas de Amarilis documentam a impossibilidade de integração completa, questionando não só as posições sexistas e racistas que minam a sociedade colonial, mas também o

expandido mito de lusotropicalismo que postulou o sucesso da integração racial no seio do império português.

Como tal, num contexto em que ainda havia censura, o género torna-se uma lupa através da qual as relações assimétricas entre homem e mulher assinalam e, em última análise, desafiam a prevalência de relações de forças desiguais entre colonizadores e colonizados.

Displacement has been a distinguishing feature of Cape Verde's history. As such, the premise of this paper is that the Cape Verdean diasporic experience offers an unusually compelling case study in terms of colonial and postcolonial interrogations of identity. Echoing Homi Bhabha's description of the late twentieth century as a time of transition *par excellence*:

«In the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross over to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion»¹.

This paper centres on Orlanda Amarílis's first published collection of short stories – *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa* –, published at a time when Cape Verde was still, to all intents and purposes, a Portuguese colony². It considers the process of the individual rethinking of identity and most particularly its implications in terms of an emergent race and gender consciousness (or lack thereof) in a few representative characters belonging to the Cape Verdean elite settled in Lisbon, in what is arguably a key moment of transit, namely the one which immediately preceded the April 1974 Revolution and the subsequent independence of Portugal's African «overseas provinces» in the year that followed.

Orlanda Amarílis, herself a displaced Cape Verdean, is well-versed in the contradictions of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Living in Lisbon since 1968 (by which time she was in her mid-forties), her internal migration to the capital of the Empire was motivated not by the wish to further her education, nor by pressing financial necessity, but by personal reasons³. A by-product of her long-term residence in the metropolis was the fact that her three collections of short stories were published in Lisbon, the first in 1974, the subsequent two in the 1980s. In a nutshell, as Phyllis Peres points out, Orlanda Amarílis's «in-between» place of enunciation «calls attention to the larger question of what it means to be a diasporic writer»⁴.

The need to reflect on the implications of dislocation, both temporal and spatial, is inscribed outright in her very début title, *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa*. Through the unexpected bringing together of, on the one hand, Cais do Sodré, one of the

¹ H. BHABHA, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994: 1.

² O. AMARILIS, *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa*, Coimbra, Centelha, 1974. All references will be to the 2nd edition, Lisbon, ALAC, 1991.

³ Her marriage to the Portuguese Manuel Ferreira, a pioneer scholar in the field of Lusophone African studies, whom she met in Cape Verde.

⁴ P. PERES, «Border Writing, Postcoloniality and Critical Difference in the Works of Orlanda Amarílis», in S. CANTY QUINLAN & F. ARENAS (eds), *Lusosex*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002: 149-167.

major train stations in central Lisbon, adjacent to the river Tagus and, on the other hand, Salamansa, a small beach village in São Vicente, the title links metropolitan Portugal to its distant minor «overseas province». This metaphorical flow towards the periphery with its complex revisiting of roots and origins, and the ensuing rethinking of identity such repositioning might entail, becomes one of the major themes explored in this collection.

Amarilis's protagonists experience a metaphorical dislocation which shakes the very roots of their identity, when, in spite of their superficial apparent integration into the daily life of the capital of the Empire, outward racial markers as well as less prominent gendered differences may suddenly determine their ultimate confinement to an inferior status as a second class citizen, leading to an acute feeling of cultural estrangement. Complete integration, seldom portrayed as a realistic possibility, is however simultaneously presented as less than desirable, because its pre-requisite would be the blanket adoption of a «white» dominant point of view. Of particular note in the fiction of Amarilis is the extent to which her female characters are shown to mentally occupy an «in-between space» almost at the outset, stemming from their double marginalization, both as non-white and as women, while men's exclusion is not primarily, if at all, predicated on gender or may even be in fact altogether bypassed, as we shall see.

The opening story, «*Cais do Sodré*», stages a chance encounter in the eponymous Lisbon train station between Andresa, a Cape Verdean woman who has been seemingly settled in the metropolis for more than fifteen years, and Tanha, another Cape Verdean, recently arrived from the islands. The two women discover that, unsurprisingly given the smallness of the islands, they know details of each other's respective family backgrounds. But, while part of Andresa yearns for identification with her past roots, «*sente a necessidade de estabelecer uma ponte para lhe recordar a sua gente a sua terra*», the temporal gap is often impossible to bridge «*não há afinidades nenhuma com as pessoas de há quinze anos para trás. Nem são as mesmas*»⁵. Crucially, she is no longer the same either, having downplayed certain parts of herself in order to achieve integration.

In this tale, the conflicting allegiances experienced by Andresa, torn between a lingering identification with the memory of her past African roots and the practical need to assimilate European values, initially leads her to put an end to the conversation with Tanha. Yet, rather than remaining silently seated next to a significantly «*inglesa ruiva*»⁶, at the last minute, Andresa boards the same train as Tanha to Caxias, thereby displaying an act of female solidarity. This gesture constitutes a metaphorical acknowledgement that a complete negation of previous cultural roots can only be mutilating. Despite temporal as well as geographical dislocations, the sharing of common cultural memories can offer a welcome respite from the intermittent sense of alienation which grips Andresa in the impersonal metropolis. As such, female solidarity, all the more vivid since Tanha has recently lost her father and Andresa's kindness will result in her being late to meet her husband, results in the protagonist embracing a composite identity, in which her previously suppressed race and, indeed, gender identifications are allowed to resurface.

⁵ O. AMARILIS, *Cais* . . . , *op. cit.*: 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*

While *Cais do Sodré* ends on an optimistic note, in the next story «*Nina*», which similarly features another chance encounter on the *Cais do Sodré* line, the sense of estrangement becomes all but unbearable by the end. The tale, where a nameless Cape Verdean male protagonist is made to feel a foreigner in the mainland a blue-eyed Portuguese girl, called Nina, the niece of his former landlady and his former girlfriend, now married. Their embryonic relationship, started several years previously when he came from overseas to study for a University degree in agronomy, ended abruptly with a cutting racist comment on her part: «*aborrecia-a a ideia de vir a ter filhos de cor*». Now, in contrast to the unfolding of the plot of the previous story, Nina once more rejects him, silently walking away from him, rather than boarding the same train: «*Nina pusera-o knock-out [...] Arredara-o com a segurança sempre usada quando era preciso escolher*»⁷.

The experience of being identified as black and therefore as intrinsically inferior, is one which the protagonist was completely unprepared for, both as a young student and now as an adult. Echoing the words of Frantz Fanon, in his 1952 seminal work *Peau noire, masques blancs*:

«*Subjectivement, intellectuellement, l'Antillais [read the Cape Verdean] se comporte comme un Blanc. Or, c'est un nègre. Cela il s'en apercevra une fois en Europe [...]. Le Noir dans la mesure où il reste chez lui, réalise, à peu de chose près, le destin du petit Blanc. Mais qu'il aille en Europe, il aura à repenser son sort. Car le nègre en France [read in Portugal] dans son pays, se sentira différent des autres*»⁸.

The key word here is «*dans son pays*» (in his country). Indeed, the nameless protagonist may have come from a remote overseas colony, but to all intents and purposes, intellectually, he felt Portuguese up to then. Yet, within the European world to which he thought he belonged by virtue of his education, he is suddenly being pigeon-holed as a second class citizen by a white woman's gaze.

As Fanon explains, sooner or later, previously internalized assumptions come undone when the black colonial subject comes to live in the metropolis: «*quand les nègres abordent le monde blanc, il y a une certaine action sensibilisante*». More often than not, this may lead to a complete collapse of the self «*Si la structure psychique se révèle fragile, on assiste à un effondrement du Moi*»⁹. This complete obliteration of the self is indeed encoded in the protagonist's lack of name which perfectly sums up the sudden collapse of his constructed identity. His anonymity is especially noticeable given the implicit contrast with the privileged position granted to the self-assured Nina, who is not only endowed with a name, but furthermore has her name crucially inscribed in the title.

However, while the supercilious Nina completely disowns him, the young man is subsequently invited to join a group of three youngsters. Their very invitation to a picnic consisting of «*sandes and gin*», in addition to their behaviour on the train (one girl is carelessly chewing gum, while another addresses him, an unknown black man) marks them out as an unconventional group. In other words, the companionship denied to him by Nina because of the colour of his skin, is now being

⁷ *Ibid.*: 23.

⁸ F. FANON, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1992: 120-121.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 125.

offered to him by the progressive youngsters, presumably for precisely the same reason. Bearing in mind that the story was written prior to the outbreak of the 1974 revolution, Amarilis probably wished to present the potential identification with the alternative crowd as positive. Nevertheless, seen from the point of view of the main character, the association with unconventional youths is not a prospect he would be likely to welcome, only serving to confirm further his downfall, rather than offering a way out.

In the central story of the collection, «*Desencanto*»¹⁰, in what may appear at first sight to constitute a welcome inversion of the trajectory mapped out in two opening tales, the protagonist, nameless Cape Verdean woman, is seen commuting into central Lisbon, first on the tram, then on the train into Cais do Sodré. But by the end of the story, her journey turns out to be, if anything, even more dismal and disempowering than that of the protagonists of the two preceding tales. Not only does she in fact have an additional journey leg by boat to the south of the river (in other words travelling once more out of central Lisbon), but she overhears two men talking about her, objectifying her through racial otherness, «*malandro, estás a fazer-te pra mulata*»¹¹. In her case, when the illusion of surface integration is shattered, she seems condemned to a complete limbo, without the redeeming grace of being acknowledged by even so much as a group of liberal youths. As such, the prevailing feeling is one of being devoid of roots, friendship, love, in other words, any human relationship that might anchor her in the community: «*é uma cigana errante, sem amigos, sem afeições, desgarrada entre tanta cara conhecida*»¹².

Throughout these stories, Orlanda Amarilis explores how a selection of people, who belong to the mixed race educated elite of the islands but have come to live in the metropolis, adopt in their daily lives, almost subconsciously, to a greater or lesser degree, self-censoring as a strategy to achieve surface integration. Yet, all have to confront the ambiguities of their position, in terms of race and, in the case of the women protagonists also gender, when they are suddenly faced with, at best a disturbance, at worse a complete collapse of their previous sense of the self. When there is interaction with the white Other (be it Nina or the two Portuguese men), it results in utter disempowerment. Indeed, the movement charted within the collection towards the periphery suggests the virtual impossibility of racial (or for that matter gendered) integration, unmasking the instances of prevalent racism amongst white middle-class Lisbon dwellers, while hinting that such racism may simultaneously have been unwittingly internalized by the Cape Verdean elite itself.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of this tale see K. BISHOP-SANCHEZ, «Contra a romantização da emigração cabo-verdiana: o “Desencanto” de Orlanda Amarilis», *Quadrant*, 1999, 16: 129-139 and E.W. SAPEGA «Morabeza in the Metropolis Gender, Emigration and the Colonial Relation in Pre-Independence Cape Verdean Literature», in H. OWEN & P. ROTHWELL (eds), *Sexual/Textual Empires: Gender and Marginality in Lusophone African Literature*, Bristol, University of Bristol, 2004: 45-63.

¹¹ Translated by D. BROOKSHAW as «You old devil, going after mulatto girls now, are we?» in P. CHABAL (ed.), *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*, London, 1996: 219.

¹² O. AMARILIS, *Cais* . . . , *op. cit.*: 45.

To counteract this, only the acknowledgement of the unsettling fact of belonging both within and without, tentatively begun by Andresa, might begin to dislodge the rigid binary oppositions of difference versus identity, inclusion versus exclusion¹³. Such a process is only a necessary first step, it is implied, unless undertaken by both sides of the racial divide simultaneously. But as the 1974 *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa* draws to a close, Amarilis' depiction of her countryfolks' racial blindspots becomes ever more searching, as she asks her readers to confront the unpalatable truth of what might happen in the worse case scenario, namely if privileged members of the Cape Verdean elite, far from journeying towards gradual enlightenment and recognition of their subaltern position, choose to remain completely «race-blind» and take up a position of total identification with the white dominant point of view. As we see exemplified in «*Salamansa*», the final tale in this volume, the result is an outwardly successful Cape Verdean man whose behaviour is simultaneously shown, however, to replicate the worse excesses of colonialism¹⁴.

The story stages Baltasar, middle aged and educated man born in Cape Verde (symptomatically there are no references whatsoever to the colour of his skin), who has achieved considerable success after leaving the islands twenty years previously to go to study in Lisbon: «*formara-se, tinha os filhos criados, tomara-se um bom chefe de família*»¹⁵. When he returns home to stay with his sister, however, far from feeling concern for the social problems which affect the islands, such as drought, famine, widespread poverty, inadequate healthcare and prevailing sexual double standards, Baltasar is utterly unable to empathise with the bleak outlook facing those who still live in the islands, by they his own sister, the uneducated *povo* or his more educated contemporaries:

«... a irmã passava os dias a lamentar a chuva arredia havia duas épocas, o povo começara a debandada para São Tomé, as pessoas do seu tempo ou tinham emigrado para a América ou tinham-se deixado ficado naquela modorra do Mindelo, impotentes para lutarem»¹⁶.

Instead, his visit emphasises his compulsive urge to reinstate the distance between himself and the peripheral overseas province where he was born, as he wishes he was safely back in the comfort zone of his centrally located home in Lisbon, significantly positioned within walking distance of the Cais do Sodré landmark: «*tenho de voltar para a minha casa em São Paulo, ali mesmo pertinho do Cais do Sodré*»¹⁷.

In addition to geographically disconnecting himself from the very real socioeconomic problems afflicting his native Cape Verde, he is furthermore guilty of misplaced nostalgia, as his reminiscences of the past narrowly focus on Linda, a

¹³ But it will not be until several years later, in her next collection, in 1982, that Orlanda Amarilis will be able to engage with the deconstruction of fixed identities further, through the short story «*Luna Cohen*» which articulates the utopian ideal of a more inclusive identity; see P. PERES, «Border . . . », *op. cit.*, for detailed analysis.

¹⁴ For a close reading, see G. McNAB «Sexual Difference: the Subjection of Women in Two Stories by Orlanda Amarilis», *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 24, 1987: 59-68.

¹⁵ O. AMARILIS, *Cais . . .*, *op. cit.*: 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

crioula prostitute with whom he maintained a liaison in his youth, even while courting his future wife and after his marriage. In other words, in his early life, as a member of the Cape Verdean elite, Baltasar's masculinity overlapped with the dominant colonial ideology as far as colonizing women's bodies was concerned, entailing his uncritical adoption of a complacent colonizer outlook on life from early on. Thus, although he has just found out from his sister's housemaid, Antoninha, who ironically turns out to be Linda's niece, that the economic hardship which no doubt forced Linda into prostitution in the first place, subsequently further compelled her to follow the path of what Onésimo Silveira describes as «a emigração degradante para terras como São Tomé»¹⁸, far from feeling sorry for her, he prefers to dwell on his selective memory of her as a willing object of male desire.

Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, filtering through his distorted memory of Linda, a different version of their relationship is inscribed in the text, one in which Linda consistently refused to accept a subservient victim position. When Baltasar, in a fit of jealousy, hit her for getting drunk with other clients, she rebelled by calling him names and showing him her backside. Intent of having the last word, he kicked her repeatedly, but did not gain the upper hand, eventually retreating «cansado e vencido»¹⁹. Twenty years on, however, rather than acknowledging his actual inability to own Linda and his unacceptable violence and violation of her, in his mind he still attempts to recolonize her body as his possession, by indulging in a wholly artificial reconstruction of the past. Indeed, as the story draws to a close, Baltasar conjures up an idyllic image of a heavenly Cape Verde symbolized by a trip to the beach in Salamansa. Tellingly, the Salamansa evoked up by Baltasar centres around a false memory of «*Areia de Salamansa, Linda a rolar na areia*», in blatant contradiction of what we were told in the opening page of the story, namely that he had never been there with her «*era uma das coisas a moerem-no cá por dentro não ter tomado parte nas farras de Salamansa*»²⁰.

However, while Baltasar may temporarily «recolonize» the virgin unspoilt beach of Salamansa in his mind to suit his purposes of male sexual conquest, «*Oh, Salamansa, praia de ondas soltas e barulhentas como meninas intentadas em dia de San João*»²¹, a different layer of cultural memory is superimposed upon his discourse and once more filters through, as the song which prompts his musings of Salamansa momentarily takes centre stage: «*vai crescendo em ritmo. A coladera escorre da boca de Antoninha*»²². The *coladeira*, a typically Cape Verdean dancing song, faster in rhythm than the morna, though not explicitly revolutionary, may be satirical in content. As such, sang in *crioulo* by the presumably illiterate maid Antoninha, temporarily «*esquecida das suas preocupações*», it indirectly articulates the resistance of the colonized, by showing their aspiration to a life where pleasure and leisure might be freely enjoyed.

¹⁸ K. BISHOP-SANCHEZ, «Contra . . .», *op. cit.*: 132.

¹⁹ O. AMARILIS, *Cais . . .*, *op. cit.*: 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 77.

²¹ On a metaphorical level, this may of course be interpreted as a narrowly disguised scathing indictment of an outmoded Portuguese colonialist stance.

²² O. AMARILIS, *Cais . . .*, *op. cit.*: 81.

Such a lifestyle however, for the time being, remains inaccessible to the likes of Linda and Antoninha forced to degrading economic migrancy, given the gap between the illiterate *povo* and the educated local elite who, through Baltasar's symptomatic behaviour, is shown to collude with the perpetuation of the colonial status quo. Accordingly, the closing paragraph of the story and of the collection as a whole, focuses once more on the point of view of Baltasar, showing him retreating into his world of privilege: «*Deixa o quintal, passa pelo quartinho de trás e some-se nas salas da casa grande*»²³.

It is impossible to read this final sentence without it immediately calling to mind the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre's famous title *Casa grande e senzala*²⁴ (translated as *The Masters and the Slaves*), where the mansion house stood in opposition to the slaves' space, the senzala. Freyre's lengthy 1933 essay interpreted the relationship between Portuguese colonizers and their African slaves, in a way that emphasized the positive face of racial miscegenation. His theoretic formulations of lusotropicalism which credited Portuguese colonialism with, by and large, the promotion of racial harmony, were used and abused throughout the dictatorship to endorse colonial ideology. Yet, precisely at a time when the Portuguese dictatorship and its overseas empire was about to crumble from within, Amarilis is inviting her readers, Portuguese and literate Cape Verdeans alike, to consider the unacceptable implications of lusotropicalism. Indeed, Baltasar's identification with the dominant colonial ideology enshrined by the «*casa grande*» entails his adoption of a whimsical perspective which predominantly relies not only on the economic and sexual exploitation of women, but also, by extension, on the exploitation of the black colony by the white imperialist project.

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To conclude, in *Cais do Sodré té Salamansa*, at a time when Cape Verde was still officially an overseas province, Orlanda Amarilis explodes the myth of the pacific co-existence between colonized and colonizers. She does so by focusing closely on the particular experiences of people who belong to a minority group drawn from the educated assimilated local elite of the islands and showing how the myth of racial equality, facilitated in the case of Cape Verdeans by their mixed race appearance, does not hold up to close scrutiny.

Significantly, however, her collection goes one step further, for not only does it make visible the racism of the metropolitan gaze, even more crucially it also exposes the racial and sexual blindspots which the Cape Verdean elite had itself uncritically internalized. At the time of publication, the likes of Baltasar may be allowed to successfully retain their grotesque (and misplaced) identification with the dominant ideology, but the loaded irony of the closing sentence «*some-se na casa grande*» implies that their days are numbered, as they are historically bound to become a dying breed and disappear altogether. Thus one of Amarilis' major achievements, and one which has previously gone unrecognized, is to figuratively intuit the extent to which, in 1974, the educated Cape Verdean elite needs to

²³ *Ibid.*: 82.

²⁴ G. FREYRE, *Casa grande e senzala*, Rio de Janeiro, Maia & Schmidt, 1933.

face, individually and collectively, the thorny question of where their true cultural and social allegiances lie.

Even more daringly, in the course of this collection, Amarilis arguably uses the depiction of the subaltern position of women, in a society predicated upon asymmetrical gender roles, as a magnifying lens to question unequal power relations between colonizers and colonized, something she might have been reluctant to engage in openly, given the censorship still in place at the time. Indeed, insofar as women, historically forced to negotiate subaltern subject positions on more than one level, may find themselves either at crossroads like the nameless protagonist of the central story «*Desancanto*», forced to rethink their conflicting sense of belonging in a «*encruzilhada pela qual tinha de escolher*»²⁵, or choose to openly rebel like the spirited Linda of «*Salamansa*», they in many ways provide a template for the Cape Verdean colonized elite, irrespective of their gender, to take stock of their untenable position, paving the way for a radical questioning of their political and racial subservience to mainland Portugal.

As such, for Amarilis', gender and race politics go hand in hand and mutually inflect each other. In the final analysis, her collection skilfully demonstrates a keen awareness of what was undoubtedly a key moment of transition where, to recall Bhabha's formulation, «space and time cross over to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion».

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²⁵ O. Amarilis, *Cais* . . . , *op. cit.*: 45.