Exile at the Edges of Empire: Contemporary Writing in Portuguese

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Isabel Moutinho was born and educated in Lisbon, Portugal, and moved to Australia some twenty years ago, for reasons of love rather than exile. Now lecturer in Spanish and Portuguese in the School of Historical and European Studies, La Trobe University, Australia, her main research area is contemporary Portuguese literature, particularly novels dealing with the colonial wars in Africa. She is co-editor of a recent volume, The Paths of Multiculturalism (2000).

In this paper, she refers to several forms of enforced displacement of people undertaken in the name of the former Portuguese Empire. These range from the enslavement and transportation of indigenous peoples to the deportation to occupied territories of convicts and others who were burdensome in the metropolis, to, in the Empire’s final years, the exile of opponents of the Salazar regime to its colonies. Specifically, she examines three contemporary narratives dealing with exile to Portugal’s (former) overseas colonies, two by Portuguese novelists and one by a Timorese author living in Portugal and writing in Portuguese. Both Alexandre Pinheiro Torres’s A Nau de Quixibá (published in 1977, but written in the 1950s) and Mário Cláudio’s Oríon (2003) are set in São Tomé and Príncipe. Luís Cardoso’s Crónica de Uma Travessia (1997) is set in Timor and Portugal. The central character of A Nau de Quixibá was sent to São Tomé as a colonial administrator and, while severely alienated, rejects any feeling of nostalgia for his homeland because of his opposition to the Salazar regime and its colonial policies. Oríon is an historical novel with a strong metaphorical dimension which treats the lives of a handful of the 200 Jewish children forcibly transported from Portugal to São Tomé in the 1490s, several of whom later became rich from buying and selling slaves. Crónica de Uma Travessia recounts the biography of the author’s father, a Timorese nurse posted to an island off the main island of Timor, in the context of a wider treatment of political exile by the Portuguese authorities – within the colony, from colony to colony, and from the metropolis to the colony. The paper concludes with a discussion of language issues associated with the writing and publishing of colonial exile narrative.

The basic goals of colonialism — namely enforcing occupation, legitimising political sovereignty, and ensuring the economic
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exploitation of a territory or state by a foreign country — have been well served over the centuries by regimes which have used their colonies as dumping grounds for citizens who have become burdensome in one way or another to their central government. Portugal, with its long colonial history, is no exception to this coincidence of interests between colonialism and deportation. Portuguese literature, like so many others in the European heritage, is rich in poetry and prose dealing with exile, both in the form of official expulsion from one’s homeland with interdiction to return and in the less technical sense of necessary or voluntary expatriation. Nevertheless, the conjunction between exile and colonialism as late as the second half of the twentieth century, often depicted in contemporary literature in Portuguese, makes for a special case within European culture.¹

Portuguese literature of exile is, of course, not always connected with colonialism,² or with the imperial venture at its origin, but this is certainly a capital element in it. Such a combination is not surprising in the case of a country that built its national identity around the experience of voyaging and discovering new lands. Historically, the voyaging of the explorer always implied a feeling of inevitable (though not necessarily undesired) removal from one’s home country, with the attendant yearning for the absent homeland. Moreover, the canonical texts of Portuguese maritime history bear witness to the fact that the crown used convicts as the basis for its earliest imperial efforts. So, for example, Camões writes in The Lusiads of the Portuguese fleet commander’s sending a convict ashore in Calicut, upon arrival in India, in 1498, to obtain much needed information. So, too, does Pêro Vaz de Caminha, in his Letter to King Manuel about the finding of Brazil, refer to convicts being left behind for the same purpose of acquisition of knowledge, and consequently power, for the Portuguese authorities. On a more personal note, at the end of the same Letter, Caminha begs the King to recall his son-in-law from exile in São Tomé, as a reward for the scribe’s good services.³ But of the feelings of such exiles at the beginnings of empire we know nothing, nor indeed of the despair of those dragged into the most extreme form of exile, not usually included in this category, that of the slaves transported from continental Africa to colonial plantations in Brazil, in Cape Verde, or in São Tomé and Principe, islands in the Gulf of Guinea. These two groups, which nowadays often constitute the research focus of historiography, have previously been the most