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LIMINALITY IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZUCA LITERATURE

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*This is not a moment, it's the movement
Where all the hungriest brothers with something
to prove went?
Foes oppose us, we take an honest stand
We roll like Moses, claimin' our promised land*

*America, you great unfinished symphony, you
sent for me
You let me make a difference
A place where even orphan immigrants
Can leave their fingerprints and rise up*

(Lin-Manuel Miranda)

DEDICATÓRIA

To America's ghost writers, and to my mother.

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I'd like to thank my mother, fierce and dauntless under any circumstance. Thank you for taking that risk, for raising me on your own in a country that was unfamiliar and more often than not unwelcoming. You've overcome every challenge I've described here and then some. I can only hope to inherit half of your strength.

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RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo é investigar exemplos de liminaridade no romance de Sérgio Vilas-Boas *Os estrangeiros do trem N*, publicado em 1997. Ao empregar conceitos dos campos dos estudos culturais e estudos pós-coloniais, esta análise pretende traçar paralelos entre as vidas dos dois protagonistas, Plínio João e Angél Benadski, ambos imigrantes brasileiros indocumentados morando em Nova York, e a experiência de viver entre mundos enfrentada pelos imigrantes. Independente do país de origem, do destino, e dos motivos pelos quais alguém decide imigrar, a sensação de se estar em um estado de liminaridade, de não-pertencimento, de estar entre mundos e identidades, é algo quase universal. Literatura brazuca (apelido carinhoso que os brasileiros-estadunidenses costumam usar para referir-se a si mesmos) contemporânea está repleta de exemplos deste fenômeno. Com o suporte de teóricos dos estudos culturais e dos estudos pós-coloniais, este estudo irá focar centralmente a primeira parte do romance supracitado para ilustrar liminaridade no que se refere aos dois personagens selecionados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Os estrangeiros do trem N*. Liminaridade. Estudos culturais. Estudos pós-coloniais. Imigração.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate instances of liminality in Sérgio Vilas-Boas debut novel, *Os estrangeiros do trem N*, published in 1997. By employing concepts from the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies, this analysis hopes to draw parallels between the lives of the novel's two protagonists, Plínio João and Angél Benadski, both undocumented Brazilian immigrants living in New York City, and that of all immigrants who find themselves between worlds. Regardless of the country of origin, the destination, and the reasons one immigrates, the feeling of being in a liminal state, of not belonging, of being between worlds and identities, is almost universal. Contemporary Brazuca (an affectionate nickname Brazilian-Americans use to refer to themselves) literature is full of examples of this phenomenon. With the support of theorists from postcultural and postcolonial studies, this study will focus on the first part of the aforementioned novel to illustrate liminality as it refers to the lives of the two characters.

KEYWORDS: *Os estrangeiros do trem N*. Liminality. Cultural studies. Postcolonial studies. Immigration.

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INTRODUCTION

To be an immigrant often means risking one's life and livelihood in the hopes of finding something better in a new and unfamiliar place. More often than not, the immigrant does not speak the local language, nor do they have family or friends they can count on in their new home. When one is undocumented, disparagingly called "illegal" by those around them, fear and uncertainty are always present. Undocumented immigrants exist in a sort of limbo; legally, they are not there at all, but they make up an indispensable part of the workforce and cultural makeup of a country. This state is what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as liminal.

Liminality refers to a transitory state, characterized by ambivalence and hybridity. In *The Oxford Online Dictionary*, "liminal" is defined as "relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process; occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold". In the field of cultural studies, it has been used to describe an individual caught between distinct identities and cultures, as well as the feeling of displacement which accompanies this state. Many immigrants find themselves in this position, intensified by the exploitation, prejudice and oppression they face, as well as the linguistic and cultural barriers between immigrant and local communities, and even among immigrant communities themselves. Part one of *Os estrangeiros do trem N*, entitled "O embarque" is the central focus of our analysis, in particular how the Brazilian protagonists view themselves, the relationships between Brazilians and the larger Latino community, other local communities and among themselves, as presented in Vilas-Boas' writings. This study arose from the need to fill a perceived gap in what is typically being studied by English students in Brazil. The literatures of many minority and immigrant communities have entered the canon of contemporary United States literature, but there is a lack of attention towards literature written by Brazilians who live abroad.

As of 2017, the United States is estimated to be home to more than 480,000 Brazilians and people of Brazilian descent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This represents one percent of the total immigrant population in the country. However, between one-fifth and one-third of Brazilian-Americans are believed to be undocumented (BATALOVA; ZONG,

2016), and thus do not appear in official surveys. In 2009, the actual number of Brazilians living in the U.S. was believed to be closer to 1.3 million, according to a study published that year by the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. This number has certainly increased in the near-decade since, although Itamaraty has not published any official numbers.

The substantial Brazilian presence in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was only in the 1980s that a significant number of people began to travel from Brazil to the U.S.. Moser and Tosta (2015, p. 29) attribute this to the failure of Brazil's then-president José Sarney's Plano Cruzado, which led to high inflation, as well as former president Fernando Collor de Melo's freezing of financial assets in the country. Brazilians then began to immigrate to the United States en masse in search of economic prosperity. This is due in large part to the cultural narrative (HALL, 1992, p. 613) disseminated across the globe which paints the United States as a land of opportunity.

By 1990, the U.S. census reported 65,000 Brazilians living in the United States, with the largest communities being in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Florida. If one could draw a profile of the average Brazilian-American at the time, she would be a married woman in her thirties, working as a housekeeper, waitress, or cook. (MOSER; TOSTA, *ibid.*). The influx of immigrants arriving in the United States, not just from Brazil or Latin America, but from all parts of the globe, is also changing the racial landscape of the country. According to Hall (*ibid.*), the majority of residents of large cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Chicago are people of color. In these cities, the stereotypical blond, blue-eyed white American is now a minority.

As of 2017, according to the United States Census Bureau, 53.4% of documented Brazilians living in the U.S. are women; 20.1% are between the ages of five and seventeen; 53.5% of the population above the age of fifteen are married; 40.1% have high school diplomas or less; and 77.2% of the population above sixteen are salary workers. The median annual income per household was just over \$60,000. 9.8% of Brazilian families in the United States live at or below the poverty line. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security reported apprehending 3,738 undocumented Brazilians for "suspected immigration violations" in 2016.

This work also aims to draw attention to the hardships and oppression faced by undocumented immigrants in the United States, so often cast aside and forgotten.

This study has been divided into two chapters. The first gives an overview of concepts taken from cultural and postcolonial studies which will serve as the theoretical basis of this analysis. From the two broad fields, the concepts of liminality and plurality of identities have been chosen to be the focal point of the analysis, as they are common themes in the immigrant experience, particularly when dealing with a neocolonial superpower and multicultural society such as the United States. The second will provide examples of these concepts in the lives of the novel's two protagonists, Plínio and Angél, and their relationships with other Brazilians and the wider Latino community.

I. CULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Identity is widely debated in the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies, particularly how concepts such as nationality and culture can contribute to the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the identity of an individual or a group of people. In the late modern era, the very idea of a singular “identity” is challenged; the individual is thought of as containing multiple “identities” (HALL, 1992, p. 598), as societies are now characterized by difference rather than sameness. Homi Bhabha (1994) writes, “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” The “in-between spaces”, as he puts it, provide opportunity to generate new, overlapping identities, due in large part to the intersection of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, generation, location, among other aspects.

Literary studies have, in the past, preoccupied themselves with the analysis of works in the literary “canon”, deemed by intellectuals i.e. most of the established critics, scholars and authors as “important”. Ultimately, Bordini (2006, p. 12) writes, it is the reader who deems whether or not a work is “worth reading”, and in the modern era, with so many works by writers of diverse backgrounds readily available, this is more true than ever. Neither the author nor the reader is of a single, homogenous identity. Bordini (ibid, p. 13) goes on to say:

In our current society, the right to autonomous existence of various cultures has been demanded, without predominance of one over the other or assimilation which can destroy their specificities. A fraternal coexistence between social differences has been postulated, with mutual respect - and this is its best facet, because it means a refusal of the homogenization which comes from hyperadministration. In the face of cultural pluralism which social organizations and intellectual elites alike have tried to put into practice, a path towards literary study of a highly empirical nature was proposed from the so-called Birmingham School.¹

¹ “Na sociedade atual crescentemente se exige o reconhecimento dos direitos das várias culturas à existência autônoma, sem predominâncias ou assimilações que destruam suas especificidades, e se postula uma convivência fraterna entre as diferenças sociais, com respeito mútuo – e essa é a sua melhor faceta, pois significa uma recusa à homogeneização proveniente da hiperadministração. Diante do pluriculturalismo que as organizações populares, tanto quanto as elites intelectuais, têm tentado pôr em prática, um caminho para o estudo da literatura foi proposto nas pesquisas, eminentemente de cunho empírico, da chamada Escola de Birmingham.” Tradução nossa.

A bridge has been drawn between cultural and literary studies to investigate how cultures, now no longer confined to that of the elite, manifest themselves in literature. Knowledge gathered in other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy and psychoanalysis, has managed to give marginalized voices the platform they needed to finally be heard. In the case of immigrants, as Tosta (2004, p. 576) puts it, “literature as a means of self-expression is always a natural choice for émigrés and exiled people”.

A recurring theme in literature written by these marginalized cultures which are now carving their place in literary canon is liminality, of being “in between”. These in-between spaces manifest themselves not only in reality, through the relationships between and among communities, but in art and literature as well. Bhabha (1994) describes a stairwell in the architectural work *Sites of Genealogy* by Black artist Renée Green as follows:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

A stairwell is a physical place connecting two levels, upper and lower. To travel upwards, one must go up the stairwell, and to travel downwards one must descend it. It is no one’s final destination; it is simply a means of getting from point A to point B, a liminal space in its own right. Metaphorically, it can be used to illustrate the “connecting tissue” between communities caught in an unbalanced power relation. It is a space where mixing inevitably occurs. Because the stairwell is open at either end, neither location is required to be fixed or static. There is movement between the two levels and therefore an exchange of ideas, where identities are renegotiated.

The feeling of “in-betweenness” is also indicative of diasporic experiences. The term “diaspora” has been used to describe the movement of diverse and distinct groups of people, from the Jewish diaspora which dates back to ancient times to the African diaspora caused by

the North Atlantic slave trade. It can also refer to the “contemporary and globalized flux of migrants” (CUNHA, 2003, p. 18), and it is this definition that will be employed in this study. In her article reviewing Jamaican cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s collection of essays and interviews *Da Diáspora* (ibid.), Eneida Cunha recalls Hall’s characteristics of the “diasporic condition”: transculturation, hybridity, and translation. Parallels can be drawn between the experiences of Brazilians to those of other Latino communities, such as Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans, all of which contribute their own distinct background to the American cultural mosaic. Brazil’s history as a diverse, globalized nation puts Brazilian-Americans in a unique position, as its massive landmass grants it racial and cultural diversity. In literature written by Brazilian immigrants, key themes repeat themselves, such as questions of identity, memory (of the homeland, and the journey to the United States), immigration and residency status, language barriers, racism, xenophobia, ethnic and cultural stereotyping, economic and class struggle, and multiculturalism. These themes, as well as other examples of “stairwells” can be found throughout Sergio Vilas-Boas’ novel.

Hall attributes the concept of plural and fluctuating identities to a series of factors which arose in the modern era, among them Marxist thought, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussurean linguistics and poststructuralism, pioneered by Foucault. Hall argues that with Modernity comes a loss of a stable sense of self. In Postmodernity the self is thought of as having no fixed or permanent identity at all. One of the biggest contributors to the decentralization of the subject and pluralization of identity in the current international landscape is globalization. Hall defines globalization as:

the processes, operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organizations in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected. (619)

Hall calls particular attention to globalization’s ability to “compress” distances and time-scales; that is, to instill the feeling that the world has become “smaller” because processes are more fast-paced and distances between places and people are shortened. Because of globalization, nationality and culture itself become even more nebulous concepts, as they never were cut-and-dry to begin with.

Immigration intensifies this phenomenon. Not only do ideas make their way around the world now much faster than in the past, thanks to television, film and the internet, but human beings do so as well. These people carry with them their culture, their habits and beliefs, to their new homes, which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by its new residents. Hall describes this as “the diasporic aesthetic”:

The “diasporic aesthetic” produced in the colonized New World or that which emerged from the ethnic minorities which inhabit contemporary metropolises - resulting from the combination of human beings, cultures and ideas that coexist in diverse and unbalanced power relations - is impure, hybrid, marked by transculturation or, in other words, by the subversion of models and of cultural translation. (CUNHA, 2003, p. 18)

It is worth noting that this exchange is inherently unbalanced, due to the historically established power relations between the colonizer/oppressor and the colonized/oppressed. One example of this lies in the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, which is the “adoption” (or, more accurately, theft) of elements of a minority group’s culture, such as their language, fashion, or symbols, by a dominant group (YOUNG, 2008, p. 63). This does not configure an equal cultural exchange, because these elements are removed from their original context, thus losing their cultural, historical, and at times religious significance. Cultural appropriation often goes against the explicit demands of the minority group in question and is also often driven by profit. By this definition, wearing blue jeans or watching American cartoons outside of the United States is not cultural appropriation; a non-indigenous person wearing a Native American war bonnet is.

Besides cultural studies, the field of postcolonial studies has also been combined with literary theory to examine the relationships and power dynamics between communities in the modern world and how they are represented in literature. Postcolonialism refers to study of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, aiming to provide a better understanding of the perspective of colonized peoples. Colonialism is defined by Ania Loomba (2005, p. 8) as “the conquest and control of other people's land and goods”. She goes further to distinguish pre-modern forms of colonialism practiced by the Romans or Aztecs, for example, and colonialism practiced by capitalist European societies beginning in the sixteenth century.

Marxist thinking on the subject locates a crucial distinction between the two: whereas earlier colonialisms were pre-capitalist, modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe (see Bottomore 1983: 81-51). Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute good and well from the countries it conquered – it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries. (...) In whichever direction human beings and materials traveled, the prophets always flowed back into the so-called ‘mother country’. (LOOMBA, 2005, p. 9)

Postcolonial theorists aim to showcase a counter-narrative to the perspective offered by those in power (typically white, Western, either European or from the United States), considered to be unreliable despite being the dominant voice in both academia and society in general. Postcolonial literary theory examines the literature produced by and about former colonies, but recently diasporic communities and ethnic minorities within developed countries have recently been included under the postcolonial umbrella as well. Jorge de Alva was one of the first to expand the definition of postcolonialism, through a poststructuralist and postmodern perspective which discredits a single “master narrative”, as Loomba (2005, p.16) describes in detail here:

It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of post-colonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination in the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as ‘post-colonial’ subjects even though they live within metropolitan cultures. It also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture.

Thus, it is worth noting that the prefix “post” in postcolonialism does not indicate that colonialism is over and its repercussions are no longer experienced. Loomba (2005, p. 13) continues:

It might seem that because the age of colonialism is over, and because the descendants of once-colonized peoples live everywhere, the whole world is post-colonial. (...) If the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. a country maybe both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and

neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and or culturally dependent) at the same time. (13)

More than being an end of an era, the prefix “post” indicates a need for a critical reevaluation of history, in which the narratives of the Western world are retold from the perspective of people who have been consistently marginalized by it.

Perhaps in no other society is this need more evident than in the United States. The prominent presence of immigrants in the United States demands viewing the country as a multicultural society, not only as a neocolonial superpower, “given its history of imported slave and contract labor, continental expansion and overseas imperialism” (SHARPE, 1995, p. 181). The U.S. has often been called a “melting pot” of cultures. This implies, however, that immigrant populations assimilate and meld into a single undifferentiated nation. This metaphor can more accurately be replaced with that of a “mosaic” or “quilt”, indicating that a multitude of cultures coexist (more often than not turbulently rather than peacefully) while still maintaining their distinct identities. This clash between dominant and marginalized cultures and the constant renegotiation of one’s identity can be found throughout the novel in question.

II. *OS ESTRANGEIROS DO TREM N*: literature and liminality

i. Part I: Taking off

Os estrangeiros do trem N details the lives of two undocumented Brazilian immigrants living in the United States in the early nineties. The first of these characters is Angél Benadski, a former soldier struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder who is arrested almost immediately after setting foot in the John F. Kennedy International Airport. The second is Plínio João, described by the author-narrator as a “typical Brazilian”, a fan of samba, football, and beer. The author describes *Os estrangeiros* as a “realistic-literary narrative”, simultaneously a news report and a novel. Vilas-Boas conducted over one hundred interviews with undocumented Brazilian immigrants living in New York City between September 1993 and October 1994. The novel contains fictionalized versions of their accounts concentrated in the lives of the two protagonists, with the names of participants and locations

changed in order to preserve their identities. The author-narrator himself is a character in his own right, named Paulo Manfort, having recently moved to a small apartment in Queens with his wife, although little is revealed about him in part I. The titular N train is a subway line operating between Astoria, Queens and Coney Island, in Brooklyn. The train itself is called “a melting pot of foreigners”, in which even the train cars themselves seem to reflect the multiethnic and multicultural faces of its passengers.

Tosta (2004) remarks on the characteristics of *Brazuca* (as Brazilian-Americans have affectionately taken to calling themselves) literature as follows:

Almost always written in colloquial language with modest constructions, these texts focus on descriptive fidelity and verisimilitude; in other words, the direct and objective representation of reality. Their characters are almost always based on real people, which is why their stories are often autobiographical or biographical. Antonio Candido once stated that "nao há literatura sem fuga ao real, e tentativas de transcendê-lo pela imaginação" (Candido 26). If we agree with Candido, it will not be difficult to question the true literariness of these texts. They cannot be compared to the realist novels of the nineteenth century, which tried to legitimize their texts by appropriating historical figures and events, because those works still left enough room for creativity and the "imagination" that Candido treasures so. The *Brazuca* novels draw upon reports, autobiography and biography, testimony and journalistic texts. (577)

These characteristics are present in *Os estrangeiros do trem N*. From the way the novel blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction, to the hybrid nature of the protagonists (fictional characters, but based on real people), to the themes addressed in the book, to its author (an immigrant himself, both a journalist and a fictional novelist), *Os estrangeiros* is itself liminal. Nothing is fixed or singular; the book is characterized by its hybridity.

In terms of genre, the novel blurs the lines between fiction and narrative journalism. Truman Capote is often heralded as being the author of one of the first nonfiction novels in this vein, titled *In Cold Blood* (1966). Creative or literary nonfiction, as it is often called, employs literary style and technique to recount factual events in a manner intended not only to inform, but to entertain. Narrative journalism, in this sense, falls into the category of creative nonfiction. Authors combine extensive research with dramatic storytelling to “transcend the conventions of fact-based journalism” (MASSÉ, 1995). Vilas-Boas is himself a journalist,

and conducted over one hundred interviews to write *Os estrangeiros*. However, the protagonists Plínio and Angél are not real people, but rather an amalgamation of the experiences of the undocumented Brazilian immigrants Vilas-Boas spoke with, recreated in his novel.

ii. Plínio João dos Santos: the child of the lost decade

The chapter “Filhote da década perdida” (“Child of the lost decade”) describes the economic and personal pitfalls which culminated in Plínio’s decision to immigrate to the United States, and thus that of the average Brazilian immigrant he is meant to represent. Described earlier in the novel as a “typical Brazilian”, Plínio is a freelance photographer from Minas Gerais, a state from which a disproportionate amount of people emigrate to the United States from. In his own words, “it’s all about the money”; having spent two years unemployed as an industrial technician in Brazil, he traveled to the U.S. under false pretenses in search of economic success.

Like Angél Benadski, and probably most Brazilian immigrants in the United States, Plínio harps on the string of unemployment when explaining why he decided to escape to the land of Uncle Sam. When he landed at the Galeão Airport in Rio de Janeiro for his connecting flight, Plínio was almost two years without a regular job.

Unemployment, the state of being literally “between jobs”, is a form of liminality. The period between losing one’s job and finding a new one is universally characterized by uncertainty and instability, from both a financial standpoint and an emotional one. One becomes unsure even of what to call themselves; for instance, if an industrial technician is unemployed and working odd jobs in a variety of unrelated fields, they may find it hard to consider themselves an industrial technician. The disenfranchisement and uncertainty of unemployment is a direct mirror to the liminality of the immigrant experience, as undocumented immigrants are rarely formally employed and are thus unprotected by the labor laws that govern the country they live in.

Plínio describes himself as a “child of the lost decade”, referring to the 1980s in Brazil in which the country “plunged into recession, hyperinflation and unemployment”. Many of

the “disenfranchised” youths of this period immigrated to the United States in the hopes of finding economic stability not afforded to them in Brazil. Plínio feels orphaned by his motherland: “In Brazil everything went wrong. That fucking country practically kicked me out. You know what I really am? Recycled garbage from the inflation, the child of the lost decade.” (VILAS-BOAS, p. 56) He calls his life in Brazil “a borrowed life”. He plans his departure carefully with his fiancé Élvia Maria, and fantasizes about the prosperity he will find in the United States. All of the following excerpts of the novel, except for those from the chapter “Dishwasher por quatro horas” have been translated to English by me. “Dishwasher por quatro horas” was included in the collection of works by Portuguese-speaking authors in North America compiled by Moser and Tosta (2011), and had already been translated to English.

His plans for the future weren’t very clear. Maybe buy an apartment, a car. No, a Jeep – a Land Rover, that can handle the worst kinds of terrain. A telephone, of course. Better yet, two. One of those American tents for camping, hi-tech, doesn’t weigh more than a kilo and eight hundred grams, can you believe that? Photographic cameras. Yes, several, of all kinds and sizes. (...) Now that I think about it, why not a country house? (p. 77)

One can see Plínio’s desire to live not necessarily excessively, but to pursue a better life than he had in Brazil. He wants to own an American-made car, and buy “one of those American tents for camping”; in other words, he wants to become a middle-class American.

At the same time, the above quote also illustrates what Hall (1992, p. 613) describes as a narrative of the nation and the way it is constructed: how a country is perceived by its citizens and by the rest of the world.

(...) it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation. As members of such an "imagined community" we see ourselves in our mind's eye sharing in this narrative. It lends significance and importance to our humdrum existence, connecting our everyday lives with a national destiny that pre-existed us and will outlive us.

Plínio was undoubtedly exposed to this national narrative through popular culture produced in the United States and disseminated across the globe. It is mentioned he is a fan of action films starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. He longs to be a part of this “imagined community”; even though he is not American, the mere act of traveling to the land of opportunity is enough to grant him his place in the overall narrative. In Plínio’s case, the narrative is one of material wealth and consumption, but also one of violence and machismo, as exemplified by his taste in American films.

While Angél displayed conflict and unease while on the plane ride to the United States, hesitant to leave his homeland for an unfamiliar country, whose citizens speak an unfamiliar language, Plínio remained resolute. He even sabotaged a job interview, his first job proposal in two years, arranged by his brother-in-law, so his family would not insist in convincing him to stay were he accepted. The only thing that could possibly impede him from leaving Brazil is saying goodbye to his beloved fiancé, but even this wasn’t enough to stop him.

To fulfill his dream, Plínio poses as an ecotourism guide, and, using a falsified passport, he is able to acquire a visa after spending seven hours in line at the Consulate in Rio de Janeiro. Curiously, the consul did not bother to check his recommendation letter from a local charity association or his certification as a guide, both of which he had paid to forge to increase his credibility. This prompts Plínio to think of the immigration system as inefficient and easy to cheat by implementing the infamous *jeitinho brasileiro*; ironically, the very same phenomenon which leads Brazilians to think of each other as untrustworthy in the chapter “Dishwasher for four hours”.

“Dishwasher” describes a scenario familiar to most Brazilians hoping to travel to the United States in search for a better life. Bureaucracy, prejudice and exploitation are prevalent themes in the *Brazuca* literature and are all detailed in the novel excerpt, and Brazilians find themselves in the position of both victim and perpetrator.

The author-narrator of “Dishwasher for four hours” emphasizes the importance of having contacts in the city one plans to immigrate to. Despite the fact that “nine out of ten

Brazucas received a helping hand from a fellow patriot”, Brazilians perceive other Brazilians as untrustworthy, selfish, and greedy. The narrator describes this as the “Immunological Syndrome of the Compatriot Threat”: the contempt, and sometimes active avoidance of fellow Brazilians.

This is an example of how colonizing culture distorts the historical narrative in order to depict the colonized as inferior, thus justifying colonialism. This can be as subtle as the perpetuation of stereotypes, some of which are more outwardly harmful than others; for example, the idea that Brazilians are resourceful, when taken to its logical extreme, leads to the belief that they are willing to do anything, including lie, cheat and steal, in order to come out on top. In “Dishwasher”, this discourse is perpetuated by Brazilians and non-Brazilians alike, doubling its effectiveness in othering the Brazilian immigrant.

Brazilians? I don't even want to see them. They walk all over us.
 You can't trust them.
 If needed, they would even steal their friend's underwear. Good for nothing
 “raça”!
 They'll try to pull a fast one on God and all the rest.
 Here, it's every man for himself. And better get out of the way, because
 otherwise, they'll run you over.
 The veterans won't help the newcomers, they only pass on the suffering.
 They're incapable of forewarning the newcomers about the dangers, so they
 can avoid the mistakes that everybody makes. No. They think like this: “Hey,
 if I caught hell, everyone else has to catch hell as well.”
 The first thing that they think about when they see a new Brazilian in the city
 is: “I wonder if he came to take my job?” (247-248)

The above quotes were said by Brazilians also interviewed by the author. Notably, the fear that Brazilians (and Latino immigrants in general) have come to “take our jobs” is common among conservative Americans. Here, the expression has been embraced by immigrants, helping to perpetuate the negative stereotype that favors the colonizer by pitting groups against each other. Those who find themselves in a more stable position as immigrants seem to be wary of others and reproduce the prejudices inflicted upon them when they first arrived. This could be their way of aligning themselves with the dominant social group in the country they reside in; in this case, white Americans.

Here, we also notice that the “Brazuca” identity (how Brazilian immigrants in the United States have come to refer to themselves) seems to supersede being Brazilian. That is, Brazucas have appropriated their identity as immigrants, and this identity appears to hold more significance than their ties to the homeland. Hall describes this “loosening of strong identifications with the national culture, and a strengthening of other cultural ties and allegiances” as a possible consequence of globalization itself, as identities “‘above’ and ‘below’ the level of the nation-state” are placed center-stage.

Despite this, in “Dishwasher”, Vilas-Boas also describes the solidarity between Brazilian immigrants. When asked, they claim Brazilians are the most untrustworthy people in New York City, but ties to Brazil are maintained in the little things available in the city which remind them of home:

It’s true that Brazilians don’t have a system of connections like the Chinese, Indians or Italians do, for example. On the other hand, a Brazuca freshman rarely faces the Big Apple empty-handed. At the very least, he carries in his pocket the phone number of a waiter, who knows a dishwasher, who knows a pizza delivery biker, who’s shared a room with a busboy, who knows an experienced baby-sitter, who’s dating a good shoe shiner, who every day stops by all the Brazilian points on 46th Street, where you can find *coxinha*, *caju* juice, *Folha de S. Paulo*, Brahma beer, *carne-de-sol*, and, obviously, job postings. (126)

“Dishwasher” also describes the four hours Plínio spent working as a dishwasher (hence the title) at a restaurant owned by a Portuguese immigrant, Álvaro Marreiros. Only one other employee at the restaurant is Brazilian: the waiter Gilberto, who Plínio befriends. Elements of Brazilian culture, particularly the food, are appropriated by Marreiros, not to be more inclusive of Brazilians and Brazilian-Americans, but to cater to “a specific American customer, generally the type who had already visited Brazil”. Thus, not only are individual Brazilians like Plínio and Gilberto being exploited for their labor, similarly to the way Brazil’s natural resources were when it was a Portuguese colony, but their culture is being exploited as well, an example of cultural appropriation. This does not bring Plínio and Gilberto any closer to economic prosperity, but serves to highlight Marreiros’ hybrid role as oppressor (emulating Brazil’s historical ties to Portugal) and oppressed (being an immigrant

in the United States himself, despite being documented). Portuguese employers are described by Plínio as follows:

“They said I shouldn’t work with a Brazilian boss no matter what. Portuguese? No way. I don’t have much to say about a Brazilian boss because I never had one. But I know Portuguese bosses. They’ll skin you alive. They’re slave-drivers. God forbid I have to work with those fucked up people, all stuck up because they’re Europeans.” (248)

Plínio uses imagery related to colonial Brazil to describe Marreiros and his relationship with the Portuguese in the United States, comparing them to slave-owners and military colonels. They are thought of as “stuck up” because they’re European, hinting at the historical animosity between the marginalized, “third world” group (Brazilians) and the dominant, “first world” group (the Portuguese).

As Gilberto states, “an immigrant can’t just, all of a sudden, tell his boss to go to hell.” Marreiros takes advantage of their vulnerability as illegal immigrants in the United States to force them to work long hours for poor wages, knowing that they can’t seek American authorities for support. His employees even suspect that he purposefully procrastinates filling out the paperwork which would give them their *grincar* (Greencard), in order to further subjugate them. Plínio compares his former boss, a documented Portuguese immigrant, to a slave owner, alluding to the colonial ties between Brazil and Portugal, reproducing them in a next context.

The relationship between language and culture cannot be underscored. Portuguese finds itself in a position of liminality in “Dishwasher”; despite being the language of the European colonizers of Brazil, it is the language spoken by the oppressed Brazilian immigrant. Plínio, despite being a newcomer in the United States and with unspecified experience with the English language, embraces the practicality of being an English speaker while infusing it with Portuguese words, expressions and accent (*grincar, chamado o sick, róti dogui*). Being Brazilian, he also does not employ the European standard of his native language, which sets him at odds with his Portuguese boss. Plínio delights in impersonating his boss and jokingly imitating his accent, both to his former coworker Gilberto and to Paulo.

Language is a topic of much debate in postcolonial and cultural theoretical circles. Is it a greater act of resistance to reject dominant languages such as English, French or even Portuguese and return to the use of indigenous languages, or to use the colonial language as a means of international communication, changing and deconstructing the standard in the process? The Indian author Salman Rushdie (1992) writes:

I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (17)

Martinican writer Edouard Glissant has also written about the topic of language as resistance, specifically how it pertains to the influence of French on the Caribbean islands. Glissant addresses the relationship between the colonized subject and the language imposed on them by the colonizer, and the strategic use of the language as a form of resistance. This is what Plínio does to Marreiros' Portuguese.

iii. Angél Giulatti Benadski: virtual passenger

Former soldier Angél Benadski, himself the son of Polish and Italian immigrants who settled in the south of Brazil, did not even make it past the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at the airport where he landed in New York City. Angél arrived in the United States with very few belongings: roughly \$200; his real passport, without a single visa; his false passport, which included a U.S. visa which would allow him entry into the country; a new name, Mauro Braga Pompeu; a false marriage certificate to serve as a guarantee that he would return to Brazil; a return ticket; and a rather unreasonable goal of saving up \$30.000 in two years. In his anxiety, Angél handed his real passport to the immigration officer instead of the fake one, and was subsequently arrested.

During the nine-hour flight from São Paulo to New York, Angél occupied a sort of liminal space, described as a “virtual territory” by the narrator: a place to get to another place. It is there, on the first plane ride of his life, where he desperately wished to return to the home he had thought abandoned him. Angél’s relationship to the aptly named motherland is that of an orphan to a absent parent. His connection to Brazil is even more tenuous than Plínio’s. His parents are not Brazilian, his relationship with his siblings is uncivil, he has no romantic partner, and he is struggling with trauma from having fought on Brazil’s border with Bolivia when a patrol went horribly wrong. Angél’s anxieties about his new life in the United States and his old life in Brazil are given nine hours to fester on the plane. As the narrator puts it, it is enough time for one’s entire life to appear before their eyes.

Despite his anxiety, Angél still believes that his stay in the U.S. will be temporary, as do most Brazilian immigrants. He did not plan in advance what he would do with the \$30,000 he would save up during his two-year sojourn, only that he would save up this amount in the first place. The narrator describes the desire to “set sail” as part of human nature, as if we were compelled by a magical force to leave. To Angél, the United States represented “wealth and abundance”, and he is spurred to action by these forces, by what he had seen on television, in film and on the internet, and by fantastical stories not unlike those told of El Dorado or Atlantis.

These stories, according to Hall, bind people from all over the world to the “global village” of communication and consumption. With the advent of television, the internet and more affordable international travel, even the most isolated communities are bombarded with images of prosperity and luxury.

The more social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places, and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems, the more identities become detached - disembedded - from specific times, places, histories, and traditions, and appear "free-floating." We are confronted by a range of different identities, each appealing to us, or rather to different parts of ourselves, from which it seems possible to choose. It is the spread of consumerism, whether as reality or dream, which has contributed to this "cultural supermarket" effect. (662)

This, Vilas-Boas writes, prompts people to “take flight”, like migratory birds, in search of something better. Vilas-Boas describes this as a “strange compulsion” every human being is prone to feel. The “magical stories” we are exposed to because of media manifest in us a desire to depart, the same way migratory birds are driven by an unshakable instinct.

Angél’s anxiety only increases at the airport, where he is intimidated by the impassive and hostile immigration officers. Not only that, they do not speak Portuguese, and speak to (or rather, at) Angél in Spanish in an attempt to communicate. Here, the language barrier is apparent; there are no Portuguese-speaking immigration officers at INS, and Spanish is meant to make up for their absence, as the two languages are supposedly similar enough to be interchangeable. This shows the lack of interest the agency has towards those it deems “undesirable”.

At the immigration office, those coming into the U.S. are distinguished not only by race or nationality, but by class. It did not matter if Angél’s name were Benadski or Santos, Smith or Silva; if he were from Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Uganda or India; “a foreigner is more foreign when they are poor and when they don’t speak the local language”. This statement by the narrator makes it abundantly clear that the novel was written in the nineties, before the September 11th attacks. After 9/11, airport security became more rigorous, with the establishment of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Brown people from the Middle East are disproportionately targeted by immigration officers and discriminated against because of stereotypes related to terrorism (THORN, 2018).

Angél is subsequently arrested and sent to two detention centers, first in SoHo, then in Elizabeth, in the neighboring state of New Jersey. There, he is surrounded by other “citizens of nowhere”, either detained while trying to enter the country illegally or caught by the INS after years of living in hiding. This condition of being a “non-citizen” is also a liminal state, where one does not enjoy the rights guaranteed by citizenship. This is true not only for undocumented immigrants, but for people in prison as well. In Angél’s case, he has become both. He exists in a sort of legal limbo (in the words of the author-narrator, a legal fiction) along with the other inmates at the detention center who were caught before having gone

through immigration services: “for all intents and purposes, he is outside of the United States, and therefore American laws didn’t apply to him” (86). These are the “excludable” immigrants, as described by the author-narrator. There are also the “deportable” immigrants, who were able to get past INS with a valid visa and passport; many spend years living in the United States unbothered, but always under the constant fear that if they are caught doing anything wrong, they will be detained and subsequently deported.

The SoHo detention center was created to house those charged with immigration violations for a short amount of time. Because of this, human rights activists were never called in to inspect the living conditions and treatment of the inmates. Angél spent three months there, without any contact with the outside world and with barely a blanket to protect himself from the cold. Women were sexually assaulted by the guards on a daily basis. Inmates weren’t allowed phone calls, and at most received weekly visits from lawyers if any had decided to take up their case. After three months, Angél was transferred to Elizabeth, where he obsessively planned his escape.

After escaping from the detention center in Elizabeth, Angél deals with a literal loss of identity, showing a resistance to participating in Paulo’s interview. He changes his appearance by shaving his head and getting tattoos and adopts the name on his fake documents, having become paranoid of being discovered by the INS.

Angél was more resistant than any other person I interviewed, because his status as an illegal immigrant was different from that of most Brazucas. Angél was a fugitive of the INS. Besides having to live under the radar as an immigrant, his papers were fake: he answered to the name Mauro Braga Pompeu. His loss of identity is much more “real” and visible than that of other Brazilians living in New York. (81)

Prisoners in the United States, regardless of their immigration status, are stripped of many of their rights as citizens in a process called felony disenfranchisement. Not only are they not allowed their freedom and privacy, but they are also not allowed to vote. Those apprehended by the INS (or its modern equivalent, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE) have technically not committed any crime (unlawful entry into the United States is considered a federal misdemeanor, according to the United States Code of Laws), but are still treated as criminals. Apprehended undocumented immigrants like Angél

are denied entry to the U.S. and must endure a Kafkaesque maze of bureaucracy to return to their home country, as described in the novel.

Angél, like all “excludable” immigrants, exists in a liminal state. He is not a citizen of the United States, nor can he hope to become one; he does not enjoy the rights afforded to him as a Brazilian citizen either. He can no longer call himself Angél Benadski. While in Elizabeth, he clung to the identity of Mauro Braga Pompeu, convincing himself that he was him, in order to bide his time before his escape.

He signed his name as Mauro Braga Pompeu without fear. He was born in Araçatuba, São Paulo on November 27th, 1963, son of Izaltina da Silva Braga and Manoel Pompeu, owner of the passport numbered CD 584362, altered by a professional forger, which showed the picture of Angél Giuliatti Benadski. Angél hid the passport inside his mattress of his prison cell, where it remained hidden through the worst circumstances. Every once in a while, he would take it out from the foam of the mattress just to flip through the pages. This way, he clung to the conviction that he was, in fact, Mauro Braga Pompeu, with a valid visa and everything. It was only then that he began to see his freedom as something attainable. It was then that he found a little more meaning in the most precious things, like falling asleep and waking up. (122)

iv. *Latino, eu?*² Brazilians and the Latino community

Latin-American immigrants living in the United States are primarily Mexican (with more than 11 million Mexican immigrants residing in the U.S., making up 28% of the foreign-born population of the country) and from countries in Central America (which totalize 8% of the U.S.’ immigrant population). The language barrier makes it difficult for Brazilians to feel as though they are members of the wider Latino community, despite fulfilling the singular criteria for inclusion: being from a country in Latin America. The term “Latino” is often used synonymously with “Hispanic”; as late as 1990, Latino was not listed on the U.S. Census survey. The word “Hispanic”, to put it simply, describes a person from a Spanish-speaking country. Therefore, according to this definition, a person born in Spain would be Hispanic but not Latino, and a person born in Brazil would be Latino but not Hispanic. Many Americans wrongly assume Spanish is the official language of Brazil. Darcy Ribeiro (1986; in TOSTA, 2004) points to a position of isolation Brazil occupies in relation to

² A reference to an article written by Tosta (2004), titled “Latino, eu? The Paradoxical Interplay of Identity in Brazuca Literature”.

the rest of South America, dating back to the relationship between Portugal and Spain in colonial times, which is reinforced among immigrant communities in the United States.

Briefly touched upon in the interaction between Angél and the immigration officers in the chapter “Passageiro virtual”, the language and cultural barriers between Latino communities are addressed further in the chapter titled “Fuga de Elizabeth”. Vilas-Boas writes that “the average American cannot distinguish between Brazilians and Hispanics. To them, it’s all Hispanic. The conflict starts there. Brazil is a South American country, with a Latino population, yes, but not Hispanic.”

Angél, after escaping from prison, works unloading boxes of beer for a truck driver in Elizabeth. The truck driver asks him two questions: first, “Where are you from?” and immediately after Angél answers, “Hum, so you speak Spanish, don’t you?” During his tenure in prison, very few inmates, most of them of Hispanic themselves, knew that, in Brazil, the official and most commonly spoken language is Portuguese.

Despite this conflict, Spanish is extremely useful for Brazilian immigrants who do not speak English, as was Angél’s case. Spanish is widely spoken on television and on the radio in New York City, and newspapers and magazines in Spanish are also easy to find. Vilas-Boas writes that Brazilians frequently turn to Hispanic channels when seeking to learn more about an important event in the news, where they feel “more at home”. Content produced in Portuguese is apparently very limited in this regard.

The same way Brazil views itself as separate from the rest of Latin America, Vilas-Boas writes, Brazilian immigrants tend to distance themselves from fellow Latinos in the United States, regardless of the usefulness of the Spanish language. Vilas-Boas attributes this to the fact that Brazilians deem themselves to be more educated than other Latinos. This points to a class struggle within the Latino community, as Brazucas tend to be middle-class and immigrants from Mexico or Central America, for example, tend to be poor. Brazucas are thus resentful of performing the same menial tasks and taking the same underpaid jobs as their neighbors: “shoe shiners, dishwashers, waiters, street vendors, club dancers, babysitters, taxi drivers, cooks, housekeepers, valets etc.”

By the end of the first part of the novel, Plínio and Angél are part of the Brazilian community in New York, however disjointed and isolated it may be. They have become a part of the vast cultural and ethnic mosaic that is the United States of America, albeit a hidden one.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To be an undocumented immigrant in any country is to go unnoticed while simultaneously be ostracized. It is to exist in a perpetual middle ground. An undocumented immigrant is not in one's homeland, and does not enjoy the rights and protection afforded to citizens in general, resulting in unequal power relations between locals, documented immigrants and undocumented immigrants, and systemic oppression. Their identities are in constant flux; they do not feel at home in the country they've chosen to live in, but often they decide to emigrate from their home country because they do not feel at home there either. This is the case of the two protagonists of *Os estrangeiros do trem N*.

Driven by the promise of material wealth and prosperity, an integral part of the American cultural narrative, and the feeling of being abandoned by their motherland, Plínio and Angél leave behind their lives, their families, their previous identities and even their names in the hopes of finding success in New York City. The obstacles they face are those faced by many immigrants: economic hardships, disenfranchisement, the immigration system which aggressively targets them, the enmity of those surrounding them, the loss of identity which comes from anonymity. Xenophobia, poverty, and bureaucracy are grim realities that Sérgio Vilas-Boas has shed light on in his debut novel.

Despite all these obstacles, immigrants make up an undeniable and ever-growing part of the American cultural mosaic. They have brought and bring with them their languages, cultures and perspectives, to the point that one would be hard-pressed to imagine the United States without them. Those who come across Vilas-Boas' writings find an opportunity to see the U.S. in a new light, one that is different from what has been commonly portrayed in mainstream literature for centuries.

In our current political and social climate, we are experiencing a resistance to globalization, which strengthens national identities (HALL, 1992, p. 619) and gives rise to racism and xenophobia under the guise of nationalism. Gilroy (apud HALL, 1992, p. 618) on the subject of this thinly-veiled racism states what follows:

We increasingly face a racism which avoids being recognized as such because it is able to line up “race” with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism. A racism which has taken a necessary distance from crude ideas of biological inferiority and superiority now seeks to present an imaginary definition of the nation as a unified cultural community. It constructs and defends an image of national culture – homogeneous in its whiteness yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies within and without.... This is a racism that answers the social and political turbulence of crisis and crisis management by the recovery of national greatness in the imagination. Its dream-like construction of our sceptered isle as an ethnically purified one provides special comfort against the ravages of [national] decline.

Although one’s culture is intrinsically tied to their race, caution should be exercised so as not to fall prey to this discourse, which only perpetuates harmful stereotypes about immigrants, especially if they are not white. These perspectives benefit only the oppressor, who seeks to weaken minority groups by pitting them against each other. This can be seen in the way immigrants feel the need to compete with each other for jobs and hesitate to help their fellow immigrant, as seen in “Dishwasher por quatro horas”. It can also be seen in Brazilians’ perceived need to distance themselves from the Latino community and negative stereotypes associated with Latino immigrants, as seen in “Fuga de Elizabeth”.

Immigration irrevocably changes the immigrant. By immersing themselves in a new language and a new culture, they form a new and unique identity, that of an immigrant, which clashes and coexists with whatever identities they held prior to their decision to leave their homeland for the unknown. As difficult as their circumstances may be in their new home, their horizons are broadened by the experience of being there.

Above all, the presence of immigrants forces a country’s borders to become more flexible, not only geographically, but also linguistically and culturally. It is through direct contact with the unfamiliar, personified in the immigrant, that we confront our preconceived notions of selfhood. Literature written by these immigrants, told from their perspective, helps foster our understanding of this flexibility, enabling us to challenge these borders. Ultimately,

Vilas-Boas writes, “the departure means the end of many things” (p. 80), including the end of stability, sameness, and comfort. What is new arrives to challenge long-established traditions that often go unquestioned, in an attempt to create something better. It is only by embracing diversity, and all the challenges that come with it, that we can grow as a society.

Literature exposes us to situations that mirror real life, maturing us not only as readers but as individuals. The uncertainty and instability that accompanies liminality, the anxieties that come with the constant renegotiation of our identities, and the realization that we are always unfinished and in constant flux become less daunting and more bearable when we experience them through the eyes of fictional characters, like Plínio and Angél. Brazilian readers that come across *Os estrangeiros do trem N* have the opportunity to exercise empathy towards those who find themselves displaced, in every sense of the word.

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