



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
 CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
 ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Sketchbook, Views from the Aljube, Lisbon (pencil, ink and watercolor drawings) | 2019 | Sharon Lubkemann Allen (courtesy of the artist)

# NEW NAVIGATORS OF PORTUGUESE CULTURAL MEMORY

Sharon Lubkemann Allen

I have long been drawn to old maps retracing the routes of Portuguese navigation, as works of art exquisitely drawn on hand stretched parchment or paper, as historical artifacts crossed by Portolan lines that reflect innovation and limits of navigational understanding, as articles that have aged, been archived, retrieved, reframed in continually revisionary cultural contexts. From the vantage point of an artist, these navigational maps are compelling in that they openly reflect the fact that the work of art, even completed and signed by the artist, remains unfinished, as evidenced here by tentatively traced outlines of continents and stretches of rivers that fade and falter at the limit of geographical knowledge.



These maps are working documents, retrospective and prospective. Marked with compass rose, astrolabe, and other navigational instruments, they also bear the seals of monarch and church, baring the intent not only of exploration and encounter, but also of conquest and conversion, expropriation, and exploitation. These maps designate land and sea in Latin, Portuguese, and other European languages legible to the navigators, and in retrospect reflecting Eurocentrism that not only conquers, but also covers over the cultures it “discovers” and covers up the traces of the devastating costs of navigation. However, there are many other legible traces on these maps, not least in the gaps filled in with figures of “strange creatures” on land and sea – more imagined than real figures of the foreigner and of navigators’ fears, stylized yet with some trace of a reality that resists erasure. Contemporary artists and writers across Lusophone cultures have recently begun to revisit, critically and creatively revise these maps and other navigational tools and traces, remapping and reconfiguring cultural memory, reorienting cultural discourse.

The navigator remains a ubiquitous figure in Portuguese cultural memory and discourse (in streets, monuments and malls), guiding discovery and attesting to Portuguese “greatness”. Yet dissenting and, in recent decades, central cultural conversations and constructions have begun to contend with the fact that Portuguese navigations resulted not only in celebrated cross-cultural contact and exchange that enriched its culture and, for a time, its coffers, but also in devastating conquest. The Portuguese Empire was one of the most protracted and problematic colonial empires, including repressive dictatorships and disastrous civil crises and cultural critique. All of these factors were addressed by Brazilian writers such as Oswald de Andrade in terms of cannibalism, and Haroldo de Campos of counter quest, in the wake of which aesthetics become inseparable from ethics for post-colonial, post-modern Portuguese and Lusophone cultural consciousness. Nostalgic currents are met by undercurrents of critique. *Consciência* in Portuguese connotes both consciousness and conscience. The “discoveries” are decried in part for a protracted cover up of incriminating evidence. While façades continue to commemorate colonial power, both literal and literary faces of Portugal have changed markedly with waves of immigration and migration after the Revolution in 1974 and entrance into the European Union in 1986.

A recalcitrant Portuguese history has been revisited, revised, and reframed by late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century writers, artists, critics, and curators working in Lusophone contexts, who inevitably navigate what have become increasingly treacherous cultural traditions and discourses. I imagine these as the “new navigators”, appropriating this controversial term to describe them in



part because of their fearlessness, or perhaps more accurately their braving fear, in dis-covering, in the sense of recovering and uncovering, monstrous aspects of the past as a way to make sense of monstrous aspects of the present. These new navigators draw on and revise the work of cultural navigators who precede them - chroniclers, painters, architects, sculptors, ranging from Camões to Pessoa, Lopo Homem and Nuno Gonçalves to Leopoldo de Almeida. Among contemporary Portuguese writers who directly confront that past, novelists from António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge to Dulce Maria Cardoso relocate and recast cultural memory through disorienting trans-historical and trans-cultural crossings, exploration of historically marginal contexts and marginalized consciousnesses, multiplication of perspectives and provocations of murmuring conscience. Antunes, like the Luso-Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão, literally re-casts and relocates the historical Portuguese navigators, at once humanizing them and foregrounding the dehumanizing impact of colonialism, by rendering the past present. In Antunes's *As Naus (Return of the Caravels)*, Cabral and Camões simultaneously recall their heroic 16<sup>th</sup>-century departure, exploits as explorers, and the recent colonial debacle as they return among the ranks of *retornados* on overcrowded ships to unwelcoming Lisbon shores, Camões bearing his father's bones.

Varejão's layered painting opens segments of a reproduced tile wall to reveal the navigator's corpses. Both novelist and artist deconstruct the past with post-modern violence, ripping open the historical façade and literary or artistic form to show cultural rape (depicting literal rape, through the cultural sacrilege of missionary priest recast as pimp and rapist, rending the literary text and the canvas to show its bloodied substrate). However, they also flesh out the most grotesque aspects of the past through the evocative poetic prose and masterful *tromp l'oeil* painting. They flesh out the figure of the writer and artist, in Varejão's case with a series of self-portraits in the guise of colonial subjects, partly blinded - eye ripped out of the seemingly bloodied canvas, placed as a beautiful porcelain sculpture on a nearby table, opened like a jewel box, with a scene of cultural memory painted within, visible only to the viewer who approaches and picks up a magnifying glass to peer within the artist's or colonial subject's eye.

In other instances, the artist is dissected, her head (beheaded) held delicately aloft by a neo-classical figure inscribed with indigenous signs in a *trompe-l'oeil* azulejo *Figura de Convite*, behind whom we see beautifully rendered but unanticipated scenes of anthropophagy. Varejão's work recasts the past through juxtapositions and reconfigurations. Like the scene of literal and cultural rape in *Filho Bastardo*,



she serves up Lopo Homem's map in a beautifully stylized oval painting that reads as a platter, except that it is sliced rather than cracked open in the center, to reveal layers of flesh underneath through what seems a vaginal tear. Her map is cut and sutured, marked by still seeping wounds and scars. Though equally scandalous and scatological, writers such as Jorge (in *A Costa dos Murmúrios* and *O Vale da Paixão*) and Cardoso (in *O Retorno*), and artists such as Paula Rego or Monica de Miranda represent perspectives of mundane rather than monumental figures, not least among them bastard children who come to understand the land and cultural landscape authentically, and articulate that understanding with authority. The technical beauty of their technique is similarly so compelling that it nets cultural consciousness and forces conscience.

Alongside Portuguese writers, Luso-Brazilian writers ranging back through Osman Lins (especially in *A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia*) to Oswald de Andrade, Luso-African writers including Mia Couto, Ondjaki (Ndalu de Almeida), and José Eduardo Agualusa, as well as artists across Lusophone cultures have been tracing new trajectories forward through cultural memory, partly by tracing new linkages between geo-cultural contexts and genres, by crossing borders and employing new navigational tools and technologies. There has been wide dissemination and significant scholarly study of (re)visionary work by Luso-Brazilian artists such as Anna Bella Geiger and Adriana Varejão as well as Portuguese artists ranging from Vieira da Silva to Paula Rego. Likewise, there are individual studies in English and Portuguese of more established writers such as Antunes, Jorge, and Saramago. Compelling collections of essays on Portuguese women's writing have been recently edited by Kaufman and Klobucka, Owen and Pazos Alonso, paralleled by important studies of post-colonial consciousness in contemporary Portuguese literature written and edited by Calafate Ribeiro, Ferreira, Moutinho, Owen and Klobucka, Teixeira and others. Yet there is little scholarship on emergent artists such as Ângela Ferreira, Mónica de Miranda, and Délio Jasse, or writers such as Cardoso and Agualusa. Sapega's 2008 monograph is one of few works that comparatively considers *Visual & Literary Negotiations in Consensus & Debate in Salazar's Portugal*.

This proposal of a new mapping of the "New Navigators in Portuguese cultural memory" seeks to introduce an extraordinary and globally extensive, yet often overlooked body of art to a wide-ranging readership in English. Concurrently, this proposal cultivating dialogue across conventionally discrete disciplines, re-imagining ways of reading visual and verbal artifacts, and delivering a critically informed and insightful interdisciplinary analysis of works by both emergent and established artists and writers



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who are reframing collective memory, relocating history, recasting historical character and chronicler, reimagining creative disciplines, and reorienting critical discourses. These new navigators' reorientation through the past also cuts reflexively, confronting the chronicler's complicity. Some of their reflective, refractive, and reflexive works have been critically considered in terms of global post-colonial critique. However, the revisionary history that comes with their variously visionary, verbal and visual ways of telling stories, is not only retrospective, but prospective, suggesting ways to navigate through disconcerted cultural memory to find new cultural moorings.

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