

An Interview with Cristiana Bastos

1. How do you see the theme of the sea in Portuguese culture? What is its value and importance?

The Portuguese are schooled from an early age on that theme through different forms. As geography: the country is presented as the westernmost frontier of Europe, and its people are seen as prone to explore the oceans, move west, move south, connect continents. As history: the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century ocean crossings of Portuguese caravels are presented as central to the transformation of global connectivity, often alongside the trope of Portuguese nautical talent and pioneering qualities. As literature: the nation's major epic poem, *The Lusíads*, is about Vasco da Gama's sea voyage to India, and many other literary expressions also evoke the experience of the sea. As art: the national style, *Manuelino*, is defined by sculpted maritime motifs. As nourishment: an important component of the traditional economy is associated with fishing and fish processing. As religion: some of the most complex *círios* (cycles of itinerant religious festivities) are in coastal regions and include boat processions. As a lifestyle: over time the seaside became a prime choice for leisure—first for elites, later for everyone. As a brand: the landmark and transformative Expo '98 adopted the theme of oceans. As a trend: surfing in Portugal is a popular sport and also a major international attraction. The list could go on; there is always something to add. Yet there are also many other themes to mix, match, produce, and re-create as individual and collective identifiers. Some people live inland and have no direct exposure to the sea; or do not care for maritime epics; or cannot differentiate Manueline baroque from neoclassical; or do not like fish, or surf, or the seaside. Nationalist regimes are keen to produce collective identifiers, symbols, and narratives that are later naturalized or taken as the cultural core, but we can see beyond the myths.

I am one of those people who adores the ocean and who is not fully happy when too far from the shore. I believe many of us Portuguese feel that way. I also believe that we are not the only people on earth who experience that feeling and who have the ocean as the main identifier of our culture and history. While some groups ignore or avoid the ocean—even when living on the coast—many are

experienced navigators and traders. Polynesians have been long-distance explorers for centuries, settling in most islands of the Pacific. Eastern Mediterraneans crossed the waters all the way to the Atlantic. So as critical analysts of our history, we may not want to endorse a metaphysical approach to the centrality of the ocean in our particular culture. Perhaps we should leave that to the ingenuity (*engenho e arte*) of poets, composers, and other artists.

2. How has Portuguese anthropology dealt with the maritime theme?

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologists were prone to grand generalizations about the national character and cultural traits of the Portuguese. We no longer work along those lines—which, as I have said, are better left to art. Instead, anthropologists focus on the collective and individual lives that directly depend on the oceans: fishing communities and other shore settlers; sailors and those involved in the sailing infrastructure, from the material production of vessels to the demographic, gendered, and family impact of sailing and sea trading; shore leisure, including seasonal tourism, service industries, beach culture, water sports, surfing, festivals, and so on.

3. Do you believe that Portugal still glorifies the sea as an avatar of Portuguese-ness, as a metonym of bravery?

We hear that in a few different ways—sometimes as a direct glorification of empire via the idiom of overseas discoveries; at other times as a version of the theme of “bravery when facing the unknown” that has stripped away the conquest component. At still other times, it is morphed into contemporary themes of global connection. More rarely, it is linked with the actual experience of fishing crews that went through the most dire conditions after whales, tuna, cod, and still endure all-around life challenges after sardines, mackerel and other domestic fisheries.

4. Recently, there has been public debate about the possibility of creating a Museum of the Discoveries in Lisbon. Many say that a museum with such a name would further glorify an archaic Portuguese history and negate the impacts of slavery and colonialism. Others see this name as reasonable and natural. Where do you stand on this issue?

I was among those who signed the letter asking the mayor of Lisbon to rethink his proposal for a discoveries museum. Most of us who signed it find the concept

archaic, out of tune with contemporary awareness that one doesn't really discover what others already know. Still, many people continue to believe that the discoveries are iconic Portuguese events that should be celebrated, even as others are fully aware of their imperial resonance and argue that discoveries and expansion cannot be addressed without also acknowledging the destructive and devastating aspects of empire. That is why some proposals suggest that a slavery memorial (approved during the *orçamento participativo*, one of Lisbon's community-based competitions for urban projects) should be coupled with the new museum. Having visited the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C., and several other memorials to slavery and indentured labor around the world, I believe that there are many ways to capture and curate such complex and painful histories and to provide tools to help address the fractures and wounds that persist in our societies. Related museum projects in Portugal should learn from international examples and seriously engage with the contemporary consequences of imperial histories, including structural racism. It may take time, but we shall get there.

5. Do you think that Portugal is yet to come to terms with its slaver past, which owes much to the glorification of the seas?

We are still a long way away, but things are happening and we shall get there some day, at least in part. There are academic and community-based events addressing that aspect of collective history. There is growing recognition of the link between the plantation-related traffic in humans and the consolidation of racism and racialism. More literature is available, and less people follow lusotropicalism, a pervasive ideology that softens history by invoking the benign exceptionalism of Portuguese colonial ventures. Change will not be easy, or smooth, or immediate, but we are moving toward more general awareness of colonial violences and their aftermath. But coming to terms with that, doing something about it, promoting justice in a wounded society, rescuing the visibility and citizenship of those excluded in the process...that is a whole other chapter that needs further engagement. Creating awareness is one necessary step along that route.

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