

Shit, Shrimps, and Shifting Sobriquets: *Iracema* and the Lesson in Lost Authority

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Any reader approaching José de Alencar's novel *Iracema* predisposed to maritime references could scarcely be disappointed. From its famous opening lines, "Verdes mares bravios de minha terra natal" (20), to its final chapter in which the sad figure of Poti gets up every morning and looks out to the ocean in anticipation of the return of his friend and master, references to the sea saturate the novel. The thalassic allusion, however, that marks the text most is the one which Alencar, the meddling author, attempts to foreclose: the name of the "jovem guerreiro" (20). This preclusion, which may be seen to fail, is the first of three such restrictions imposed on the text by the Brazilian author. Along with the other two, the name of the eponymous heroine and the fluctuating name applied to the Pitiguara Indian, the warrior's name demonstrates the iconoclastic power that intertextuality exercises over any tale that seeks to establish a single voice.

As Luis Filipe Ribeiro has pointed out, through the tactical deployment of footnotes, letters, and prologues, Alencar "interfere antes, durante e depois do texto, participando exaustivamente na produção do sentido" (219). But this exhaustive interference never achieves its ultimate goal of semantically closing the text. The first time that the white warrior is named, we are told by both the character, and lest we doubt him, the author, what his name means: "Meu nome é Martim, que na tua língua quer dizer filho de guerreiro" (23). The accompanying author's note seeks to validate the veracity of the character's assertion, grounding it diachronically: "Martim—Da origem latina de seu nome, procedente de Marte, deduz o estrangeiro a significação que lhe dá" (68). However, this example of authorial intrusion does not prevent the sea

from being seen in Martim's name. Alencar's act of restriction falls short in its objective of connotative limitation and renders the reader suitably suspicious of further interventions from the author. As far as names go, a synchronic reading of the text sullies Alencar's authority, reducing him to the status of a voice that "can make itself heard only by blending into the complex choir of other voices already in place" (Todorov ix).

If we accept Todorov's reading of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, then the word "Martim" enters into a discussion with utterances both past and future. Indeed, Todorov asserts the following:

After Adam, there are no nameless objects nor any unused words. Intentionally or not, all discourse is in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject, as well as with discourses yet to come, whose reactions it foresees and anticipates. (ix)

Not only is Martim affected by the discourse of the sea, he also affects it, becoming another voice in the intertextual dialogue that permeates the Lusophone representations of the deep. He changes and is constantly changed by that maritime discourse.

From Camões onwards, the primordial mass has been a central feature of the Lusophone cultural unconscious.¹ Furthermore, its representations have often been tainted by the polar ambiguity of glory and disaster, or by the blocked dialectic of discovery and return. The repeated references in *Os Lusíadas*, for example, to the cutting open of the sea²—symbolic of the opening up of a frontier—are read alongside the Velho do Restelo's warning:

Oh! Maldito o primeiro que, no mundo,
Nas ondas vela pôs em seco lenho!
Digno da eterna pena do Profundo,
Se é justa a justa Lei que sigo e tenho! (IV.102)

For the Velho, the sea serves as a boundary, part of the natural separation of the world. In seeking to cross that boundary, to cut open the sea and change its nature from separator to link, the Portuguese are, in his opinion, making a date with Nemesis. The sea may thus be read, just within the epic poem, as containing the ambiguous duality of threat and prospect, of reward and retribution.

Ambivalence is a characteristic that the deep retains in many of its manifestations in Lusophone literature. As a synecdochic representation of

the act whereby the Portuguese set out to discover the globe, the sea also bears within itself the symbolism of a desired return to Portugal. In the words of Luís Forjaz Trigueiros, "Portugal é terra de Mar" (91). Oliveira Martins, amongst others, made a similar observation. The geography of the nation made the "enigma absorvente de um mar desenrolado diante da vista" an overpowering force that led to a glorious history (I.6). But at the same time, the cost to the nation of the maritime venture was high. The sea behaved like an enticing mermaid, leading the Portuguese astray. The true cost became apparent at the disaster of Alcácer Quibir (Oliveira Martins I.7).

Ambivalence also affects representations of the sea in the post-independence literatures of the Lusophone world. From the perspective of the formerly colonised, one would expect the oceans to bear within themselves the notion of the cursed medium over which the coloniser arrived. One can see examples in the work of the Mozambican author, Mia Couto, of the sea literally being tainted by the blood on the hands of the oppressor. But even as the sea turns red in Couto's novel *Vinte e Zinco*, it also transmits the idea of a cleansing of the past, of the possibility of a rebirth and redefinition of the role of the deep (92).

The Angolan author Pepetela portrays the sea in an equally ambiguous way in *A Geração da Utopia*. As the character of Vítor contemplates the ocean, he finds it hostile because of its associations with the slave trade—a trade that, for many years, linked Angola and Brazil. The vicious activities of the Portuguese colonisers link the sea to death and oppression. However, as Vítor continues to observe the ocean, the binary of oppressor-oppressed/master-slave begins to crumble. Vítor realises that the slave trade was far more complex than he would like to imagine, involving as it possibly did members of his own family (85). The sea is thus not only contaminated by African blood but also by the blood on African as well as Portuguese hands.

Slavery dominated Brazilian political life for much of the nineteenth century, only finally being abolished in 1888. Bradford Burns suggests that its abolition was a key factor leading to the military coup that ended the reign of the Emperor Pedro II (Burns, *History of Brazil* 228). The sea, in Brazilian national identity, serves as both the bringer of the Portuguese and the medium over which African slaves were introduced to Brazilian society.

In the foundation novel *Iracema*, the descriptions applied to Martim include "guerreiro branco" (24), "guerreiro cristão" (48) and "guerreiro do mar" (46), all three of which point back to a rather bellicose Portugal. The

sea operates as the medium over which the cross of Christ will be brought to bear by the white man on the indigenous population of what would become Brazil. Any doubt that this is what is going to happen is squashed at the end of the novel, as Poti is wholly assimilated into the religion, culture, and language of the coloniser. The negative consequences of the colonising process in the Brazilian context—both its propensity towards the erasure of the colonised and its glottophagic imperialism—ought to be borne in mind when reading the text. The reason why they are often neglected and “o genocídio real transforma-se no casamento ideal” (Ribeiro 223) may be traced, as Ria Lemaire intimates, to *Iracema's* status as an aesthetic masterpiece (69). This poetry in prose, as Machado de Assis designated it, rhetorically deploys language in a way that may be read to conceal the horror of the process of colonisation, portraying betrayal and destruction as true love and constructive sacrifice.

There are clearly dangers in any reading of the text that seeks to re-instate some agency to those who were colonised, as this reading, in part, attempts to do. The reading may unintentionally imply the possession of a spuriously overwhelming power by those who historically have been reduced to a position of subalternity, and, in the context of Brazil, literally to non-existence. A balance, therefore, must be struck. An attempt to show the ways in which language may be read to escape authorial control does not imply that the voice of the colonised destroys colonial power, but rather that colonial authority is slightly undermined by the whispering trace that remains on the names it sought to make its own.

In the case of *Iracema*, there is the additional complexity of its traditional reading as a novel that sought to establish Brazilian cultural independence from Portugal (Coutinho III.241; Filho 134-36). The Indian, as Bradford Burns points out, became a useful if paradoxical tool in the climate in which Alencar wrote:

Although the Indian as an individual was scorned, as a symbol he was cherished. He came to represent the original Brazil before the coming of the detested Portuguese. (*Nationalism* 44)

The coloniser had split into two groups, the Brazilian elite and their Portuguese counterparts. Both relied on the Portuguese language as the medium for their expression.

Alencar was well aware of the power of language in the creation of a national identity, famously asserting that “a língua é a nacionalidade do pensamento como a pátria é a nacionalidade do povo” (qtd. in Jobim 107). As various commentators have pointed out, Alencar believed that Brazilian national identity, as it would come to be manifested in a culturally specific literature, required of its exponents a knowledge of the indigenous languages of Brazil (*Nationalism* 45; Filho 134). His project may thus be read as the attempted consumption of the pre-Portuguese languages of what would become Brazil, in an effort to brazilianise Portuguese. Indeed, the author himself claimed in his “Carta ao Dr Jaguaribe,” published as an appendix to *Iracema*, the following:

Verá nele [neste livro] minhas idéias a respeito da literatura nacional; e achará aí poesia inteiramente brasileira, haurida na língua dos selvagens. (78)

But the languages on which the novelist dines leave him with a bad case of indigestion, for like the sea in *Martim*, they introduce a network of possible meanings beyond authorial control, despite Alencar’s attempt to force the languages to submit to his own intentions. As Bakhtin points out, all discourse in any novel is “overpopulated with the intentions of others” (294). This is ever more the case when a novelist attempts to appropriate the language of another and in the process to restrict its possible meanings. The more Alencar attempts to preclude semantic networks, the more he dares the reader to go beyond the limit he sets. Each morpheme that he borrows from Tupi and Guaraní arrives burdened with the linguistic baggage of another language system, not to mention the dialogical agitation that the word brings with and on itself. Thus the *mar* of *Martim* may be seen to echo the Sumerian for both uterus and sea (Croutier 14). Freud explained the equation in dreams of water with birth, in terms of the evolution of humankind from the deep (194). Our emergence from the womb mirrors life’s emergence from the sea. Ferenczi would later develop Freud’s ideas, arguing that our entire existence as humans is premised on a desired return to the sea from whence we came. *Martim* can be seen to embody all of these ideas. He is both the symbol of death and destruction and of the birth of a nation. He is both warrior and womb, Mars and *mar*. Increasingly, he looks out to the sea, which forms a link to the *pátria* from where he originated. He thus marks the deep with “saudades” (47) in a manner analogous to Herculano’s strategy in *Eurico, o Presbítero*.³

The sea, in Lusophone tradition, has always served two purposes, to link and to separate. The sea *for* Martim serves to remind him of his “berço natal” (47), and to remind him of his absence from it. The sea *in* Martim will serve as the link between the new world and the old world. At a diegetical level, he will bring the value system of Europe to bear on America. But at the same time, the novel in which he is cast will form part of the armoury distinguishing Brazil from Portugal.

Much has been made of Iracema’s name, particularly that it is an anagram of America.⁴ In fact, the status of Iracema’s appellation has been one of the most contested aspects of the novel since it was written. Sânzio de Azevedo claims that Afrânio Peixoto was the first person to notice the anagram in 1929. Azevedo describes a polemic that ensued, in which the intentions of Alencar, as author, were hotly debated (274). Did he mean Iracema to be read as America or not? Leaving aside the fact that Barthes’s ideas had not filtered through to Fortaleza when Azevedo wrote his article, his definitive proof that Alencar did not mean Iracema to be read as America fails in its own terms. For Azevedo asserts that true authorial intention can be extracted from Oscar Mendes’s discovery of an unpublished early manuscript of the novel in which “o primeiro nome criado pelo autor para a sua heroína era *Aracema* que, anagramado, não daria ‘América’” (275). This proves nothing beyond the fact that Alencar chose to change his heroine’s name. Indeed, contrary to what Azevedo concludes, it is possible that Alencar noticed that by changing the “A” to an “I,” “Aracema” could be converted to an anagram of “America.”

More interestingly, Mendes’s discovery can be used to call into question Alencar’s fluency in indigenous languages. The author explains Iracema’s name as the contraction of the Guarani words for honey and lips. It is one of many etymological explanations that Alencar gives in the notes: “*Iracema—Em guarani significa lábios de mel—de ira, mel e tembe—lábios. Tembe na composição altera-se em ceme*” (67). If “Iracema” was always meant to be “lips of honey,” was “Aracema” a mistake? In any case, the extent to which “Iracema” means in Guarani what Alencar claims it does is questionable. According to the *Diccionario Guaraní-Español*, published by Editorial Tupã in 1952, “honey” is spelt “eíra” in Guarani, and retains the “e” in most of its renderings (340). M. Cavalcanti Proença’s notes on Alencar’s notes cast further doubt on the author’s prowess in indigenous languages: “Para Alencar, *tembe* se torna *ceme*, fonética não muito explicável, pois o natural seria tornar-se *reme* (com r franco)” (Alencar 80). Once again, in trying to restrict the

meaning of the name, Alencar challenges the reader to challenge him. By citing the authority of an external language system, the author invites the reader to leave the text and check his facts. In one crucial case, such an investigation reveals a semantic multiplicity in both Guarani and Tupi that underlines both the author's desire to sanitise the savage and the author's loss of authority, since Poti is not so far removed from the English homophone that enters the Anglophone reader's head as he or she reads the Brazilian text. But before considering the problematic role that Martim's Pitiguara friend and his name play in the novel, we turn our attention to the ways in which Martim comes to over-write, or more appropriately over-speak, Iracema's name and voice.

The role of the spoken word is given primacy by Alencar, in a way that mirrors Rousseau and prefigures Lévi-Strauss. In all three cases, orality runs parallel to a vision of the noble savage. In Alencar's case, a discussion of Poti's provenance in the author's notes is rendered conclusive by the assertion that "*a tradição oral é uma fonte importante da História, e às vezes a mais pura e verdadeira*" (66). The noble Poti is legitimised by an oral source. The spoken word rules supreme. If this is the case, license is granted by Alencar to consider precisely what the spoken voice does in his text. The first duty that it performs is to introduce Iracema, in the anachronic first chapter:

A lufada intermitente traz da praia um eco vibrante, que ressoa entre o marulho das vagas:

—Iracema! (20)

The sea metonymically interferes with Iracema, through the "marulho das vagas." The enunciation of her name is thus always already marked by Martim. Before the story unfolds analeptically, the sea has permeated her. Ria Lemaire points out that as the narrative develops, Iracema loses power at various levels to Martim (63-68). This is paralleled by her absorption into the sea. The first time that she lays eyes on her future lover, he is described as having "*nas faces o branco das areias que bordam o mar; nos olhos o azul triste das águas profundas*" (21). Not only, therefore, is Martim linked to the deep appellatively and in terms of provenance, but also descriptively. Iracema's increasing association with the sea mirrors his attempted erasure of her name. Before she leaves and betrays her tribe, she has never seen the sea. She is "*a virgem da serra, que nunca desceu às alvas praias onde arrebetam*

as vagas" (34). The voices associated with the sea, such as that of the "gaivota," are alien to her. But almost immediately after her flight, they begin to enter her head: "O grito da gaivota terceira vez ressoa a seu ouvido" (35). The reader learns that the sea becomes an intrinsic part of her new existence. It is a symbol of what links her to her lover and separates her from her past: "Iracema achara ali nas praias do mar um ninho do amor, nova pátria para seu coração" (50-51).

After a very short period of conjugal bliss, Iracema realises that the sea also acts as a block between her and Martim. A distance develops between the two that she associates with the voices that the sea carries over from Martim's homeland (58). The sea thus becomes a barrier between her and her lover, representing the immense distance between their two cultures as well as the means over which her culture will be consumed by his.

In Alencar's romantic vision of Iracema, she is allied to the purity of nature. His descriptions of her form a link to various aspects of flora and fauna. The nature of her voice is that it is the voice of nature. Her name is articulated by the "jandaia." But, by the final chapter, her erasure appears to be total: even the faithful bird is no longer able to speak "o mavioso nome de Iracema" (65). The only voice left appears to be that of Martim. Iracema's dying request is to be buried where she can hear the sea, and thus the voice of her lover:

Enterra o corpo de tua esposa ao pé do coqueiro que tu amavas. Quando o vento do mar soprar nas folhas, Iracema pensará que é tua voz que fala entre seus cabelos. (63)

The power of her own voice is transformed in the novel, from its halcyon ephemerality as the echo that inhabits the heart of her lover—"As falas da virgem ressoaram docemente no coração de Martim" (34)—to the point where even her thoughts require linguistic mediation through the warrior's tongue—"A voz do cristão transmitiu a Poti o pensamento de Iracema" (39). Is there any trace, therefore, left of her by the end of the novel, other than a dialogic resonance of what once was but is no more?

One answer could be that she has the power to name the future and to have her own name conflated with it. Her suffering is imprinted on the name of her son, a name that the "jandaia" mixes with that of his mother (60). Iracema tells him "Tu és Moacir, o nascido de meu sofrimento" (60). One

interesting feature of this declaration is the use of the first person possessive pronoun, which she almost immediately reiterates in her subsequent designation of her son as “filho de minha angústia” (60). As Maria Manuel Lisboa has pointed out, Iracema “invariably refers to herself in the alienated third person” (101), something that she reads as part of the erasure of Iracema associated with the European presence of Martim. But Lisboa also asserts that the “act of naming is... an act of affirmation of primacy and mastery” (101), a claim that can be read to support the apparently permanent restitution of Iracema to a position of eternal power, since she has named the future: Moacir. In the act of naming, she regains, even if in a refracted way—through the genitive and the generative—some of her subjectivity.

Yet it is a peculiarly absent future to which Iracema stakes her possessive claim. Moacir, like the epitaph of the novel, becomes “um filho ausente” (17), strangely missing at the end of the tale, since “[o] primeiro cearense, ainda no berço, emigrava da terra da pátria” (65). The little power granted to Iracema by the text is slight and distanced, in contrast to the seemingly total control asserted by Martim as the novel draws to a close and Poti is linguistically recodified before the Christian/Portuguese cross. But that is precisely the point at which the text becomes unstuck, because attention is drawn to the meaning of the Pitiguara’s name, as Alencar seeks to foreclose it once and for all.

The reader’s suspicions should have been raised by Alencar’s repetitive assertions throughout the novel with regard to the meaning of Poti. The Pitiguara are insultingly referred to as “potiguara, comedor de camarão” (24). The author’s notes once again seek to validate the etymological assertions of the body of the text: “*Potiguara—Comedor de camarão; de poty e uara. Nome que por desprezo davam os inimigos aos pitiguaras*” (69). A little later in the novel, the narrator reiterates the assertion:

Os guerreiros da grande nação que habitava as bordas do mar, se chamavam a si mesmos pitiguaras, senhores dos vales; mas os tabajaras, seus inimigos, por escárnio os apelidavam potiguaras, comedores de camarão. (34)

Poti himself has his nature determined by his name:

O valente Poti, resvalando pela relva, como o ligeiro camarão, de que ele tomara o nome e a viveza, desapareceu no lago fundo. (36)

With his conversion to Christianity, Poti is reborn as “Camarão.”

One thing that is peculiar about Alencar’s assertions is the thought that being called a “shrimp-eater” is a term of abuse, particularly given the positive status bestowed on the shrimp when it is associated with the character of Poti. Something that is “ligeiro” and full of “viveza” is difficult to envisage as denigrating. The entries in the *Pequeno Vocabulário Tupi-Português* of Pe A. Lemos Barbosa are somewhat illuminating in this respect and speak for themselves:

poti—defecar; excremento

poti—camarão (130)

The Guarani-Spanish dictionary previously cited confirms these possible connotations (119). As Poti becomes Camarão, Alencar attempts to clean him up, to expunge this other meaning and to turn him into a successful European man. This attempt, particularly in the context in which Alencar situates the novel as an example of literature “haurida na língua dos selvagens,” may be read to fail. That “língua dos selvagens” haunts the text and undermines the authority of its author, the very same author who introduced it into the text. The nobility bestowed on the first and most complete convert to the new Brazilian order that Alencar was seeking to reflect culturally, drawn primarily as it was from an oral source, is dirtied by the dialogue of the spoken word that crosses the text and destroys Alencar’s dream of a completely closed and coherent network of meaning. Like Martim, who intertextually resonates with the sea, or Iracema, the explanation of whose name—both through its labial and linguistic associations—draws the reader’s attention towards the pre-existing oral cultures of Brazil in a way not quite envisaged by Alencar, Poti’s name reflects the fact that the author’s control is never total.

Notes

¹ “Cultural unconscious” is used here in the post-Jungian sense of the aspects within the psyche that link the individual to the group with which he or she culturally identifies (see Anne Singer Harris 31). The literature written in a particular language may at some levels be read as a conscious manifestation of the preoccupations of the cultural unconscious of that language group. Interpreted in this way, the cultural unconscious is different from national identity since one language can operate across various nations.

² See, for example, Camões I.19; I.42; I.45; II.8; IV.76; V.24; V.37; V.73; VII.70; IX.51; X.144.

³ In the sixth chapter of *Eurico, o Presbítero*, set in Ilha Verde, the narrator asserts that “uma saudade indizível atraía-me para o mar” (Herculano 54).

⁴ See for instance Ribeiro 220; Lisboa 98; Azevedo 274-78.

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