

## An Interview with Pedro Schacht Pereira<sup>1</sup>

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

I'd say the theme of the sea intersects Portuguese culture from literature to music, architecture to painting, the decorative arts to cinema, but also from water sports to hedonistic beach parties. That line can be traced from the Middle Ages to the present. It is very easy to recognize its presence across multiple genres and periods and, since Expo '98, its role in giving a new impulse to the commemorative drive that has characterized the relationship between the state and the historical memory of the maritime voyages and overseas expansion. But it is perhaps less easy to establish its present cultural relevance, amid the calls to make the oceans the country's strategic economic sector and the tentative materializations of such a vision in recent attempts to promote offshore oil prospecting in southern Portugal. Yet even as there is an obsessive nurturing of the theme in celebrations of historical memory, I am struck by its relative absence from significant contemporary cultural production in the new century. It may be that the historical prevalence of the grand narratives has conditioned how we read references to the sea in Portuguese texts. It is undeniable that from Joham Zorro's "Em Lixboa, sobre lo mar, / Barcas novas mandei lavar" to Ruy Belo's "O meu país é o que o mar não quer," the sea beckons the reader, but it is also incumbent to acknowledge that forty-five years of democracy have not been enough to entirely disrupt the imperial lens through which we engage with this theme or allow us to pay adequate attention to the different storylines that are there to be read, particularly in literature. Finally, some iconic readings of the theme, such as Pessoa's, may still cast their shadow and prevent us from devising newer meanings, but I'm not entirely sure this is the case.

I grew up in a coastal town, where the presence of the sea can be felt miles inland, through *maresia*. The foghorns punctuating the silence of the night and death at sea marked the daily life of the fishing communities that compose a significant portion of the population. These dramas have shaped a certain culture of the sea, and Raul Brandão, the best painter of the sea we have ever had, left a vivid memory of it in *Os Pescadores*. From Camões to António Lobo Antunes, and from

*História Trágico-Marítima* to *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, the sea is almost literally palpable on page after page. From the sea of conquest to the sea of rejection, from usury to loss, and from mapping to wayward navigation, Portuguese literature has been through it all. The public space in some of our cities has domesticated some of our past worst nightmares: thus, in Lisbon, we can linger on as the sun sets over the Atlantic in the Miradouro de Santa Catarina, under the aegis of Adamastor. Or I should say we could, because since last June the mayor has decided to fence the park off, in an apparent concession to the gentrifying forces that consume Portugal's main cities, where the sunset-loving crowds can now be seen as rejects washed ashore. Nowadays the tides that matter may just be for those who look for thrills in Nazaré, or the throngs of tourists arriving every day by the airships whose traces in Lisbon's skies could be contemplated from Adamastor.

## **2. How have Portuguese Studies dealt with the maritime theme?**

If anything, the record here is more mixed. More than ever, we still need studies that highlight the diversity of themes that I tried to outline in my answer to the previous question. While in the field of History, the curricular offerings are far from accompanying the work that a cadre of new researchers—so many of them entangled in the precarity imposed by the new, neoliberal division of intellectual labor and knowledge production, subject as they are to the whims of national and international grant competitions—is publishing in Portuguese and international venues alike. As regards literary and cultural studies, it is still unclear to me if anything is being done in terms of a sustained inter- and transdisciplinary study of the oceanic theme in Portuguese culture. I can think of specific publications in which the theme of the sea has been studied, I know *PLCS* published an issue dedicated to the South Atlantic not too long ago, and I also know that there has been a certain buzz about transatlantic and transoceanic studies, but it is not clear to me that it is more than a passing trend, and certainly not that it is more prevalent in Portuguese studies than it is in, say, Hispanic or Anglophone studies.

## **3. Have these visions evolved from the nineteenth century (when nationalisms were born) until today? Or have they crystallized?**

I would venture to say that, in certain corners at least, the emphasis and focus on the study and teaching of Portuguese oceanic expansion and the so-called “discoveries” remains very nationalistic, even if there are several examples of a historiography that has evolved in other directions. It is interesting that the

focus on social history is still rare in the Portuguese historiography of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century expansion, and has not made its way from the new studies that have appeared in the last two decades to high school curricula and undergraduate history degrees. So, I would say there has definitely been a crystallization of the way these themes are addressed and studied in school, and even more so in the way they are treated in public debates in Portuguese media, even if that is not necessarily the case with the scientific research that is being carried out in Portuguese as well as foreign universities.

**4. Do you believe that Portugal still glorifies the sea as an avatar of Portugueseness, as a metonym of bravery?**

I think that is evident from the direction that the public debate about the putative Museum of Discoveries has taken place since last spring and from the ease with which certain metaphors are employed in public discourse (recent examples can be found in the speeches by Lisbon's mayor and Portugal's prime minister at the start of the Web Summit in November 2018). A glance at the history manuals adopted by Portuguese schools illustrates how that view is imparted to the younger generations, an approach that has changed very little since the 1970s.

**5. 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 a signatory of the open letter that some Portuguese scholars published in the newspaper *Expresso* last April, which detailed why the idea of creating such a museum was ill conceived. I have also published a few opinion articles in Portuguese newspapers in which I attempted to engage critically—within the space and conceptual constraints of the medium—with some of the arguments advanced by defenders of the project. The first thing that needs to be said is that the debate was tainted from the start, as it emerged primarily as a response to the fact that the project to build a memorial to slavery in downtown Lisbon won the participatory budget competition that Lisbon's municipality promotes every year. This bad faith was already apparent in the debates that ensued after the publication, in the spring of 2017, of another open letter, this one denouncing the anachronism in a speech by the president of Portugal during a state visit to Goree

Island in Senegal. In that speech he celebrated Portugal's presumed (and untrue) pioneering role in the abolition of slavery, while doing nothing to acknowledge and atone for its long-standing responsibility and troubling record in the history of the institution. The idea of the Museum of the Discoveries, which was first inscribed as a project in the political slate that Lisbon's mayor ran on in the 2017 local elections, was wielded in opinion articles in the Portuguese press, with bylines by nationalist historians and conservative public figures, as a counterpoint to the slavery memorial. That prompted the publication of the open letter in which signatories pointed out the inadequacy of the proposed terminology, which consecrates a single viewpoint about a historical process whose complexity the museum was supposed to showcase and highlight.

The debate intensified considerably from then on, involving many public figures and sectors in Portuguese society, including a group of one hundred self-identified Afro descendants. A multiplicity of artists from different disciplines detailed their concerns in yet another open letter, but there was also at least one public letter in favor of the museum, promoted by a nationalist platform with a presence in social media. It is not surprising that the proposed museum would attract support from conservative circles; after all, such support confirms the project's conceptual strictures. More troubling is that so many public figures on the left, or at least with a known antiauthoritarian past, have chosen to come forward not so much in favor of the museum but markedly against the public stances taken by the many signatories of the letters that oppose it.

Thus, last spring Eduardo Lourenço complained about the "need to crucify this country," and a former minister of education, Maria de Lourdes Rodrigues, decried those public stances as "an act with perverse consequences." Just last week, the writer Lídia Jorge told an audience at the Guadalajara Book Fair, at which Portugal was featured as the special guest country, that there was "a movement, mainly by university people," that wants "[us to] expiate our [colonial] guilt." I have no idea what she understands by a "movement," but in my understanding an open letter signed by scholars in different countries does not necessarily and automatically constitute one. What these reactions show is that the view of the discoveries as an untouchable subject is consensual across the political spectrum; furthermore, they show that some public figures, whose work as essayists and/or fiction writers had a profound impact upon the cultural landscape of 1960s–1990s Portugal, seem to be incapable of distinguishing civic engagement and critical stances from unpatriotic ruse. It is disconcerting to me

that these sacred cows of democratic Portugal are echoing the calls to silence dissent that some of them dared to disobey during harsher times, often at the cost of exile. My response to them is this. It is not for them to have the last word about how Portugal's colonial history is to be understood. I am forever grateful to Lúcia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, a momentous book that established a nonconformist legacy in Portuguese culture, but it is time for us to move on. Likewise, I would say to Eduardo Lourenço that *O Colonialismo como nosso impensado* is an enormous contribution to our understanding of Portugal's conundrum on the eve of the end of empire, but it is time for us to acknowledge that the idea of the end of empire as a noiseless, mostly happy return to European shores (as if those who returned were exactly the same as those who left) is a fiction. It may have been tempting to read the return as a frictionless event in 1975, when there was so much uncertainty about the course of the political process following the revolution, but today only those who are willfully blind and deaf to the new voices that have emerged in the past few years can still believe its benevolent charm. If we are to move from hagiography to criticism, we need to start interrogating Lourenço's ideas more forcefully, and that is the best contribution we can make to the success of his legacy.

In sum, I would say that, although in principle I am not against the idea of a museum that could tell the stories of Portugal's travels in the *long durée* in all their complexity and richness, I am doubtful that such an endeavor will be successful in the current environment. If anything, the current debate shows that there is little appetite for complexity, when it is easier for public figures with responsibility for Portugal's democratic experiment to create scarecrows that they vilify rather than to engage with the real arguments that scholars put forward for consideration. It is striking and ironic that the historical prevalence of the grand lusotropical narrative has been coetaneous with the dereliction of the country's archives and research institutions whose collections are directly and indirectly related to the preservation of the memory of the empire. Something in how we've been celebrating empire is detrimental to the constructive transformation of the modes of knowledge production and diffusion. This should give us pause. My hope is that, instead of embarking on a new, necessarily expensive and conceptually questionable museological adventure, resources will be invested so that dying institutions acquire the life they have never had, researchers and staff alike can work in dignifying conditions, and modern editions of so many of the texts that are key to the memory of empire can be accessed by all who want to

read them. Until then, the memory of empire will just keep serving the short-term political needs of politicians invested in a social order that is not too different from the one overthrown in 1974.

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

From what I have already said above, we can surmise that yes, a reckoning with Portugal's past as a slave-trading power has yet to happen and is made more difficult by the enduring allure of the lusotropical narrative, which has shown great resilience across different periods of the country's colonial and postcolonial history. This coming to terms should not be seen, as it has been in so many opinion articles and public interventions since the open letter I promoted was published in April of 2017 (against President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's statements in Gorée Island, Senegal), as a process of expiation, to use Jorge's terminology, or as a "crucifixion" of the country, as Eduardo Lourenço put it. I reject this Christian lexicon and question its adequacy to the task of understanding what is at stake in a process of coming to terms with one's own past. This process should rather be seen as a necessary stage in the mourning and overcoming of the country's colonialist legacy that was interrupted in 1975, and conveniently "forgotten" upon the country's admission into the European Union. Guilt is only productive in a logic of hypocrisy; coming to terms with the nation's troubling past—and its concomitant colonialist legacy—should mean that we do not recognize guilt, but we do take responsibility for that past by ensuring that the present it made possible is on the way to a future free of the betrayal of the human rights values that society has enshrined. It is only by understanding how we failed them that we can ensure that we understand what those values really mean and can then strive to observe them going forward. This does not mean, as has been said *ad nauseam*, that we want to judge the past with the eyes of the present or that we want to reject our history. On the contrary, we celebrate that history when we learn from it; and to refuse to face present consequences—such as racism—of past errors is to ensure the perpetuation of a colonialist mentality that cannot serve the truth and welfare of the entire national polity.

There is hardly any difference in the way in which the history of Portugal's overseas expansion is taught in schools today from how it was taught when I was a student in Portugal. And it helps that the history of slavery is simply a marginal subfield in Portuguese historiography, a countercurrent against what

is happening in Brazil, the United States, and other European societies, where these issues, although not easier by any means, are nonetheless more present on the political agenda. Was it by chance that 2015 commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the independence of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa (a struggle in which Africans and Portuguese both paid an immense human price, and which was instrumental to the Portuguese conquest of freedom in 1974–75) were hardly noticeable? Yet what hope is there for forging freer and fairer relationships with those new countries if we insist on ignoring our common history and on perpetuating a colonialist view that promises nothing more than paternalism, bad faith, and mutual disrespect? Much more could be said about this, and I hope the debates will intensify. I will finish with the words of Achille Mbembe, from a recent essay about patrimonial restitutions, because I think they are imbued with the wisdom we need: “In order to weave new ties, [Europe] needs to honor truth, because truth institutes responsibility. This debt to truth is in principle inefaceable. It will haunt us until the end of Times. To honor truth, we need to engage in remembering together. If we want to share the beauty of the world, we need to learn to be in solidarity with all its suffering, [...] and to heal together the fabric and the face of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Portugal may yet choose not to engage in this learning process; it would be a choice for the past over the future, and that would be sad. But a choice can only be made when the stakes are clear to everyone, and we are not there yet. Can we still choose not to choose?

*Interview conducted in 2018.*

#### NOTES

1. My thanks to Lisa Voigt and Isabel Ferreira Gould for their reading and editing suggestions.
2. Achille Mbembe, “À propos de la restitution des artefacts africains conservés dans les musées d’Occident,” *AOC Media*, October 5, 2018, <https://aoc.media>. The translation is mine.

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