Scholars and policymakers concerned with Northeast Brazil usually make claims about the cultural, ecological, or economic causes of the region’s poverty, backwardness or suffering. Indeed, it seems hard to talk about the Northeast without offering solutions to some kind of problem. But historian Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. will have none of that. Writing in a Foucauldian vein, Albuquerque studies the textual processes that have made the Northeast thinkable as a discrete region in the first place. *The Invention of the Northeast*, originally titled *A Invenção do Nordeste e Outras Artes* (Cortez Editora 2009), is an extraordinary book that denaturalizes the very concept of the northeast through a masterful combination of history, cultural studies, and literary criticism. Albuquerque shows how constructs of the Northeast as backward and unruly furnished the emerging nation with an imagined heartland, a space of authentic folk culture that anchored the emerging idea of a Brazilian people (pp. 16, 21, 37).

The “Northeast” emerged as a discrete region in 1919, as “an area of operation of the Federal Inspectorate of Works Against Droughts” (p. 37; also see p. 87). Previously, elites had espoused an environmental determinism that attributed the northern population’s “indolence, passivity, and subservience” to the region’s climate. After World War One, a new discursive formation arose in the context of modern nation-building concerns. A new repertoire of images made the Northeast legible as a site of “weather-based misery and suffering” and a locus of national pity (p. 32). Artists and intellectuals from various schools drew on a common cache of tropes, themes, and stereotypic personas (the bandit, the messianic priest, and the besuited land boss) to understand this region. This discursive formation led a double-life, testifying to the provincial loyalties and customs that preempted the unification of the Brazilian nation, while allowing elites to “inventory these diverse manifestations” of the nation, centralizing the meanings of regional signs and “rearranging them into a new vision and text of Brazil” (pp. 25, 29).

In the first of only two body chapters, Albuquerque engages the work of the “traditionalists” who reacted against the putative imposition of a bourgeois sensibility
onto the people of the Northeast. Inspired by Gilberto Freyre, some traditionalists, such as José Lins de Rego, nostalgically depicted the spontaneous and natural life of the sugar plantation workers as the antidote to the conflict-prone South. Others, such as Rachel de Queiroz and José Américo de Almeida, reworked “the mythology of the sertão into a critique” of alienated life of Brazil’s cities (p. 102). Either way, these traditionalists regarded the power structures of yesteryear with ambivalence: Critical of arrogant and despotic patrons, they also longed for the empathy that distinguished them from the heartless bourgeoisie (p. 107).

After detailing the traditionalists’ utopic nostalgia, Albuquerque lays out the inversion of these utopic depictions within the oeuvres of Marxist-inspired artists and intellectuals. As the Peasant Leagues arose during the 1950s, Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos, Candido Portinari, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Glauber Rocha and others depicted the Northeast as a space of abject destitution and perennial hunger. Their work also sought to imagine the region’s revolutionary possibility. For some, the pillaging bandit symbolized the natural enemy of the land boss, his “raw rebellion [serving as] an index of the revolution” to come (p. 150). For others, it was the hardy folk themselves who, while irrational and simpleminded, labored with a nonalienated, collectivist ethic “in touch with the cultural, natural, and social traditions that embodied the soul of the nation” (p. 154). They constructed a laconic northeastern subject whose “ability to see social truths under surfaces” (p. 179) led him to reject verbal sophistication “as a florid distraction” (p. 185). Yet Albuquerque concludes that these luminaries simply inverted the traditionalists’ celebration of northeastern primitivism, and were therefore “imprisoned in the exact same texture and logic” (p. 138; also see pp. 143, 162).

One ambiguity that Albuquerque might have addressed pertains to the nature of the Northeast’s regionality relative to Brazil’s other official regions: the Center-West, North, South, and Southeast. On the one hand, it is just one of these regions, each of which was constructed with its own discourse that accounted for the “distances that seemed to separate it from other national areas” (p. 15). On the other hand, the Northeast is the Brazilian region par excellence, in that it was “invented as the opposite of São Paulo,” a place construed as lacking in folk culture (p. 19). Why did the reified cultural forms attributed to these other regions never become the anchor for an authentic
Brazilian identity? Why, for instance, did the indigenous peoples of Amazonian North not furnish Brazil’s authentic bulwark against modernity as they did in other Latin American countries? Albuquerque does allude to the shifting labor markets that compelled millions of Northeasters to migrate to São Paulo making them a ubiquitous, internal Other (p. 118; and see his discussion of the migrant audience for Luiz Gonzaga’s music, pp. 114-124). In his preface, historian James Green suggests that the Northeast’s primacy derived from a greater political anxiety concerning the prospect of communist subversion there (pp. ix-xii). I can think of no one better equipped to explicate these issues than Albuquerque, and I look forward to his future works.

Albuquerque’s *The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast* is a masterpiece for both the originality of its thesis, and for its virtuosic readings of Brazilian art and literature. Duke University Press and translator Jerry Dennis Metz have done a great service by making it available to Anglophone scholars. All of us who study the Northeast now need to contend with Albuquerque’s critique of the folksy, fictional unity ascribed to the region, and take heed of his call for new, plural representations of struggle that refuse “to occupy the[ir] expected places in Brazilian hierarchies” (p. 229).

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