
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

ADRIANA MICHÈLE CAMPOS JOHNSON: *Sentencing Canudos: Subalternity in the Backlands of Brazil*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

The destruction of Canudos (or Belo Monte, as it was known by its inhabitants) in 1897 was a profoundly traumatic episode in Brazilian history. It took the Bahian state and Brazilian national governments four military expeditions to destroy what they perceived as the threat of this community of rural backlanders led by Antônio Conselheiro, a lay Catholic religious leader. The lengthy account of the campaigns against Canudos written by Euclides da Cunha, a young army officer who witnessed the community's destruction, *Os sertões* (1902, translated as *Rebellion in the Backlands*), profoundly shaped Brazilians' understandings of the movement and subsequent historiography and writing about the movement.

Focusing on the work of da Cunha and others who wrote about Canudos, Johnson stated that her goal in this book "is not to uncover what Canudos was 'really like' but both to investigate how it was constituted through discourse and to ask what we can learn about the way it continues to exert pressure on our judgments" (p. 11). In her first chapter, she addresses the question of intellectual mediation and the roles played by da Cunha (and other intellectuals) as both speaking for the people of Belo Monte and portraying them. Drawing on subaltern studies and a variety of literary critics and social theorists in her second chapter, Johnson argues that writing about Canudos quickly assumed the form of what Ranajit Guha calls a "prose of counterinsurgency," in which the underlying assumptions regarding official documentation on repression are reproduced in subsequent scholarship.

In the third chapter, Johnson examines efforts to "downplay the radicality of differences" (p. 80) and to view Canudos in the context of ordinary life and culture in the backlands. A large part of this chapter is devoted to the 1874 Quebra-Quilos movement, revolts against the implementation of the metric system and the draft lottery that swept through the northeastern interior, as well as to the work of revisionist historians like Dain Borges and Robert M. Levine who have stressed the ordinariness of Canudos. However, citing J. J. Veiga's 1989 novel, *A casca da serpente*, she concludes that "even an ordinary Canudos would not have escaped eventual destruction" (p. 103), because its ordinariness

“corresponded to a state that no longer existed” (p. 104) given the changes that accompanied the modernizing republic.

Os sertões is the subject of the fourth chapter. Through a careful reading of da Cunha’s newspaper articles, field notes, and the book, Johnson shows how “he both articulate[d] and embodie[d] a modern state project,” which “explains why his text became canonical” (p. 119). To be sure, *Os sertões* is full of criticisms against the military incompetence, brutality, and other failures of the Brazilian state, but da Cunha suggests that the ultimate solution to the problems faced by Canudos and the backlanders would be fuller and more effective incorporation into the modern state, precisely what its residents rejected when the state touched them in the form of secularization, increased taxes, the census, and mapping (p. 137). His account of its utter destruction firmly relegates Canudos to the past.

In her final chapter, Johnson examines the monarchist Afonso Arinos’s *Os jagunços* (1897) and the republican Manoel Benício’s novel *O rei dos jagunços* (1899) as alternative readings of Canudos. Imbued with “nostalgia” (p. 139) and what amounts to “the fantasy of a rural landowner” (p. 149), Arinos’s novel resembles the classic nineteenth-century “national romance” (p. 145). His portrayal of Canudos as normal, however, ultimately “refuses to give the conflict a meaning” (p. 150). Benício’s text, oscillating “between fiction and nonfiction” (p. 154), seeks to tell the story from the perspective of Canudos’s residents. Neither author, Johnson concludes, created “a Canudos that is recognizable as Canudos” (p. 162) for us today, evidence for the “sentencing” that writing about Canudos has imposed on its residents, to invoke the metaphor of her title.

Historians – members of the academic guild to which I belong – will find this book both challenging and frustrating. Johnson’s implicit and explicit criticism of historians’ approaches to Canudos and her questioning of the influence that contemporary sources have on historical writing are well-taken, though many historians would object that we are already more than capable of detecting assumptions or biases in our sources (or perceiving the influence of “hegemonic intellectual discourse,” to quote the back-cover blurb). The equation of literary and historical accounts directly challenges a distinction that we historians hold dear. The lengthy summaries of important monographs by Judy Bieber, Peter M. Beattie, Jeffrey D. Needell, and others smack of dissertationese. The focus on the Brazilian empire’s political order (pp. 24-30) as part of a theoretical discussion about representation as proxy and as portrait does not seem to advance her argument, although the point that “da Cunha’s book represented Canudos as both” proxy and portrait (p. 13) is certainly well-taken. Historians will likewise question the assessment that the many conflicts faced by Canudos, which derived from the “hybrid and uneven processes of modernization . . . have suffered a general obscurity.” To be sure, for much of the twentieth century,

“Brazilian historiography and public memory tend[ed] to emphasize the peaceful evolution of history wherein changes are supposed to have been tranquilly and cordially resolved by the elites and the people” (p. 3), but generations of historians have worked to discredit these ideologies. Here Johnson may have missed an opportunity to subject recent historiography to the same sharp and critical eye that she reserves for *Os sertões* and the two novels that did not achieve the same canonical status as da Cunha’s book (and for Antônio Olavo’s 1993 documentary, *Paixão e guerra no sertão de Canudos*, which she presents in her conclusion as an exemplary alternative reading of Canudos that does not relegate – or sentence – it to the past).

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Remembrance of Things Past: The Trope of Africa in Afro-Brazilian Studies

BEATRIZ GÓIS DANTAS: *Nagô Grandma and White Papa: Candomblé and the Creation of Afro-Brazilian Identity*. University of North Carolina Press, 2009;

STEFANIA CAPONE: *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Brazil’s African descendant population, the largest in the Americas, has attracted the attention of anthropologists since the end of the 19th century. Following the tendency of their times, early studies focused on practices that had parallels in the African continent. These practices were understood to be “survivals” that had been transported across the Atlantic intact. Religious practices were of special interest, especially those that were influenced by the Nagô, as the Yoruba were then known, who arrived in huge numbers during the last decades of the slave trade. Most disembarked in the city of Salvador, capital of the northeastern state of Bahia and the most active slave port in the Americas. The African population was greatest in Bahia and the northeastern region in general, but Africans were also found in other parts of Brazil, a demographic situation that persists to this day. Although Afro-Brazilian religions developed in virtually every region, anthropologists focused their gaze on *candomblé*, a variant that arose in Salvador. Over the decades, this ethnographic bias was replicated again and again, also creating a ripple effect that radiated outward to other forms of cultural production including literature, film, popular music and the visual arts.

The genesis of this ethnographic paradigm and its repercussions in Afro-Brazilian religious communities are examined in the two works under review here. Arguing that *candomblé*, as understood by the general public and even