

BACK TO THE FUTURE: GENDER, RACE AND PROGRESS IN THE NARRATOR OF *THE CONTINENT*

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Abstract: This work examines with a 21st century perspective notions of progress in the gaze towards the Other in Erico Verissimo's *O Continente* (1949), set in the 19th-century, and its English translation. An analysis of the close-third-person narration reveals how it performs shifts in point of view in time, language, race and gender. This perspective is found to be a political resource to experience alterity and its many nuances, as the literary form of 1940's context of postwar polarization and antifascism.

Keywords: Otherness; Narrator point-of-view; Time-travel; History and fiction; Antifascism.

Resumo: Este trabalho investiga, com uma perspectiva do século 21, noções de progresso no olhar para o Outro em *O Continente*, de Erico Verissimo (1949), que se passa no século 19, e sua tradução para o inglês. Uma análise da narrativa em discurso indireto livre revela bruscas viradas de ponto de vista em relação a tempo, linguagem, raça e gênero. Recurso político de experimentação da alteridade e suas nuances, esta narrativa aparece como forma literária do contexto de polarização, pós-guerra e antifascismo dos anos 1940.

Palavras-chave: Alteridade; Ponto de vista do narrador; Viagem no tempo; História e ficção, Antifascismo.

— Mas quem é que sabe o que Deus quer? — perguntou ela. — A paz ou a guerra? Deus será do lado dos farrapos ou dos legalistas?

O Continente, 1949

In the first scene of Erico Verissimo's *O Continente* (1949), the reader closely follows tense moments of a soldier, for several pages. He "got ready for the last sprint. How many steps from here to the church?; "Seconds passed. He had to follow the order"; "where did all this fear come from?" (18) We root for him, witnessing the intimacy the

narrator shares with this first, relatable, person we encounter. And then, the narrator switches sides. The shift happens first in the mind of that same soldier, as we learn he knows the people he is fighting: "The order was clear: if someone came to the well for water, he should open fire. Water... water for Maria Valéria. Water for the besieged..." (22)¹ Then, we will follow the narrator deep into the Sobrado, that townhouse under siege. This is the first of many shifts of perspective the storytelling plays on the reader, which I find to be compellingly political.

This essay investigates, through 2020 lenses, a novel from 1949 about the period between 1745 and 1895. There are at least three gaps of time: between this research and the novel, the novel and its set period, and its own internal time ellipse. Otherness in time is not the only kind present in the work. Indigenous peoples, enslaved blacks, women, displaced peoples, and several political pairs of opposites – Portuguese and Spanish, Liberals and Republicans, etc. – all inhabit the making of a national identity vis a vis regional constructions. I examine the narrator of *O Continente*, in its volubility in backing either side of otherness. This achieves a political place that echoes the novel's time of production – more than the time it depicts. Its observations meander across a long time period, of which we may take advantage bearing in mind Bakhtin's outsideness view towards literature (1986) and Braudel's *longue durée* approach in history (1982).

Erico Verissimo was himself no stranger to duality. In his travel writing, he once said, in the middle of global political polarization: "Catholics classify me as heretic. Fascists declare that I am red. The reds mutter that I am only pink. Well, then, from now on I am yellow." (1946: 157). He did have one unwavering position: against fascism – the imposition of one's voice over Others'. Verissimo's writing has famously explored the "transversal cut of society", as he has put it, or through the angle of a "simultaneous" depiction of social segments. (Candido 1972; Bueno 2006). This characteristic is, I have found in previous work, one of the reasons his work triggered political controversy, and made him a subject of policing. To states, Verissimo posed an interpretation challenge, criticizing capitalism, and the Soviet Union. He was also aware of the relative nature of

¹ Excerpts from the novel are from the Portuguese edition (2004) in personal translations, when original language is not essential to close-reading, or specified when from the 1951 translation into English.

otherness by personal experience.² Scholarship has noted the importance of his international life as a translator, traveler and "cultural ambassador". (Candida-Smith 2011; Minchillo 2015). *O Continente* takes this further in as narrative form, and goes beyond alterity in class and politics, indeed projecting cultural aspects of alterity towards past and future.

O Continente is written in a unique form of narration given the multiple levels of alterity involved in the plot and its time-traveling particularities. Free indirect style, or close third-person, is a novelist's omniscience becoming a kind of secret sharing, "going into character", most powerful when hardly visible (Wood 2009). In dramatic irony, we see through characters' eyes while being encouraged to see more than they do. In Machado de Assis's 19th-century fiction, narrators often hinted at the reader from "behind the characters' backs." This perspective subtly reveals nuanced observations about the situations narrated. With this in mind, we will look into *O Continente*, the first part of his most influential piece of fiction, *O Tempo e o Vento*, written in the postwar context, considering the narrative's lenses of otherness. Not only as a theme, universal, but in the very form of the novel, its structure and narration, by analyzing the novel's scenes of exchange, interface, between Others. Relations which appear not as ambiguous, vague or forgiving, but as starkly contrasting while porous and shifting. The voice(s) telling the story use a multiplicity of souls through which to gaze the story, in subjective third-person. A floating narrator embodies each point of view, possessing characters from opposite sides, embracing their beliefs, no matter how divergent from the previous incarnation; opposing races, genders, sides of a war.³

The relationship between literary form and historical content has been thought of for centuries, from considering history and literature as completely independent to seeing them as unavoidably interconnected.⁴ To Catherine Gallagher, fiction's uniqueness

² This is noticeable from an attentive reading of his non-fiction in travel writing. Verissimo remarked on how North Americans saw Latin America as one homogeneous culture, and how race relations differed across the continent.

³ For recent work on Verissimo's narrators' multiplicity, see Ana Lucia Macedo Novroth, 2020.

⁴ Current theory often returns to Aristotle's *Poetics* or Defoe's *Crusoe*, to map attempts to define (or blur) the borders (and tunnels) between fiction and real. (See Compagnon 2004; Gallagher 2006; Ginzburg 2012; Cohn 1999).

involves "the narrator's discourse with the character's subjective experience in the free indirect style." (2006: 356). More than its events, narrator and structure are telling of this novel's context concerning alterity. "The narrator as witness to history" (Chaves 2000) is observed further, for when history is subverted (time-travel perspective) and when context is expressed in form, beyond the period depicted. Conceived in early Cold War, amidst travels through inter-American apparatus, *O Continente* incorporates the in-between nature of its context. From Volume 1, where this narrator is forged, to Volume 2, the voice settles in as shapeshifter. The narration might be "racist" when narrating events around a racist character, for example, or condescending about the past depicted revealing minute glances of 1949 criticism. This changes further when the novel is translated. To characterize this narrator, I will discuss: the novel *O Continente* (in Portuguese), its 1951 translation into English, Verissimo's memoirs, Brazil and US press and state documentation, to explore Otherness through shifting narration in five points: time, language, race, gender, politics.

1 Keeping time: centuries collide

As the reader of *O Continente* soon becomes aware, the book is structured between different time periods: Chapters entitled "O Sobrado", I through VII, describe the events in one place, the day of the siege (1895); and these are alternated with other chapters that move forward chronologically in over a century, from the 1700s to that same day in 1895. The intermittent flashbacks build the family saga. In this section, I will investigate how characters and narrator experience time, historical or not, which builds a broader backdrop of generational otherness.

The novel begins vague about time in the first Sobrado installment, starting with the immediately classic: "*Era uma noite fria de lua cheia.*" In its first abrupt jump into the past, foundations are well defined: the chapter "A Fonte" begins on "April of 1745", a certainty given through the narration close to Father Alonzo – a lettered and European Jesuit priest. In Ana Terra's chapter, next, the unlettered characters only update calendar time if someone returns from the village with vague news of a new year having passed. Back in "A Fonte", to Father Alonzo, southern Brazil was a "land painted by the hands of

a child.” (44). The New World appears as a utopia of naive origins. Ana Terra’s chapter is timeless. Her world is as primitive as a biblical Creation, has noted Zilberman (2000), marked by the absence of chronology and by repetition. In colonial times, America was imagined as Paradise (or hell); and in post-World War II, as a refuge for utopia.⁵ In this aspect of intellectual history, there is a kind of consonance between the period depicted (1700s) and the one from which such depiction is produced (1949).

While confused about time, the Terras are very aware of the weather (in a language where both sound exactly the same: *tempo*). “The first winter rains ceased – July must have been starting.” (123). Here both elements are present: the uncertainty about the calendar, and the proximity the narrator has to the characters, embracing the same empirical wisdom. The narrator’s horizon of expectation is close to the characters in sight.⁶ When the son of an Indian woman and a European colonist Pedro Missioneiro arrives at the Terra house, he is coming from Father Alonzo’s mission, and brings with him linear stories. When Pedro tells them legends around the fire, the Terras, a silent household, are hypnotized by their first encounter with storytelling. This is soon followed by encounters with History (100). The novel’s epigraph from the bible, “one generation passes away, another generation comes; the earth remains forever; the sun rises and sets,” suggests a constant flux between generations. Social and cultural changes in History, however, deeply affect the pace of change between generations (Mannheim 1951). While it considers genetic continuity,⁷ *O Continente* subtly accounts for social change across generations, in its structure.

In the next chapter, the second generation of the family which we follow closely is now so aware of calendar time it is aware of its lack in past generations: the now-dead founding hero Ana Terra is said to have a grave that has no date, as “people didn’t know time then.” (182). The characters, now, start trying to locate one another in national history periodization: “where were you in the Independence?” asks the new-in-town captain

⁵ See Sergio Buarque de Holanda’s *Visão do Paraíso* (1959); Stephen Zweig’s Brazil, *Land of the Future* (1941).

⁶ The “alto duma coxilha” (226), hilltop, reappears as a point of visibility, truth (where Pedro Missioneiro dies; Rodrigo fights). When the family moves to from fields to town, they climb uphill, into urbanization and future.

⁷ See Marília Mezzomo Rodrigues’ *Filho de Tigre nasce pintado: medicina, hereditariedade e identidade nacional em textos de Erico Veríssimo*. (2009)

Rodrigo Cambará to a new acquaintance (177). We witness the formation of historical consciousness. Characters broaden expectations about the future as they are more aware of the past. In the second installment of “O Sobrado”, the characters explore the retrospective mode into their future. Rodrigo's grandson Licurgo would decades later reflect about his unborn daughter: “vão dizer que ela nasceu com o sobrado cercado pelos federalistas”(27). This kind of self-reflection about the present as past reappears in Vol. II, when the town physician Dr Carl Winter sees his current situation through the gaze of his future self in Germany, reminiscing: “de repente ele não estava mais em Santa Fé, conversando com Juvenal Terra, e sim num café de Berlim, dali a muitos anos, numa roda de amigos, recordando aquele momento.” (388). The fluid narrator seamlessly weaves such twists and turns of time and thought.⁸

Magical thinking also develops along the novel's century-long time frame. And the narrator accompanies the subtle changes in intellectual history. The mystical visions of Pedro Missioneiro when he was a child frightened Father Alonzo, who seemed to secretly believe them, a man of his time that he was (early 1700s). The character gazes suspiciously at the boy, questions him with concern, asks him not to share those visions with others. Ana Terra, a quarter of a century later, does believe that she can hear her mother weaving yarn after being dead; but she confesses it only to the readers, through the sympathetic narrator (“coitada, trabalhando até depois de morta”). When her son Pedrinho notices it too, though, she dismisses it casually (“está enterrada”). Thus History in *O Continente* is not just events in the background, but is in the very mindset of the narration. And every so often, a 1949 narration peeks through and plays with the distance in time enjoyed by the reader in relation to the characters. “The world – thought Father Lara – was never as happy as in the Middle Ages” (217) – a laughable statement for a 20th-century public, a secret wink at us by the layered narrator. Ironic remarks are slipped in appealing to the reader's modern intuition: “money to buy medicine, instruments and – oh, yes! – things for the church,” thought the priest.

⁸ Father Lara also reflects: “Dali a cem anos, como iriam os historiadores descrever aquela guerra civil?” (285).

In the New Year of 1834, collective consciousness within the novel finally celebrates the date in the town's main square. With awareness of historical time, a desire for change is also in the air: "the world is wrong!" complains the questionable hero Rodrigo, listing social problems naively.⁹ The narrative sometimes stops to wonder: about the future, how the future's past will be felt; characters start discussing change and if generations better or regress or repeat themselves. Questioning progress was as strong within the novel as it was surrounding it, in the postwar context. In World War II, writers asked whether progress would be followed by the end of civilization. "What scares me the most," wrote Verissimo in his travel writing, "is that with the atomic energy humanity appears to reach its scientific maturity before in its history reaching moral maturity." (1946: 515). Marc Bloch spoke of humanity being on the threshold of atomic age, "this poor world of ours which, however justifiably proud of its science, has created so little happiness for itself..." (1953: 9). *O Continente* was written in an atypical window of internationalism, against regional extremism,¹⁰ ethos embedded in the novel structure, if not in its apparent theme.

2 Language/*língua* – the curious case of Pedro Missioneiro

The narrator in *O Continente* relates to different characters beyond a constant free indirect style. As we have seen, they flip sides, change the point of perspective, travel back and forward in time in a single phrase; not as a simple omniscient narrator but a very partial one, but alternating the view through different lenses and often opposing biases. One of the clearest examples of the narrator going beyond close third-person and actually switching bodies (and ears) is the case of Pedro Missioneiro's accent. We follow Pedro's childhood in the then Spanish side of the South American colonies. The language of the narrative, including the dialogues, is all in plain contemporary Portuguese. Although presumably the language spoken by characters was Spanish, to Brazilian readers of the

⁹ Rodrigo says childbirth pain was one of the things to change. Father Lara adds a grain of salt to the statement: "essas palavras, vindas dum egoísta, tinham seu valor" (251).

¹⁰ Nationalism was seen by pacifist authors as an evil that led to war, and culture as its redeemer. The apparent antagonism of nationalism and internationalism was a representative symbiosis. The apogee of nationalism in the 20th century in fact coincided with the height of internationalism. See Sluga 2013.

original novel it sounds as it presumably did to the characters: native tongue, understandable – thus Portuguese. Then, in the next chapter, Pedro Missioneiro's speech becomes a kind of *portunhol*, a mix of Portuguese and Spanish.¹¹

Entonces a Virge viu que estava tudo perdido. Pero apareceu a mulita na estrada e Nossa Senhora dice: 'Mulita, usted tem filhos?' Dá-me uma gotita de leite para meu filho que esta jorando de fome.' A mulita deu, pero era solo uma gotita, mui pouco. O menino continuou jorando.' (100).

Pedro Missioneiro is now seen through the gaze of the Terra family, hence the (seemingly) new accent (92). *These pages of the novel unveil the shapeshifter nature of the narration.* Considering Verissimo's already international career by the time he wrote *O Continente*, we might ask how this resource was solved in the English version by L. L. Barrett (1951). It is worth briefly analyzing this translation, as it adds another layer of alterity through language, and narrator change. It includes some Spanish words into English, resulting in a weirdly misplaced *Spanglish*.

Entonces the Virgin saw that all was lost. *Pero la mulita* appeared in the middle of the road and Our Lady said: 'Mulita, have you any children? Give me a drop of milk for my Son who is crying of hunger.' The *mulita* did so, *pero* it was only a drop, *muy poco*. The child kept on crying." (1951: 86).

While in the original the structure is that of Portuguese, relying on cognates (Azevedo 1994) the translator chose different words to switch into Spanish (perhaps more familiar to an Anglophone audience), adding the "exotic flavor" without compromising understanding. This balance between foreign and intelligible is found differently elsewhere in the translation, sometimes compromising the intimate voice of the narrator instead. A simple "*bombacha*" becomes the tourist-magazine "bombacha – the wide gaucho breeches." "*O Sobrado*" becomes... "The Sobrado". Barrett thus chooses to sometimes enlighten the reader, as in the first case, adding a didactic tone to the narration, and in the second he keeps the Portuguese adding a estrangement texture.¹² The narrator becomes (perhaps unavoidably) another person, a concerned voice often taking their audience by the hand.¹³

¹¹ Milton Azevedo (1994) has analyzed Pedro's Portunhol linguistically, although not its absence in childhood.

¹² In the 1960s, Haroldo de Campos said fruitful translation involves transcreation, "que transcenda, deliberadamente, a fidelidade ao significado para conquistar uma lealdade maior ao espírito do original trasladado." (1992: 47).

¹³ Barrett's concern for a student-reader is in great detail in his review of *Gato Preto em Campo de Neve* (1949).

But keeps the untranslatable Pedrinho, and "Rio Pardo" as opposed to Pardo River. This way reader is reminded that they are in a South American setting, not any frontier story. Untranslatable life concepts, however, need to be bypassed: "*madrugada*" has to become Early Morning – and the bilingual reader realizes there is simply no *madrugada* in English, no such in-between moment.

The narrator's dynamics of zooming in and out of each character's worldview is done most visibly in the case of Pedro's otherness in language. In *Missioneiro's* case, though, this shapeshifter nature of the narration appears particularly clear, "hearing" one same character speaking with no accent and then with a heavy one. The inconsistent *portunhol* reveals in a more blatant manner something present throughout the novel, even if not as explicitly. More subtle forms are present regarding race, gender and politics. The narration is multidimensional, and the narrator has extremely elastic morals. Subtle choices of narrative, such as the close-up narration in the original *O Continente* and the often didactic one in its translation, or Dr. Winter's letters to Germany describing the Brazilian village from afar, change the message entirely. In *O Continente*, the voice shifts slightly in political perspective (say, from machista to feminist) depending on the character of which it is possessed and the period it is inhabiting.

3 Men and women – Rodrigo's scene, Bibiana's acts

The Cambará family starts when Captain Rodrigo's father invents the name and gets "tired of indians", "tasting of dust". Or, in the toned-town translation, "weary of Indian women", "smelling of dust". The original is gruesome, and the juxtaposition of women and food, particularly meat, reappears repeatedly. Rodrigo would often catch himself thinking of barbecue when around women (244) or thinking of women when around barbecue (219). While this tendency seems to go down the family tree organically, the name Cambará is revealed as brand new, despite the inflated weight it seemed to carry as a long line of brave and just men according to Rodrigo (77). One of the "laws" of the Cambarás was not hitting women and protecting the weak: "when I see a slave beaten, my blood boils." (255). The reader soon finds that there are steep limits to such attitude in resembling an anachronistic "progressiveness": in the same breath Rodrigo says black people are fine

(in their place); a "*maricas*" son he'd kill. Narrative further exposes his contradictions (to the 20th-century eye): he refuses to buy an enslaved person to help his wife, that is: he is anti-slavery but pro-women-exploiting, a contradiction present time grapples with. That this can be expressed so vividly in as early as 1949, and about 1830 with verisimilitude, is testament to how layered *O Continente's* characters and narrator are when dealing with otherness.

Rodrigo is complex. The reader is constantly fearing he might do something rash to make us dislike him. He is the first male character whose internal romantic rationale is described (220) and the most unbalanced thus far in the novel. Who has the right to an internal monologue and who does not? When the narrator is witness to Rodrigo, women and non-whites are often mere objects of white-male action. While this is to be expected from events depicted in that context, the narration acts similarly in form. Black women appear as an afterthought of less than a line on one occasion: "while the negras made tea", and the existence of Rodrigo's victim Paula is merely implied, on the other side of the active pronoun: "amou-a com pressa e fúria." (227). While close-ups often have this characteristic, the big-picture story arch betrays the oppression, often empowering those the narration recently degraded. *Once the narrator is freed from Rodrigo's "influence", it concludes with the matriarch*, as it had been introduced, coming full circle: "and that is why many years later Bibiana heard her grandmother..."(155). Bibiana Terra is an unwavering presence in the chapter named after Rodrigo, her husband (who dies long before her). Elsewhere in the novel, the structure and visuals are more telling than the words said by characters or narrator about the topic of discussion. In scene where Bibiaba, her daughter-in-law and the town doctor have a long and detailed discussion about women's condition, the contrasting mise-en-scène is most telling: the heavy topic of sexism combined with descriptions of a sweet milk dessert the characters savor graphically; then, the heavy topic of Bibiana's evil daughter-in-law alternates with descriptions of the pleasant garden where they talk (398-399).

The portrayal of "machos" in Verissimo's novels has been discussed,¹⁴ often observing narration point of view. About what he calls Verissimo's "antimachismo", Athayde (1972) said "several times we are internally our own opposites, wearing many souls at once, with 'infinite multiplicity' the better the author." (86). Here we notice its most nuanced view through the contrasting structure itself. A character might be *machista*, and the narrator might even "take his side", but the overview gaze towards their surroundings contradicts the hero/male aggressor's perspective. The family house is more than once described as being "pregnant", and the scissors used for generations of matriarchs to cut babies' cords at birth at one point are used for trimming trees of that house, reinforcing the female-anthropomorphizing (189). Once again opposing layers coexist. Not only in immediate content, as the "transversal cut of society" method, but in long-term structure. The 1949 gaze illuminates the story with implicit denunciation, not explicit positioning. Dr Winter complains about the lack of women's rights, (347) Bibiana utters text-book female sexism: "men don't cry", "my son isn't a woman to drink tea." (386). Such resources are seen in race relations. Bibiana answers Winter that what she likes is "taking care of her obligations", then turns to her enslaved woman: "Quick, Natália, bring the rest before the food gets cold!" (391). This set of sentences results in a sophisticated (and current) exposition of hypocrisy simply by narration order. Bibiana is at the same time oppressed as a woman and oppressor as a white person.

4 *Negro/Black: there-and-not-there* – Severino and anonymous mothers

"O pequeno Licurgo crescia com saúde, graças ao leite da ama preta," (406) notes the narrator following Dr Winter's angle yet resonating with Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) which had a new celebratory edition published the same year as *O Continente*.¹⁵ Next to Father Lara, the narrator seems both accustomed and shocked by

¹⁴ See Mariana Marques (2016). Evelin Leite Kantorski, (2011) argues that Verissimo "anticipates" feminism in the 1930s. In *A Volta do Gato Preto* (1946), he talks of the US as pioneer in feminism, mentioning the 1920s suffragists.

¹⁵ Letras&Artes, 1950. Verissimo also said northerners were lucky to have Freyre, "um sociólogo que mostra rumos para os romancistas e lhes fornece dados... fatos sociais digeridos, o sumo da História", since "um cidadão pode ser um bom contador de histórias mas em matéria de sociologia não enxergar nem um palmo adiante do nariz." (1949).

white and male aggression, slightly juxtaposing mid-20th century conscience over 1834 reality.

Sabia que era uma espécie de tradição entre os Amarais fazer filhos nas escravas, produzir mulatos e mulatas, que por sua vez depois se cruzavam com brancos, índios ou pretos. Os brancos gostavam muito das índias. O padre ouvira dizer que as mulheres índias se entregavam aos índios por obrigação (...) Agora – refletia ele (...) No futuro os filhos desses imigrantes haveriam de fatalmente casar-se com as gentes da terra e o sangue alemão se misturaria com o português, o índio e o negro. Para produzir... o quê?" (217).

"*Sabia que*" implies a fact, to be known – the rival family again embodied Freyre's thesis. In the following line ("whites, indians, blacks"), we see the "myth of the three races," constructed much later as the ideal miscegenation that supposedly founded Brazil and its so-called racial democracy. Then, different levels of certainty for different groups of people: "whites liked" indigenous women, while about these, the priest indirectly heard, "*ouvira dizer*," what they liked. Then, the reminder: "*refletia ele*", that is, this is all just a 19th-century priest's opinion projecting inquiries about a genetically monstrous future. Rodrigo asks the priest if all are equal before God, "even *negros*?" Racism is as nuanced according to skin tone gradient as the characters are layered between good and bad. Father Lara thinks to himself how the answer to Rodrigo's question should one day be "yes", but later thinks: "*como um homem branco e limpo se enfeitara por mulher que pouco falta para ser mulata?*" (270). Race and gender issues are often together, at different levels of subtly, since the start of Brazilian literature (and of Brazil), and the connection between them has increasingly been brought to light.¹⁶

At the time of production of the novel, international scholars studied the Brazilian case of "racial democracy", in search for postwar solutions for tension.¹⁷ Watershed moments in civil rights were just around the corner. Indeed, right when Verissimo and Barrett were writing, only then, the UNESCO published its "First Declaration on Race" stating that there should be no doubt that "the mental capacity of the races are the same" and "miscegenation does not result in biological degeneration". (1950) The gap between the setting period of the novel and its time of production is in fact precisely the time it took

¹⁶ For examples in literature see Chalhoub, 2005. In general, see Angela Davis' *Women, Race and Class*, 1981.

¹⁷ See Pereira and Sansone's comprehensive compendium of debates on the UNESCO project in Brazil (2007).

to go from scientific racism to refuting it internationally, a product of Verissimo's postwar context. From a distance, in 2020, we see this ever more clearly. Limitations of the 1949 horizon, press and scholarship debating racism, post-"racial democracy myth", had a long way to go. While Verissimo was shocked by segregation in the US in the 1940s, the press found the very fact that "racism exists" news-worthy in the 1950s,¹⁸ and Brazilian historiography had breakthroughs about slavery's had lasting effects in the 1960s.¹⁹

One of the most troubling parts in the novel is the case of the enslaved boy Severino. The way we watch it, side by side with protagonist Bolívar – not the victim nor the villain, but the one in the middle, an indirect causer of the tragedy – makes it ever more complex. While Bolívar attends his own wedding, he awaits the hanging of Severino, his childhood friend.

Metade de seu ser estava na sala: a outra metade, lá fora. Seus olhos de instante a instante voltavam-se para a janela, mesmo contra sua vontade. Uma sensação de perigo iminente (...) não perdia de vista o relógio grande de pêndulo que estava a um canto da sala contígua, e o qual ele via através da porta. Eram quatro e vinte: o pêndulo de latão oscilava compassadamente. As cinco Severino ia ficar pendurado na forca, balançando dum lado para outro. (356)

The intermittent shifting from side to side is present in multiple images of the passage: Bolívar's mind half inside, half outside; his eyes turning to the window repeatedly; the pendulum of the clock, oscillating; the body of Severino, dangling. Then, as the section carries on shifting in a larger scale, from the theme of the hanging to the theme of the wedding, Bolívar feels a different kind of otherness, towards his fiancée: "her fingers were thin, long, delicate, with many rings. He looked at his own hands, rough, sunburnt, hairy and shaded by veins. His hands had nothing to do with hers. Nevertheless, a priest would soon join them forever." (356). In this image, symmetric balance of opposites – four elements of each hand – is extreme, unreconcilable otherness, and yet linked; connection mixed with utter difference, internal division. This wedding/hanging day lasts many pages.

¹⁸ "Prejudice exists!" reads the *Correio Paulistano* (1950) when Katherine Dunham got barred from a hotel in Brazil.

¹⁹ While he was participating in Unesco's race relations investigation, Florestan Fernandes studied the city of São Paulo in what it had not overcome of slavery, statistically, in descendants' lives. His *The Weight of the Past* (1967), showed how, after slavery, "the asymmetric model of traditional social relations that assured white supremacy and Negro inferiority found in São Paulo the material and moral conditions to survive intact." (561).

Even a passing character points out the iniquitous parallel: "so we're tying two nooses at once today, huh?" Bolivar feels the 5pm pounding of the clock "like blows on his skull." (367). The hanging is seen indirectly: through Dr Winter's eyes who in turn sees it through Luzia's eyes. The "pendulum clock" would reappear several times, adding physical weight to time. When Aguinaldo Silva, master of the Sobrado before Bibiana, is on his death bed, "uma preta entrou e disse baixinho a Bibiana que o relógio grande de pêndulo tinha parado de repente." (377). Ominous breaks of History enter the room with the clock visual and through the fleeting voice of an enslaved woman.²⁰

Slavery as a topic is discussed in *O Continente* more openly than in novels from the period it depicts.²¹ Aguinaldo Silva had said he likes animals so much that they are "like people to him", bragging he nearly killed an enslaved person for hitting a mule (361). Condescending care is the best possible attitude seen from the hero family's members. Bolivar called Severino "monkey" as a term of endearment, and his cousin Juvenal said Bolivar "looked like a runaway slave" when sad. Again, the parallel shape: between slavery and Bolivar under the spell of his wife (or cruel "master") Luzia. This also appears in the novel concerning women's hardworking lives.

At her wedding, sadist Luzia says openly what others wouldn't: "*negro não é gente*". Characters surrounding her are shocked. How would their reaction have been in the real 1850s, at the rise of scientific racism? To the 1949 Brazilian audience, Luzia likely became an instant villain. While Brazil was no racial democracy, official discourse pretended to embrace miscegenation, while the US readers lived starker official segregation. On the other hand, civil rights movements would soon change the scenery, which made *Time and the Wind* become dated before *O Tempo e o Vento*. The term Negro, for instance, used in the translation, was abandoned in steep decline along the following decade. (Google Ngram). Interestingly, the term "people of color" made the opposite trip over recent years, abandoned in Portuguese and adopted in English. Other differences in language forced

²⁰ This kind of duplicity in structure seems to summon W.E.B. Dubois's double consciousness. See Paul Gilroy 1993.

²¹ 19th-century author Machado de Assis, has been a topic of debate for the last few decades concerning the apparent absence of explicit references to the slavery institution, largely due to its all-encompassing presence at the time. Slave society structure does, however, appear ingeniously in the form of stories, or through the experience of other subaltern groups such as women. See Gledson 1986; Schwarz 2001; Chalhoub 2003.

decision-making by the narration. In Portuguese one has to choose the gender ("*escrava*" or "*escravo*") Barrett alternates: when the original says "*escrava*" he translates either to "slave", "slave girl" or "Negress", expanding "master vocabulary". And the violent "*fazer filhos nas escravas*" (217) becomes somewhat milder: "have sons by their slave women." (206).

The novel threads sensitive lines of an increasingly tense topic in its time. The topic of slavery is not in between the lines, as in the time of Machado de Assis, and not anachronistically well-resolved either. The shape-shifter narrator makes sure of that, enabling a contradictory context to shine through when discussing another context. When Barrett translates Verissimo, he takes Brazil's literature and culture abroad, and with the adjustments required in translation, reveals a different kind of otherness. Author and translator were both officials of inter-American relations in early Cold War.²² Everything was political, and there were sides to choose from, or to avoid.

5 Polarization – war, nation, and Maria Valéria's catharsis

In one of Verissimo's lectures at UC-Berkeley, "Such Stuff nations are made of", he talks about the 1620s Dutch invasions in Brazil narrating the heroic saga of a people: "They had suffered, toiled, fought, *all of them* – White, brown, black, and copper-colored men. For the first time, they were thinking or acting in terms of a common cause, a common flag, and a common country." (1945; 23). The rhythm and rhyme lend an epic tone, depicting dramatically the construction of a national unit which involves interracial solidarity culminating in the idea of a common flag. There are echoes of Shakespeare in the title of the chapter of the passage mentioned: "Such stuff nations are made of", rephrases Prospero in *The Tempest* (1611): "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." (Act 4, scene 1). Verissimo writes "nation" in place of "dreams". Ideals of progress and moving backwards sustain the course. The sequence of lectures at Berkeley in its book form (1945) reads:

²² L. L. Barrett also translated Verissimo's "Night" (1956), "Mexico" (1960) and "His Excellency, the Ambassador" (1966). He had a diplomatic career in Latin America in the 1950s and topics might have been strangely familiar. Before he worked for the State Department, he was thoroughly vetted by the FBI for his loyalty to the US. Barrett also translated the first Unesco/OAS edition from Brazil into English, *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* (1959). There he opts for translator's notes to explain Brazil, instead of transforming the narrator into travel guide.

“chapter IV- My country has palm trees” and “chapter V- Yes, but snakes and slaves, too”: a dialogue between opposing forces. Verissimo thus refutes the romantic nationalism that preceded him.²³ Zilberman has shown how, with all its war backdrop, *O Continente* is a pacifist novel (2013). In 1949, being a pacifist was reason for suspicion by authorities. Narrative angles had concrete consequences in Verissimo's world. Shifting perspectives towards characters and voice placement could alter political results in the world outside fiction. For the apparent ambivalence, Brazilian Political Police (DOPS) questioned him trying to understand his politics, and reported on his support in pacifist manifestos, information passed on to the US Embassy during the war in which Brazil was an Ally.²⁴

Bibiana asks Father Lara: what does God want after all, war or peace? Farrapos or Legalistas? In the beginning of the novel the sense of two-sidedness in war – where both sides suffer and there is no clear right side – was a conclusion the reader arrived at indirectly, as the narration showed different people with different reasons for different sides in battle. Now, in the form of dialogue, this is blatantly outspoken, by Bibiana. More than that, it finds less resonance in her time (Father Lara deems the question heretic), than in the reader's (post-World War II). A mother laments: “I gave everything I had to the Farrapos, my 7 sons.” (299) That is, even endorsing this side of war, she lost everything. Accompanying skeptical Juvenal, the narrator expresses disbelief: “Justice? Haha...” (280). The memory of the Ragamuffin War (1835-1845) was dubious in itself, and controversial at the time of *O Continente* (1949), conceived around the centennial of the war depicted.²⁵ The Cold War context of which Verissimo was aware in his travels as he conceived *O Continente* was ambiguous in a whole new way. Regional, national and global, all spheres involved contrast and contradiction about those conflicts past and present. Expressing a

²³ Verissimo's 1945 table of contents move seems to resonate with Bordini's and Zilberman's situating of *O Tempo e o Vento* as historical novel in this tradition in Brazil, from Romantics to Modernists and beyond. (2004)

²⁴ US National Archives and Brazilian police archives list Verissimo as suspect in 1943 and 1948. (NARA, DOPS)

²⁵ On the memory of the Farroupilha Revolution, Sandra Jatahy Pesavento says: “em 1935 o acontecimento buscou estabelecer um verdadeiro marco, juntando passado e presente e insinuando o próprio futuro (...) o Rio Grande procurava evidenciar progresso sem se despojar de um passado que o nobilitava.” (1985: 9).

political position, much less choosing sides, was complicated to say the least.²⁶ A liberal intellectual such as Verissimo was besieged from all sides (BORDINI 2000: 56). Writing was navigating a mine field. And polarization went beyond this external broader setting of global history. Vargas' "pendulum" policy of "pragmatic equidistance" tilted either to the US or Germany before joining the Allied forces, with disputes from within the state and beyond.

A polarização política recorta os vários grupos de interesse, os organismos 'técnicos' do Estado, a burocracia militar, a diplomacia e até mesmo as instâncias centrais de decisão, colocando em um mesmo campo político os defensores do comércio compensado e do protecionismo, os nacionalistas e os pró-alemães; e, de outro lado, os advogados do livre comércio, da liberdade cambial e tarifária, os pan-americanistas e os pró-EUA. (Moura 1980: 108).

Verissimo navigated several of those realms in the 1940s. His one clear position was antifascism. When the USSR invaded Hungary in 1956, he spoke at the PUCRS University about what he later phrased as "my political position, which so many seem not to have understood by now." There he criticized not only officially authoritarian regimes but also so-called "liberal" ones which acted with authoritarianism.²⁷ Even as a "good neighbor", in Verissimo's account of his US travels, he saw a dangerously competitive nature emerging as essentially "American": individualist hurry, useless thirst for profit. (1942) That is, Cold War division also made losers on both sides, as experienced by his characters earlier in history. Yet *O Continente* does not "reflect" Verissimo's "opinion". Historical content flows through literary form despite author "intention". *By responding to reality intuitively, fiction can reveal truths about it that "factual" texts cannot.*²⁸

In the Sobrado, a *mulata* comforts the little Terra-Cambará boys telling an absurd story of the folk trickster Pedro Malasarte, after they beg for it. In these crucial last

²⁶ Despite Vargas' social advancements, he carried out severe anti-communist persecution. Although not in the party, Verissimo was interrogated; under "communism" fit most contrary to the regime. (Duarte 1999). In his memoirs, he recounts: "quero que me fale com toda a franqueza" – disse-me naquele dia um funcionário do DOPS com quem eu tinha relações pessoais. – "és ou não comunista?" nem sequer me dei o trabalho de lhe responder..." (1973: 263).

²⁷ "Quando em 1935 as tropas de Mussolini invadiram a Abissínia, firmei o manifesto em que intelectuais brasileiros protestavam contra a bárbara agressão fascista. (...) O pacto russo-alemão que em 1939 permitiu a invasão e a mutilação da Polónia, abrindo aos nazistas o caminho para a conquista da Europa, teve também o meu repúdio (...) As violências praticadas pela Inglaterra contra os patriotas de Chipre e as da França contra os nacionalistas da Argélia têm a minha mais decidida antipatia." (Verissimo 1976: 8).

²⁸ See Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999); Gabrielle Spiegel, *The past as text* (1997); Catharine Gallagher, *The Rise of Fictionality* (2006); Carlo Ginzburg, *Threads and traces* (2012).

paragraphs of the first volume of the epic, a momentous narrative choice: the non-white non-male almost un-known character serving a bizarre episode of an anti-hero to elite boys.²⁹ Then, on the very last page, after Licurgo refuses to capitulate ending the siege, the godmother Maria Valéria has an indirect internal monologue (via the ever-shifting narrator) that flips in one paragraph the misogynistic dynamic we had witnessed throughout the book, for over a century: "Men! And suddenly she wants to spit. Men! Muddy boots, smell of sweat, stale cigarettes and cachaça, knife in the vest, phlegm on the floor. Machos! Those sickening men downstairs, wrapped in their ponchos, spitting all over the house, doing their necessities in the cellar..." (311). The sudden possessing of Maria Valéria's intimate point of view, as a last abrupt shift of perspective, crumbles down much of what had been built around men's achievements in the wartime night we followed for a century. *A sudden snapping out of it, waking up, looking from outside of it all.*³⁰

This cuts deeper than Verissimo's "counterpoint" approach, previously discussed in scholarship. Contradictions woven into narration seamlessly compel us into different perspectives. This goes beyond what Verissimo said about trying to "weave my novel's backdrop with threads of historical facts without bending and twisting them." (Lessa 1949) It involves not just the history depicted, but the mindset of the periods enmeshed in narration, and the influence of the time in which it is being written, as history in the making. Truth shines through fictional form. Structure and narration experience history from within, embodying otherness in defiance of hegemony. A fictional construction capable of gauging different issues related to different kinds of repression through different gazes and times, seems in tune with a global postwar sentiment of exposing the makings of internal evil and giving voice to those under it. The narrator is not "over the fence" or "unreliable". The narrator is deeply in, either side, in plain truthful contradiction, not coexisting in all sides but agilely oscillating, being and not being, in true Vargas Era form.

²⁹ The scene of an Afro-Brazilian servant telling stories to white children is a common recurrence in literature, as in Monteiro Lobato's beloved (albeit currently controversial) 1930s "Tia Nastácia."

³⁰ This premise is central in the analysis of João Feres Junior (2005), who examines the concept "Latin American" (with Koselleck's "asymmetric counter-concepts") as expression of antagonism between one America and the "other": Otherness in racial, cultural and temporal terms.

Outside the novel: Dr Winter and Bakhtin's outsideness – a note from 2020

We have seen how different sides are embodied by the narrator within third-person narration. Pedro Missioneiro is portrayed with an accent once he is in the Terra household; women are compared to meat when in Captain Rodrigo's presence; all men are hated once around Maria Valéria's point of view. Narration fears for the soldiers on either side of a given war. In its structure, *O Continente* is antifascist. Around the same time, Theodor Adorno (1951) explained how Fascist propaganda strategy involved being vague, and building a threatening Other shutting down space for difference.³¹ Exploring the other from within, in both its glory and evils, generates understanding – more than if the narrator were only anti-racism and anti-sexism. Ultimately, the combined "possessions" result in a polyphonic version, the impossible point of clarity in a context encouraging extremism from all sides.³²

"How could it be that in that end of the world, that lost no-place on the fringes of the American continent, there was such a woman? She seemed out of a Sophocles or Schiller tragedy," (363) thinks Dr Winter about Luzia. Southern Brazil appears not as part of a country, but a lost place in a continent. And it is interpreted through European culture lenses, in this case as surprisingly similar and later, as opposites. Winter finds absurd the combination of his violin playing Beethoven and his slave heavily carrying a rustic jug: "he had such a sharp realization of the contrast – the minuet and the slave – he laughed." (383). Winter refutes the statement by a town judge, that the town was a "latin civilization," deeming unthinkable that "*gauchos* descended from the Romans," (375) because of racial mixing.³³ This is interesting considering the mid-20th century construction of "Latin American" as a population unit.³⁴ Verissimo had encountered stereotypes of "latinos" in his North American travels, and often made a point to deconstruct them. Winter's place of

³¹Also in 1951, Hannah Arendt wrote *Origins of Totalitarianism*; originally titled *The Burden of Our Times*, tellingly.

³²See Beatriz Bracher, *The necessity of fiction in Brazil today: or how to fight fascists without becoming one* (2019).

³³The debate tends to the side of Winter, given the judge is depicted as slow and intellectually insecure.

³⁴ The division between America and "Latin" America derived from Europe's relation to Latinidad. The peoples living south of the Rio Grande were of varied ethnicities. Nonetheless, "'Latin' America became a new 'racial' category defined not by blood or skin color but by marginal status." (Walter Mignolo 2005: 73) See Tenorio-Trillo 2017.

"outside spectator" is made explicit in a meta comment by the narrator: "Partly as actor, partly as spectator, Carl Winter could really follow the comedy's development." (377).

The way the characters and narrator experience distance in time and memory echoes the problem noticed later by Verissimo while writing the volumes of the work on more recent history.

Era como se eu estivesse dentro dum avião que voava a grande altura: podia ter uma visão de conjunto, discernia os contornos do Continente. (...) Ao escrever *O Retrato* [*O Tempo e o Vento* II] já o "avião" voava tão baixo que comecei a perder de vista a floresta para prestar mais atenção às árvores. (...) meio perdido, porque eu também era uma árvore. (1973; 18).

Thus, distance in time resembles distance in space, vision. Another layer of complexity may be added to this interpretation if we consider otherness in the real-world life of the novel, that is, its international life, not just its form and content. To Mikhail Bakhtin, "in the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly." (7). Readings of *O Continente* from abroad in its time is perhaps as telling as readings of it across eras within Brazil. The same year L. L. Barrett translates *O Continente*, he writes about Verissimo: "he reveals himself and his ideas, at least partially (...) particularly in his latest, *O Tempo e o Vento*". Then, the translator denounces other books which are too explicit in their position. When a book treats social problems "without adequate literary dress of fiction well-tailored to its shape and measure", he says, then "such a book is no novel and has no right to the name. There are far too many such treatises masquerading as novels." (31). Verissimo's literary value was seen there as in being *indirectly* political.³⁵

Granville Hicks wrote about *O Continente* in the New York Times a few months later.³⁶ On the remote "southernmost province of Brazil", he says that the novel, despite many unfamiliar details, doesn't seem strange to a North American reader, which he explains that Verissimo's frontier "is fundamentally *similar to our frontier* (...) His frontier, however, lasted for a *century and a half*, producing many generations of bold, hard, belligerent men and patient, resourceful women. That is the theme of his novel – the

³⁵To Chaves, Verissimo's structure had "balance between character autonomy and politized author testimony" (1972: 75).

³⁶Granville Hicks was one of several US Marxist authors who became anti-Marxists in the early 1950s.

persistence of a desperate but *heroic way of life...*" (Hicks, 1951). Inter-American unity coexists with difference. To Hicks, Southern Brazil had a "frontier life" as "heroic" as the US, but stayed stuck there for longer.³⁷ In 1943, the same paper had reviewed the translation of *Caminhos Cruzados*, celebrating it for both literary and geopolitical value, as it makes the reader see that "Porto Alegre is not so different from Jacksonville, after all, *Crossroads* is definitely a solid contribution to a good neighbor policy."

Porto Alegre is not Jacksonville. And Southern Brazil is not the US Western frontier. While some style references and themes might resemble each other, expected of an increasingly interconnected American continent, particularly in Verissimo's career, what we have seen in the narrator of *O Continente* is messier than that. As put Silviano Santiago, "the biggest contribution of Latin America to Western culture comes from the systematic destruction of concepts of unity and purity," in an effort of contamination (2000: 16). After living as a white man in Brazil, once Verissimo landed in the US, he was struck by the realization that he was not "white" there. Coming from an Embassy event in a tuxedo (and with a tan), he was mistaken for a waiter (1941) – a relatable experience for many Brazilians today. Questioning the place of minorities as relative, especially seen from outside (of time or space), underlies the narrative of *O Continente*. Who is whiter? Who oppresses whom and how? How might agency affect events or subvert order?

A book's afterlife can be as telling as its life abroad.³⁸ The 2020 reader will recognize the ending of the Chapter "Teiniaguá" all too well. The death of a patriarch happens in a cholera epidemic. The first to die is the enslaved, of cholera, and the elite family's heir Bolívar dies fighting to escape the quarantine motivated by political disputes. Epidemics and disease control are historically political, and often expose a society's deepest problems of class, race and gender.³⁹ This is true before *O Continente*, and was better diagnosed after it.⁴⁰ It is one of the many effects of Brazil's inequality. Seventy years ago, *O Continente* put together issues we now see must be thought of together. Alterity, unity plus diversity, race,

³⁷ The notion that Latin America as the "past" version of North America is described by João Feres Jr (2005).

³⁸ "Ancient Greeks did not know the main thing about themselves, that they were Ancient Greeks." (Bakhtin 1986: 6).

³⁹ Isabel Allende has said the 2020 pandemic exposed patriarchy's inequalities. Researching an 1823 slave revolts, Emilia Viotti da Costa had found that "crises are moments of truth." (1998: 13).

⁴⁰ See Sidney Chalhoub's *The Politics of Disease Control* (1993).

gender. Not by being ahead of its time, but through a form deeply in tune with its society at its core, in a foundational moment as is the mid- 20th century Brazil. Wars become mere background, in face of the real tensions of the novel (and of the country), the excruciating inequality of a people. Pairs of opposites and contradictions in the narration of *O Continente* unravel cuts and continuities of history, and live on through the form of the novel and past its time. More than a southern history backdrop, it has Brazilian storytelling.

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