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A Cosmopolitan Canon: Portuguese National Literature as World Literature

The case of literatures written in Portuguese presents an interesting case – study for the relationship between national, language – specific, and international canons. The colonial relationship between Portugal and Portuguese – speaking countries escapes an understanding of colonialism as shaped by the British and French experiences, since Portugal’s relationship to its former colonies operated under what Boaventura Sousa Santos identified as an intermediary space between Prospero and Caliban: whilst Portugal was the nominal colonizer, it frequently acted in the interests and under the influence of Britain. Nonetheless, the Portuguese elite’s dependence on the colonial project became especially evident as it crumbled: the independence of Brazil had a decisive impact in ushering in liberal reforms in the 19th century, as the independence of the African colonies in late 20th century was inextricably linked with the toppling of Salazar’s regime and the ushering in of democracy. During these processes, the formation of a Portuguese literary canon was shaped by the circulation of texts and people that reflected the worldview of this elite.

In this paper, we shall see how the central authors of the contemporary Portuguese literary canon — defined also in terms of popular perception through the school system— are consistently tied with either the crown or the state in a project of nation building anchored in colonial expectations towards the Global South and a peripheral relation towards Northern Europe. The result is a constant awareness of foreignness in the texts of Gil Vicente, Camões, Vieira, Garrett, Eça de Queirós and Pessoa, as well as a need to measure themselves against authors and literatures emanating from the core countries of the world system—at times learning productive processes of emulation (Castro Rocha, 2015) from authors coming from the former colonies, becoming a form of cosmopolitan national canon.