

Inhabiting Identities in Nelson de Oliveira's Short Story "O irmão brasileiro"

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...it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free. (22)

—Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*

In December of 2010, as numerous decades-old cases of adoption fraud came to light in Spain, a Spanish woman in her forties was reunited with her biological mother for the first time since birth. The mother had been told that her daughter was stillborn. The daughter had been told that her mother had died during labor (Tremlett). Although just one of many instances of baby trafficking, the happy, or at least conclusive, ending makes it stand apart.

The existential question "Who am I?" gains new valence for those who suspect a haunting deception surrounding their origins. This theme is central to Nelson de Oliveira's short story "O irmão brasileiro" 'The Brazilian Brother,' published in 2006. In the short story, a narrator seeks answers about his own illegal adoption to make sense of his identity. His method of doing so—which involves repetition, digression, invention, and contradiction—allows the reader to accompany him in this self-exploration, which draws attention to how language can paradoxically confound, as opposed to facilitate, understanding. By collapsing the real and imagined, and by collapsing two different countries and characters, the narrator undermines the concept of a unified self, proposing, in its place, a plurality of possible and fantastic identities. Without straying from proper grammar, the short story employs stylistic elements to explore the instability of identity and the anxiety this instability can provoke. Carefully structured sentences and paragraphs create ambiguity, leading the reader to question meaning, especially regarding the construction of a national identity.

A brief consideration of how national identity has been articulated in Brazilian letters will underscore the singular treatment of the topic in Oliveira's short story and contextualize the text within a long tradition of narrating (and contesting) national identity. The cultivation of a national identity was integral to Brazilian fiction from its origins through the 1920s, be it with the sincerity of José de Alencar's novel *Iracema* or the riotousness of Mário de Andrade's novel *Macunaíma*. From the 1930s through the 1950s, this concern was replaced by a focus on the myriad *regional* identities that comprised that national identity, with particular attention paid to the speech, customs, and poverty of the remote *sertão* or scrubland. The Brazilian literature of the 1960s through the 1980s was especially preoccupied with the place of women, homosexuals, people of color, and other marginalized voices, thus enriching and validating various groups within the nation. For instance, literary critic Fernando Arenas, in *Utopia of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil*, argues that fiction written by women and gay men from the 1960s through the 1990s demonstrates how Brazil's (and Portugal's) macro-narratives of the nation left out the struggles, desires, or very existence of women and homosexuals. Thus, for many writers publishing

during those decades, the point of affiliation was less the nation than specific marginalized groups within the country, and this affiliation allowed authors to challenge certain conceptions of the nation and invest loyalty in a smaller subset of it (chs. 2 and 5).

The non-Brazilian and multinational settings of novels by contemporary authors, such as Bernardo Carvalho and Chico Buarque, constitute a new trend in Brazilian letters. This trend demonstrates a growing interest in searching outside one's nation for inspiration. On this topic, literary historian Pascale Casanova argues:

... the autonomy enjoyed by the most literary countries is marked chiefly by the depoliticization of literature: the almost complete disappearance of popular or national themes, the appearance of 'pure' writing—texts that, freed from the obligation to help to develop a particular national identity, have no social or political 'function'—and, as an aspect of this, the emergence of formal experimentation, which is to say of forms detached from political purpose and unencumbered by nonliterary conceptions of literature. (199)

Casanova's claim that formal experimentation is detached from political purpose overlooks how literary experimentation can undermine the regularities of standard language in a way that is political. Aesthetic experimentation can unsettle the practices and institutions that standard, regularized language presupposes. However, Casanova makes an important point about a nation's literary freedom relevant to Brazilian letters. Only since the military dictatorship have Brazilian authors been widely "freed from the obligation to help develop a particular national identity" or subset of a national identity, although *obligation* must be understood as a sense of obligation, as opposed to an actual enforced obligation. Yet, what makes "O irmão brasileiro" stand out is that, instead of developing or ignoring national identity, the text deceptively presents national identity in a way that challenges its very relevance as a category. Instead of transcending the topic of national identity, the short story dives deeper into it.

On the first page of "O irmão brasileiro," the narrator creates ambiguity about nationality via his use of pronouns and his intentionally vague sentences. He writes, "[s]omos o país de futebol, não somos?" '[w]e are the country of soccer, aren't we?' (239).¹ Given that the author is Brazilian, that the text is written in Portuguese, and that we have no indications that the narrator is not Brazilian, we assume that the collective "somos" refers to Brazilians and that this "país de futebol" is Brazil. Yet, the next line complicates our assumption: "Nós. Digo, eles" 'We. I mean they' (240). After reading this line, we may imagine that the narrator is not Brazilian, but that he is referring to Brazilians. The next line proves us wrong: "Esses que me cercam, os bretões" 'Those around me, the Brits' (240). In this sentence, the first-person narrator introduces us to his own complicated relationship to England, his country of residence. By changing his use of the pronoun *nós*, he disassociates himself from England. Theirs is the country of football, but he does not feel connected to this allegiance. The narrator continues: "Mas não é sobre futebol que eu quero falar" 'But it's not soccer that I want to talk about,' hinting at his lack of control over his own narrative (240). Thus the

¹ All translations are my own.

narrator places his confusion about national identity and his difficulty telling his story side-by-side, suggesting a relationship between the two.

Despite his desire to stop talking about soccer, the narrator continues to do so. He brings back the first-person plural to refer to the United Kingdom, “[n]ós inventamos o jogo, não inventamos?” “[w]e invented the game, didn’t we?” (240). Although he rejected identifying with England earlier in the paragraph, here he considers himself to be part of the country that invented the game. The text’s use of *nós*, as well as verbs conjugated in the first-person plural, captures the narrator’s uncertainty about his own national affiliation: he begins using *somos* to refer to English people, then he corrects himself, and finally he cycles back to considering himself to be English. The shifts in the subject—in the sense of the grammatical performer of action—are clearest when we view the aforementioned lines together:

Somos o país de futebol, não somos?

Nós. Digo, eles. Esses que me cercam, os bretões. . . . Nós inventamos o jogo, não inventamos?

We are the country of soccer, aren’t we?

We. I mean they. Those around me, the Brits. . . . We invented the game, didn’t we? (emphasis added)

Yet soon after, the narrator laments again that this is not what he wanted to talk about. Instead,

Talvez quisesse falar apenas dos meus pais.

Não dos pais que estão comigo hoje. Não.

Gostaria de falar dos meus pais verdadeiros, da minha infância, da minha cidade e do meu país de origem. No entanto, quando penso neles vejo apenas bruma e sombras. Não faço a menor idéia de como tornar tudo isso mais nítido. Quem poderiam ser, qual país seria este?” (240)

Maybe I wanted to talk only about my parents.

Not about my parents who are with me today. No.

I would like to talk about my real parents, my childhood, my city, and my country of origin. However, when I think of them I see only mist and shadows. I have no idea how to make all of that clearer. Who could they be, what country could this be?

Soon, we will discover that this country is Brazil. We also will learn that the narrator—if we believe him—was forced to leave Brazil at the age of four or five because he was kidnapped to be sold for adoption in England where he has lived ever since. The narrator’s ambiguous use of the words *somos* and *eles* and his unclear references to either Brazilian or English soccer allow for the

stylistic elements of the short story to mimic its themes of displacement and confusion. Like the narrator himself, the reader confounds national identities, both syntactically and thematically.

After introducing his confusion about his national identity, the narrator describes dreams that he appears to have had in his adolescence and now is recounting at age thirty. However, various periods intermingle, so the narrator's present and past—like his fantasy world and his real life—often cannot be distinguished. A recurring symbol of “uma espiral sem começo e sem fim” ‘a spiral with no beginning or end’ haunts the narrator's waking nightmares, and his descriptions of his dreams attempt to reconcile that fear of a life spinning endlessly without meaning (255).

Central to the narrative arc of these dreams is the narrator's unrequited love for a young woman named Alice who in one dream appears to be in a Brazilian *Carnaval* parade, although we are only told that it is a “feriado nacional” ‘national holiday’ and that she and many others are wearing garish costumes with embroidery and gold. The adjective *nacional* is ambiguous intentionally, allowing us to perceive a dream set in Brazil, England, a combination of the two, or a different place altogether. Since the short story's most poignant events and characters are imagined in the narrator's dreams, we become more attached to the narrator's fantasy world than his real life in London. We, therefore, imitate the wistful nature of the narrator, investing ourselves more in his imaginary worlds than in his troubled family life in England.

At one point, the narrator tells us what he will see when he opens his bedroom window in England. He offers a detailed description of a tropical view with lush vegetation and coconut palms. It is his idealized image of a Brazilian landscape, something he longs for and can no longer recall clearly. When he actually opens the window, he sees a lifeless sky, grey homes, and the dried leaves of a London street. As readers, we process the real and the imagined views together, as if one were as real for the narrator as the other and as if they could seamlessly coexist. Moreover, the contrast allows us to perceive how Brazil, in the eyes of the narrator, is less a real country than a utopian dream, whereas England embodies the narrator's dissatisfaction in the present. Through ambiguous wording, shifting registers, and detailed descriptions of imagined places, the short story confounds tendencies to look for linearity and to privilege the real over the imaginary. Furthermore, the narrator's view of Brazil through the window resonates with Julia Kristeva's interpretation, in her seminal work *Strangers to Ourselves*, of foreigners' relationship to their place of origin. She writes, “[m]elancholy lover of a vanished space, he [the foreigner] cannot, in fact, get over his having abandoned a period in time. The lost paradise is a mirage of the past that he will never be able to recover” (9-10). Likewise, the narrator's desperation to retrieve the childhood he could have had in Brazil, if he had not been stolen, spurs his confusion of time and space, which is brought to life in the image of the two views through the window.

Throughout the short story, the first-person narrator jumps from one time in his life to another with no warning, sometimes even confusing himself. However, at the end of the short story, he tells us that he is thirty years old and that he is boarding a plane for Brazil where he has not been since he was very young. He describes walking pensively toward the departure gate,

... na direção de um país que me é estranho, do qual guardo algumas recordações muito fortes, poucas, eu sei, mas violentas, que me perseguem aonde quer que eu vá.

Os meus pais já morreram há muito tempo. (279)

... in the direction of a country that is strange to me, about which I hold some very strong memories, few, I know, but violent, which follow me wherever I go.

My parents already died a long time ago.

We do not know which parents he refers to although it sounds as though they are his biological parents since he has been speaking about Brazil. The next sentence clarifies the ambiguity and proves our assumption wrong, "meus pais ingleses" 'my English parents.' However, the next line reinstates the ambiguity, "[m]ais uma vez me engano" '[o]nce again I'm mistaken.' Did he mix up the parents about whom he is speaking? The next passage clarifies, "[m]uito tempo, não. O meu pai morreu há um ano. Faz apenas seis meses que mamãe morreu" '[n]ot a long time ago. My father died a year ago. It's only been six months since mom died'(280). Viewed altogether, as the sentences visually appear in the short story, the undermined meaning reads more clearly:

Os meus pais já morreram há muito tempo.

Os meus pais ingleses.

Mais uma vez me engano. Muito tempo, não. O meu pai morreu há um ano. Faz apenas seis meses que mamãe morreu. (279-280)

My parents already died a long time ago.

My English parents.

Once again I'm mistaken. Not a long time ago. My father died a year ago. It's only been six months since mom died.

Yet in a short story woven with dreams, no clarification ever seems completely believable. Was this narrator in fact kidnapped for illegal international adoption as his foster mother confesses before dying or is that another one of his fantasies? The narrator explains that on his mother's deathbed, she and he could not communicate: "Nos seus últimos dias não conseguimos dizer nada um ao outro, simplesmente porque eu não conhecia as mesmas palavras que ela, e vice-versa" 'In her last days, we couldn't manage to say anything to one another, simply because I didn't know the same words as her, and vice versa' (280). As comprehension breaks down among family members, it breaks down in the text as well, especially since we cannot discern definitively where the narrator's fantasies end and his real life begins. He and his English mother's inability to understand one another mirrors our inability to understand what is reality and what is fantasy with regard to the narrator's identity.

The ambiguity of "O irmão brasileiro" makes the reader work hard. To engage with the text, we must make guesses, re-evaluate, acknowledge our misinterpretations, and accept the unknown. Therefore, the short story can be classified as what Roland Barthes refers to as a *writerly text*.

Barthes distinguishes between readerly and writerly texts. Readerly texts “are products (and not productions)” (5). They represent “a kind of idleness” in which the reader becomes “intransitive,” a passive receiver. In contrast, the writerly text’s goal is to “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). Our activeness as readers of “O irmão brasileiro” heightens our sense of how meaning is produced, drawing attention to the writerly project of exploring both the limits of language and the richness of ambiguity.

This writerly project is particularly evident in a scene in the liminal space of an airport terminal where the narrator describes the trip he is taking to Brazil. He seeks the type of reunion that took place between the Spanish mother and daughter mentioned at the start of this article. Yet, the narrator seems less set on discovering his biological parents than on discovering a lost part of himself: “Hoje começo minha viagem de volta ao passado, em direção a esse garoto de quatro, cinco anos. Na direção de um garoto que nunca cresceu” “Today I begin my journey back to the past, toward that four or five-year-old boy. Toward a boy who never grew up” (281). What appears to be a trip over geographic space is for the narrator a trip in time to a past that he has attempted to recall or invent. However, the next line destabilizes this idea: “Minto” ‘I lie’ (281). Next, the narrator tells us something that could be fantastical, metaphorical, or poetic: “Aquele garoto tem hoje trinta anos, e apesar de tudo continua morando lá, com a sua família de origem, na casa onde nasceu” “That boy is now thirty years old, and despite everything he continues living there, with his family of origin, in the house where he was born” (281-282). He explains that he does not know the name of this other half of himself, this version of himself that never had to leave Brazil, but he imagines his name is Lucas. By imagining a part of himself that is spatially separate from his own body, he gives life to the Brazilian upbringing that was denied him, an act reminiscent of his adolescent attempts at levitation and his preoccupation with the part of the self that transcends the bodily.

The narrator and Lucas constitute two parts of the same self, which are connected to two different nations, a foreigner and native within the same person. Kristeva notes how the relationship between the foreigner and the self complicates the idea of a collective: She argues that, “[b]y recognizing him [the foreigner] within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible” (1). The narrator in “O irmão brasileiro” manifests this problematic *we* in his split identity between himself and Lucas:

Ele lá, eu aqui. Ele, ascendente. Eu, descendente. Crescendo separados.

Dois solitários lado a lado.

Lembro das coisas que ele viveu. Dois capricornianos lado a lado.

Lembro principalmente de Alice. A garota que ele amou.” (282)

Him there, me here. Him, rising. Me, descending. Growing separately.

Two solitary beings side by side.

I remember things that he lived. Two Capricorns side by side.

Mainly, I remember Alice. The girl he loved.

Throughout the short story, the narrator has expressed how, as an adolescent, he fell in love with his classmate Alice. Yet here, love of Alice belongs to Lucas, suggesting the narrator's detachment even from his own passions or his relegation of passion to the mysterious, foreign side of himself. Much of the information in these short paragraphs is repeated from previous pages, as if the narrator himself may be delusional. Or perhaps the repetitions, confusions, and one-sentence paragraphs are his way of manifesting the strangeness of feeling out of place in one's own body, one's own country, and one's own story. Repeated sentences, ambiguous grammatical subjects, and jagged paragraphs hence become a literary strategy of conveying emotions, such as estrangement, perplexity, and fixation.

Nelson de Oliveira uses stylistic elements to capture the narrator's confusion about identity and belonging, a confusion linked to national identification, but more individualistic and multivalent. The narrator's method of storytelling collapses Lucas and himself, reality and dreams, and Brazil and England in a way that calls attention to how the formation of an identity involves ambiguity and flux. Oliveira's narrator, by splitting himself into two selves, attempts (with unclear success) the type of freedom author Amin Maalouf solicits in the quotation that began and now concludes this analysis: "...it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free" (22).

Obras citadas

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