

Journeys through the Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix: Essays in Memory of Fernando Arenas

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In late 2019, the Lusophone studies community lost one of its most productive and vital scholars. Fernando Arenas, Professor of Lusophone Literatures and Cultures in the Departments of Romance Languages and Literatures and Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan, died at the age of fifty-eight. He had been diagnosed in 2018 with a malignant brain tumor. He previously taught at the University of Minnesota, where he achieved the rank of full professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese in 2010; at Harvard, where he was visiting professor in 2003; and at the University of San Francisco, where he was assistant professor from 1994 to 1995. He completed his Ph.D. in Luso-Brazilian literatures at the University of California, Berkeley in 1994. He was a beloved teacher, colleague, and interlocutor, widely known for his warm and engaging personality and for his generous service to the field at large and, in particular, to the American Portuguese Studies Association. He twice served as principal host for APSA conferences, the first time at the University of Minnesota in 2006 and then, despite his illness, at the University of Michigan in 2018.

The essays in this special issue cluster are brought together to honor the legacy of Arenas's scholarship, teaching, and professional service, dedicated to the advancement of Lusophone literary and cultural studies. His commitment to the field and his generosity as a colleague, teacher, mentor, and simply as a person touched many of us, across institutions, countries, continents, and communities. Arenas emblemized in many ways beyond the academic or scholarly the

transnational vocation of Lusophone studies, following the example of Russell Hamilton, whom he very much admired. The topics, geographies, and approaches taken in the trajectory of his work include the historical and contemporary interconnections, exchanges, and migratory flows between Brazil, Lusophone Africa, and Portugal; cultural studies of Lusophone popular music; Lusophone African cinema; Afro-Portugal, Afro-Brazil, and Afro-diasporas; gender and sexuality in Lusophone worlds; and postcolonialism and globalization within the historical and contemporary frameworks of what he came to call the Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix, or the time-space of the Portuguese language and its linguistic and cultural contact zones and borderlands.

Arenas's first monograph, *Utopias of Otherness: Nationhood and Subjectivity in Portugal and Brazil* (2003), combined a sweeping, comparative review of ideas and ideologies of nationhood and empire in Brazil and Portugal with a consideration of the ways in which Caio Fernando Abreu and Maria Isabel Barreno contested and unsettled them through the writing of utopian desires of queer and female subjectivities and experiences. Nearly coinciding with that book, Arenas, with Susan Canty Quinlan, published the pioneering edited volume *Lusosex: Gender and Sexuality in the Portuguese-Speaking World* (2002), which includes a broad range of essays on Angolan, Brazilian, Cabo Verdean, Mozambican, and Portuguese cultural manifestations and texts, from different historical periods, tied together through their critical analysis of representations of sexuality and the intersections of class, race, gender, and discourses of nationhood.

Arenas's second monograph, *Lusophone Africa: Beyond Independence*, was published in 2010, with a Portuguese translation, *África lusófona: Além da independência*, published in Brazil in 2019, a few days before his death. Attentive to cultural history, geopolitics, postcolonial theory, and theories of globalization, this book presents a clear conceptual framing for understanding contemporary cultural production and recent historical developments in Portuguese-speaking Africa. It is structured in a similar way to his first monograph, with a lucid, deeply informed, and sweeping historical introduction—in this case narrating the interconnections between Africa, Brazil, and Portugal dating back to the early colonial period and up through national liberation struggles, decolonization, and the postcolonial dynamics within and between nations—and then a series of precise readings of a selection of specific twentieth-century and contemporary artists and their work. Here, Arenas brings readings of literary works into dialogue

with studies of popular music and cinema, considering ways in which they manifest or critically respond to ideas of nationhood and national independence and the ruptures and continuities between the colonial and postcolonial social and symbolic orders.

Arenas's third book project, which was to be titled *The Rise of Afro-Portugal: From African Migration to European Citizenship*, was well underway but, sadly, unfinished at the time of his death. It signaled a deeper unfolding of questions raised in his book on Lusophone Africa, on the historical and ongoing entanglements between former colonies in Africa and Portugal and the increasingly visible or recognizable presence and protagonism of African and Afro-descendant individuals and communities in sociocultural and political arenas of contemporary Portugal. As outlined in substantial detail in a 2015 essay published in *Postcolonial Studies*, this book promised to address social activism and debates around questions of race, citizenship, belonging, and decolonization in the former imperial metropole and a range of forms of contemporary cultural production, again including literature, music, and film. In this vein, Arenas's last publication, an article included posthumously in the 2021 issue of *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies*, edited by Inocência Mata and Iolanda Évora, considered representations of Africans and Afro-descendants in contemporary Portuguese cinema, investigating, in his words, "how this form of cultural production reflects a Portuguese nation in full mutation, where the borders between post-colonial Portugal and the former African colonies, as well as notions about what is 'being African' or 'being European,' are being redefined" ("Africanos" 237).

Looking back at Fernando Arenas's contributions to the interdisciplinary field that he founded in the tracks of Russell Hamilton—namely, Lusophone studies as practiced in the U.S. academy—two innovations may be highlighted: the generative use of the concept of the Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix and an ethnomusicologist's appreciation of the porous margins of national cultures. The latter may be said to precede and pave the way for the former, because it was via listening to music from Portugal on his short-wave radio as a young man in Bogotá, Colombia, that Arenas was introduced to the variety of sounds and rhythms in Portuguese. Arenas's interest in Creoles would lead him to formally study Cabo Verdean Creole while he was a visiting professor at Harvard, in 2003. He had always included music (and film) in his literature courses, but it was throughout

the latter part of his career that he designed and began to regularly teach a course on Lusophone music, with particular attention to African pop music. He laid out both a theory and a method for its study and teaching in “Soundtracks of the Lusophone and Creolophone Spheres,” included in the 2020 volume edited by Hilary Owen and Claire Williams, *Transnational Portuguese Studies*, which sadly but quite properly was dedicated to his memory.

Arenas’s virtually lifelong passion for music from different Portuguese-speaking geocultural sites brought to his attention arguably before and beyond academic scholarship what he would later call the Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix. The latter may be understood as a (postcolonial) approach to coloniality as Enrique Dussel originally theorized it, that others—for example, Boaventura de Sousa Santos—brought to bear on the “time-space” of the Portuguese language. But it was Luís Felipe de Alencastro’s *O trato dos viventes: Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Negro, séculos XVI e XVII* that Arenas often referred to when talking about the specific triangulated perspective that informs the notion of a Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix, for which he notably never claimed credit. This is evidenced by his use of single quotes in the title of the invited talk he presented at the University of Michigan in March 2010, the announcement of which is available on the web. “African and Brazilian Interconnections in the ‘Lusophone Transatlantic Matrix’” presented his new research project (which would have been his third monograph), focusing on “the contemporary cultural production of African immigrants and their descendants in Portugal in order to analyze the emergence of Afro-diasporic identities that are re-defining the boundaries between postcolonial Portugal and its former African colonies.” In his lecture he aimed to emphasize “not only the triangular relationships between Portugal, Brazil, and Portuguese-speaking Africa, but also the competing as well as complementary bilateral relationships between Brazil and Lusophone Africa, on the one hand, and Portugal and Lusophone Africa, on the other hand.” By studying such cultural networks, he aimed to suggest “alternative processes of globalization aside from those fostered by the world’s economic centers along a North/South axis and beyond the well-known hegemony of Anglophone cultures.”

It is perhaps not surprising that by May 2011, Fernando Arenas had an exciting job offer in hand, one that, besides a high salary and research perks, offered him the possibility of teaching not only in the Department of Romance Languages but also in the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies. Although the

University of Minnesota tried to retain him, Arenas did not look back—at least not immediately. But surely, his home base would continue to be in Minneapolis for many years to come and until his untimely death.

The cluster of essays presented here only begins to respond to the trajectory and breadth of Arenas’s scholarly legacy. We acknowledge in particular a gap in terms of his contribution to the development of Lusophone queer studies. The dialogue with his work represented here is largely weighted toward its later trajectory and its sustained engagement with music and film and questions of nationhood, transnationalism, and belonging in the wake of empire, centered in Lusophone African and late- and postimperial Portugal but holding Brazil within the frame of reference. Coincidentally, after being tenured, Arenas moved away from queer studies in both his critical work and his teaching. In the academic year 2005–06, he had the privilege of being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on his second book, on post-independence Lusophone African music, film, and literature. The latter became his overwhelming passion shortly followed by diasporic African and, albeit to a lesser extent, Brazilian cultural production in and about postimperial Portugal.

In that vein, and attending to Arenas’s consistent attention to issues of culture, nation, and gender, the first three essays focus on the contributions of women who take on male-dominated artistic projects to inscribe them with the often invisible and silenced feminine experience. The volume opens with Inocência Mata’s incisive historical overview not only of Lusophone African female authors but of the issues that their respective works make visible, issues concerning experiences where gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and culture. This analysis is particularly important when considering the way in which the works of women writers—the number of which is expectedly small in comparison with those authored by men—contributed in decisive ways to the imagining of the free, independent African nation as well as to its reimagining in the postcolonial period. A particular moment in the narrative of anticolonial resistance from quite a different perspective and site is the focus of Ana Paula Ferreira’s essay. She analyzes the emergence in Brazil at the turn of the 1960s of a transnational Lusophone “community” made of heterogenous groups linked by the struggle against Salazar’s fascist-colonialist government. The analysis sheds light on, among others, the once colonialist writer Maria Archer, who proffers the ambiguous and yet prophetic decree that Brazil should safeguard the future of the

Portuguese language in Africa owing to its ever-present history of slavery. Looking momentarily away from imperial and postimperial travails but not from often misunderstood (when not ignored) creative works by women, Hilary Owen focuses on a 1987 film by Portuguese director Margarida Gil to discuss the gender politics of women and cinema in that period. Specifically, the article shows how Gil's film, based on the seventeenth-century autobiography of Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco, reterritorializes the literary adaptation genre not only through its narrative focus but through cinematic techniques that mobilize a probing and defiant feminine perspective.

The final three inclusions engage in distinct ways with the Afro-diasporic orientations that characterize much of Arenas's work and the attention it brought to the myriad forms by which geopolitical and cultural borders in postcolonial Lusophone and Creolophone worlds are defined, disrupted, and traversed. Kátia Bezerra, in her analysis of the 2011 documentary film *Cartas para Angola*, draws upon diaspora and postcolonial theorizations to consider the ways in which an ambivalent, or perhaps better, multivalent sense of home and belonging is expressed, through letters and interviews, by individuals whose lives are traced between Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. For Bezerra, a former student of Arenas at the University of Minnesota, the film and its subjects, through individual experience and memory, but also through local and transnational social support networks, challenge essentialist understandings of identity and identification. Malcolm McNee, also Arenas's student at the University of Minnesota, contributes translations of a selection of chronicles by the Angolan/Afro-Portuguese writer and musician Kalaf Epalanga, who was invited by Arenas as one of the keynote speakers at the 2018 APSA conference. The selection of chronicles means to pay tribute to Arenas in their centering of African and Afro-diasporic pop music and dance—notably, kizomba—as characteristic of Lisbon's contemporary culture and, more broadly, their reflection on the historical layers, imaginings, and meanings of Black presence in Portugal. Finally, in the concluding essay, Jorge Fernandes da Silveira directly reflects upon Arenas's writing about and interpretation of Cabo Verdean music and musicians, namely, Cesária Évora and Lura, as presented in a chapter from his book on Lusophone Africa. Closing with a poem dedicated to Arenas, Silveira's deeply personal essay presents a form of intimate reading and writing with or through extended passages of Arenas's writing, highlighting some of its stylistic, methodological, and conceptual features

that reflect an intellectual, experiential, and affective approach to its objects of study.

In closing, we are grateful to Fernando Arenas for the legacy of scholarship and service to the field of Lusophone studies as well as the memories of generous friendship, mentorship, and collegiality that he leaves behind. We are also grateful to Jeremy Lehen, executive editor of the journal, for his invitation to put together this special issue; to Kevin W. Ennis, for his thoughtful editorial assistance; and to the authors compiled here, for their collaboration and contributions to this tribute. Were our dear colleague and friend alive to witness the many recent scholarly and popular events centered on the ever more visible cultural productions from Afro-Portuguese citizens in Lisbon and other urban centers throughout Portugal, he would surely be not only happy but proud of having contributed in a pioneering way to their study and international visibility in academia.

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