Postcolonial Text, Vol 4, No 4 (2008)

Rethinking Difference and the Body of the Nation: *Cannibal Democracy: Race and Representation in the Literature of the Americas*

Zita Nunes
218 pages, 2008, $67.50 USD (hardcover)
Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press

Reviewed by Alessandra Capperdoni, Simon Fraser University

Zita Nunes's book is a fascinating and well researched study of the ways in which the relationship between race and democracy has been conceptualized in the Americas through the metaphor of "cannibalism." The author uncovers a network of writings from Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States (literary texts as well as public discourse) that highlight the interrelationship, and contradictions, of representing race and black citizenship in the Americas during the early and the late twentieth century. A central trope in the articulation of models of racial democracy, cannibalism circulated as a mobile metaphor with different intentions and effects, but always carrying forth the idea of a "resistant remainder" to assimilation, the disavowal of which is necessary to the coherence and stability of the body politic.

Studies exploring metaphors of cannibalism in relation to the entangled questions of race and national identity in Brazil are plenty, but they are often neatly mapped onto the fields of Brazilian modernism and anthropofagia. In contrast, Nunes's book recasts the nexus of nation, race, and democracy within a transnational framework by investigating the ways in which different articulations of race and national identity are deployed throughout the Americas through contact zones and intra-continental discursive flows comprising writers, the black press, and political rhetoric. Although this language is deployed differently and with different effects, it highlights a transnational relationship that challenges nation-based models still prevalent in studies of culture. Nunes's meticulous archival research is clearly attentive to the complexity of these interactions and concretizes Paul Gilroy's call for a shift from the narrow vision of the nation model to the global coalitional politics of anti-imperialism and anti-racist practices of the people of the African diaspora.

Central to Nunes's analysis is the concept of the "remainder," indebted to the language of Freudian psychoanalysis and derived from the work of Brazilian modernists in the 1920s. That a language of ingestion, evacuation, and remaindering is pervasive within texts by Brazilian, Caribbean, and Afro-American writers testifies to the similar ways in which "prevailing narratives of identity formation throughout twentieth-century America [. . .] present the individual, the social, and the political as a body that ingests" (xvi). The construction of a racial and national

identity is thus predicated on a process of assimilation, yet one that "presupposes a remainder" (xvi).

This is a central concept for a critical analysis of "racial democracy," which, in its original form, presupposed the inclusion of all citizens within the body politic: a process of absorption and "accommodation" producing a harmonious blending of races and cultures. Nunes notes that whilst this notion is often associated with Brazilian author Gilberto Freyre and his influential *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*), it circulated among both Brazilian modernists and Harlem Renaissance writers, as well as the black press of both Brazil and the United States. The contradiction in the deployment of the term "race," a marker of both inclusion and erasure of racial identity, is indicative of anxieties about the form that participatory democracy and citizenship should take in relation to blackness.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on Brazilian authors Mário de Andrade and Gilberto Freyre, whose works strive, and fail, to find a place for black and indigenous subjects within national identity without being absorbed by the logics of whitening (*embranquecimento*) and, in this process, point to blackness as a resisting remainder to the racial democracy envisioned for the new (modern) Brazil. That the discourse of national identity trespasses the borders of the nation is apparent in Nunes's analysis of the representation of Brazil in relation to race and democracy in works by U.S. writers W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Chesnutt (Chapter 3), and the black press of both Brazil and the United States (Chapter 4), while a brief discussion of Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* highlight Brazil both as a sign of repression and a possibility (a resistant remainder/reminder) in black self-representation in the U.S. Chapter 5 does not follow what would appear to be the chronological pattern of the opening chapters. Instead, it focuses on late twentieth-century writers from the U.S., the Caribbean, and Brazil (August Wilson, Toni Morrison, Erna Brodber, and Marilene Felinto), and two artists from the Caribbean diaspora (María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Keith Piper) to show the interconnectedness of early and late discussions of identity, culture, representation, and relocation.

The complex interplay of blackness, indigeneity, and whiteness is mapped by Nunes through the careful retracing of the signifier "race" within the folds of a pervasive language of ingestion and assimilation that builds on notions of incorporation and introjection derived from psychoanalysis. In doing so, she effectively problematizes the pervasive language of hybridity of post-colonial studies and recasts the notion of the "in-between" in a transcultural context that is also a new archive of knowledge in relation to race and democracy in the Americas. Nonetheless, the notion of the "remainder," which is central to her analysis, is sometimes deployed in vague terms. Although Nunes clarifies

the usage of the term at the beginning of her study (i.e., what is "left over" rather than what is "left out" from the process of incorporation), the inherent slipperiness of the word—signifying, at the same time, a physical/biological, cultural, and affective/psychic process—risks collapsing her valuable and meticulous research in a trope hiding the complex dynamics she tries to highlight. A partial restructuring of the book could have helped to obviate this problem. For example, María Magdalena Campos-Pons's and Keith Piper's works are particularly illuminating in clarifying the different ways in which "remaindering" structures notions of individual, social, and political identity. This discussion, in this reviewer's opinion, should have been highlighted earlier on as an alternative to, and a trace of, earlier articulations of cannibalism and racial democracy. Furthermore, while Nunes states that she wanted her study "to go beyond a collection of separate readings of texts from distinct regions" (xvii), the textual readings are not always well integrated into her discussion, and although not presented as isolated case-studies, they seem to maintain a conceptual independence which is at odds with the overall movement of her writing. In this sense, the last chapter, though rich in material, seems to function as an addendum to the book, which focuses primarily on the early twentieth century. Yet, parts of Chapter 5 could have helped in highlighting the transnational and translational context of the study to show the interconnections of past and present beyond a diachronic model. Specifically, María Magdalena Campos-Pons's work could have been recast at the beginning of the book as a theoretical positioning of Nunes's study, as well as a graphic re-articulation of alternatives to metaphors of incorporation that shed further light on the nexus of race, identity, and citizenship. Since "the book's organization derives from the need to 'rethink' as yet unresolved questions related to representing difference in democracy" (xvii), the futurity of history, which underlies Nunes's preoccupations, should have been concretized more clearly in the book's structure.

The psychoanalytical framework of Nunes's study is perhaps the least satisfying aspect of the book. Nunes builds her argument primarily on Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's work, *The Shell and the Kernel* (1987), which elaborates Freud's theory of ego formation in *Totem and Taboo* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Psychoanalysis* by proposing the notion of *introjection* and *incorporation* respectively as "good" (healthy) and "bad" (pathological) responses to the loss of the object. Nonetheless, the engagement with Freud's theory of the ego is vague and at times problematic. It is not clear whether Nunes reads the interrelationship between race and nation through, on the one hand, a psychoanalytical model of ego formation, thereby treating racial identity and the national body, as it is articulated in the writers under examination, as the projection of the body of the individual; or, on the other, through

the rhetoric of cannibalism which permeates both Freud's theories and the Brazilian modernists—that is, as a discourse. These two aspects are not necessarily in contradiction, but the study is vague as to its objective in relation to psychoanalysis. Treating it both as methodology and discourse leaves hazy zones of interpretation in an otherwise engaging and lucid analysis. Furthermore, while notions of incorporation and introjection are clearly central to the argument of her study, the sections delving into psychoanalytical models are disappointingly short, self-contained, and restricted to Abraham and Torok's elaboration of Freud. While a full engagement with psychoanalysis is clearly not the objective of the study, the invocation of psychoanalytic concepts to read metaphors of cannibalism would have benefited from a more nuanced treatment of these notions (e.g., Freud's use of terms of incorporation and introjection is clarified by Jacques Lacan in *Seminar I*, while both Sándor Ferenzci and Melanie Klein make significant contributions to his theory).

Nunes's study makes an invaluable contribution to critical race studies of literature and culture. Despite the few shortcomings, the book genuinely engages with questions of race, national identity, and representation through a welcome methodological shift. It will hopefully contribute to a reshaping of literary studies outside the comfort zones of critics and institutionalized disciplines toward the transnational and interdisciplinary models of inquiry invoked by many but practiced by few. As a concluding remark, this reviewer would like to commend once more the in-depth archival research of the author that speaks to the theoretical elaboration of her study in illuminating ways.

Works Cited

Lacan, Jacques. The *Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique*: 1953-1954. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.

Abraham, Nicholas and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel*. Trans. and ed. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Psychoanalysis* (1905). Trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic, 1964.

—. *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton, 1950.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing* (1929). New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

Redmon Fauset, Jessie. *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*. Boston: Beacon, 1990.

Freyre, Gilberto. *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933). Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1987. Trans. Samuel Putnam, *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933). Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.