

The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast

Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr.

Trans. Jerry Dennis Metz, Fwd. James N. Green

296 pages, 2014, \$94.95 USD (hardcover), \$25.95 USD
(paperback)

Duke University Press

Reviewed by Alessandra Santos, University of British Columbia

The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast was first published in Brazil in 1999 to critical acclaim. It is now in its fourth edition in Brazil, an impressive accomplishment for an academic study. The book is considered, in the words of Christopher Dunn, “a modern classic of Brazilian cultural history.” Jerry Dennis Metz’s excellent translation provides the opportunity for non-Portuguese readers to embark on a worthwhile intellectual journey with Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. A well-regarded Brazilian historian—who has published extensively on the popular and artistic imaginaries, intellectual discourses, as well as on masculinities and queer studies—Albuquerque in this book offers an innovative historical examination in compelling prose that engages the reader from the very beginning of the book. In his Foreword to the English edition, James N. Green calls the book a masterpiece and “a great historical work” that elaborates on a “simple yet profoundly complex thesis” (ix). The praises this book has received are due to its merit in elucidating the complex networks behind the construction of “common knowledge” and the circulation of ideas. The Brazilian Northeast has been considered the country’s poorest region due to its arid climate, multiple droughts, and an unfortunate history of social disparity. This seminal book superbly demonstrates how the region was recently invented through a series of historical and discursive strategies. Not only does the study offer a meticulous analysis of the creation of an entire socio-geographic region, but it offers a productive examination of the very notion of region and regionalism in history. In that sense, the scope and impact of this work is remarkable.

From the aforementioned foreword by Green we learn that the United States’ interests were at stake in a post-Cuban revolution Latin America, and contributed to the invention of the Brazilian Northeast in the second half of the twentieth century. Albuquerque’s time frame is from the 1920s to the 1960s, but the larger global historical context indicates that the implications of such a regional creation resonate with a world divided between capitalism and communism. In that sense, this study reflects major post-colonial concerns that articulate a history of the two world wars, the origins of the Cold War and its brutal consequence in the CIA supported military dictatorship in Brazil that started in 1964 and lasted until 1985. It is in this scenario that we learn how the Northeast was invented through methodical and fascinating analyses of a variety of sources—cultural criticism, literary works,

visual arts, cinema, theater, music, and media. Albuquerque's rigorous research is truly interdisciplinary, demonstrating his apt skills in multiple registers, and how history is constructed within diverse cultural spheres. The book's main objective is to dissect the invention of a specific region through the study of discursive practices and their power dynamics. In that sense, this is a superb application of Foucault's tactics to a Latin American context. While considering the Brazilian Northeast "an object of knowledge and space of power" (3), Albuquerque dialectically and fruitfully examines the simultaneous networks of power in Brazil and throughout the continent.

The book is organized into three clear and coherent chapters. One is compelled to say that this is a study focusing on the production of space—both discursive and geographical—demonstrating how these spaces are intrinsically inter-connected, and how regions "represent the strategic provisioning of space" (7). The chapters are carefully positioned, evoking an acute awareness of the location of culture. Chapter One, "Geography in Ruins," sets the historical scenario for the formation of a regionalism, and explains how the idea of the Northeast as a region came to be. The author discusses how the concept of the region emerged from the ruins of a nation divided into geographical segments that informed socio-political paradigms. The chapter also covers a broader discussion of regionalism within contexts of modernization. Case studies come from several literary works, evoking the legacy of Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*. Chapter Two, "Spaces of Nostalgia," examines a variety of cultural spaces in Brazil. It explores the impact of spatial referents on a community, directly addressing the origins of the term Northeast in Brazil in all its cultural and political implications. This section demonstrates the intricacies of discourse and public policy, and how the institutional designation of an area, corroborated by cultural production, concretely affects the region. The chapter covers literary writers, social scientists, painters, and musicians: novelists José Lins do Rego, José Américo de Almeida and Rachel de Queiroz, anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, painters Cícero Dias and Lula Cardoso Ayres, singer Luiz Gonzaga, and playwright Ariano Suassuna, among others. This section examines nostalgia and national visibility as further traits in the complexities of regional practices. Chapter Three, "Territories of Revolt," examines case-studies focusing on utopian revolutionary possibilities an invented region has to offer. The chapter examines leftist writers and poets such as Jorge Amado, Graciliano Ramos and João Cabral de Melo Neto, visual artists Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Cândido Portinari, and filmmaker Glauber Rocha, among others. This chapter situates the multiplicity and versatility of the regional invention, solidifying the book's main dialectical argument regarding the region as a dynamic cultural field.

The book has many strengths, including its rigorous methodology and approach, as well as originality of perspective; more important is its proposition to decode a region, and in doing so, challenge the very notion of a regional history. While dismantling regional (and with it national and global) hierarchies before our eyes, Albuquerque aptly

demonstrates how history is written and constructed through a series of procedures that belong to a much larger and complex system. Thus, the book is an invitation to rethink categories, constructions and interpretations that have concrete social impact. From the beginning of the book, the author indicates that the study will concern an affective geography, aligning the work with an intellectual history that takes into consideration intensities of emotions and the impact of the imaginary in history. This book is rigorously researched, well argued, and beautifully composed; it has much to offer to readers regardless of their field of study and research interests. This book is bound to have a long-lasting intellectual impact.