

REVOLUTION AND THE PEDAGOGY OF THE POSSESSED IN NEI LOPES'S NOVEL OIOBOMÉ

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Abstract: Nei Lopes (b. 1942, Irajá, Rio de Janeiro) is much more than a *sambista*². In fact, he is a multifaceted Afro-Diasporic thinker and novelist who has created texts that educate Brazilians about black history. The following article provides a bio-bibliography of Lopes and an analysis of how his novel *Oio bomé: A epopeia de uma nação* (2010) represents what I call a “Pedagogy of the Possessed,” an Afrocentrism with similarities to Paulo Freire classic book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). The novel proposes a “pedagogy of the possessed” to reimagine the course of Brazilian history, rooting it much less in European ideas and much more in *quilombos*, religious traditions that include possessions of the faithful and other Afro-diasporic forms of creativity and resistance. Palmares and the Haitian and Cuban Revolutions inspire Lopes. This novel is particularly important in Brazil, the country with the Americas’ largest black population (GATES, 2011).

A REVOLUÇÃO E A PEDAGOGIA DO POSSUÍDO NO ROMANCE OIOBOMÉ DE NEI LOPES

Resumo: Nei Lopes (b. 1942, Irajá, Rio de Janeiro) é muito mais do que um sambista. De fato, é um pensador afrocêntrico com muitos interesses, um romancista e um autor de textos que educam o povo brasileiro sobre a história negra. O presente ensaio proporciona um resumo bio-bibliográfico do autor e uma análise de como seu romance *Oio bomé: A epopeia de uma nação* (2010) representa o que pode considerar-se uma “pedagogia do possuído”, um afrocentrismo com semelhanças com o livro clássico de Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido* (1968). O romance propõe uma “pedagogia do possuído” para reimaginar o curso da história brasileira, baseando-a menos em ideias europeias e muito mais em quilombos, tradições religiosas que incluem a possessão dos crentes e outras formas de criatividade e resistência afro-diaspóricas. Lopes se inspira em Palmares e as Revoluções Haitiana Cubana. Esse romance é particularmente importante para o país com a maior população negra das Américas (GATES, 2011).

LA REVOLUCIÓN Y LA PEDAGOGÍA DEL POSEÍDO EN LA NOVELA OIOBOMÉ DE NEI LOPES

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Resumen: Nei Lopes (b. 1942, Irajá, Rio de Janeiro) es mucho más que un sambista. De hecho, es un pensador afrocéntrico con muchos intereses, un novelista y un autor de textos que educan al pueblo brasileño sobre la historia negra. El presente ensayo proporciona un resumen bio-bibliográfico del autor y un análisis de cómo su novela *Oiobomé: La epopeya de una nación* (2010) representa lo que puede considerarse una "pedagogía del poseído", un afrocéntrico con semejanzas con el libro clásico de Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía del oprimido* (1968). La novela propone una "pedagogía del poseído" para reimaginar el curso de la historia brasileña, basándola menos en ideas europeas y mucho más en quilombos, tradiciones religiosas que incluyen la posesión de los creyentes y otras formas de creatividad y resistencia afro-diaspóricas. Lopes se inspira en Palmares y las Revoluciones Haitiana Cubana. Esta novela es particularmente importante para el país con la mayor población negra de las Américas (GATES, 2011).

1. Nei Lopes: *Música e letras*

Culture has been central to reclaiming Afro-Brazilian agency and cultural memory, and Lopes has gained fame through music that is rooted in sub-Saharan cultures and the African diaspora. He began recording sambas in 1972 and began his solo career in with *Negro Mesmo* (1983) (FAUSTINO, 2009). His Afrocentrism is evident in some of his album titles from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s: *A Arte Negra de Wilson Moreira e Nei Lopes*, *Canto Banto*, and *Partido ao Cubo* (FAUSTINO, 2009). The latter is likely a play on "Partida a Cuba" or "Leaving for Cuba," since he is depicted in a guayavera and smoking a cigar on the cover and the title track includes the verses "O samba mandou chamar / a rumba / e casou com ela" (LOPES, 2004, n.p.). Hence, Lopes reunites the Brazilian national dance, samba, with its African roots, and he ties it to a diasporic consciousness, as is evidence in the verses

A festa foi na favela
E amanheceu no solar
Na mesa posta ao luar
Ají guaguanô no tempero
Som cubano e brasileiro

I quote these verses to present Lopes as a diasporic thinker, not just a Música Popular Brasileira performer. He has devoted his career, in part, to teaching his compatriots about the African origins of their popular culture, such as the televised performance *Sambeabá—O samba que não se aprende na escola*, which shares its title with his Afrocentric book of scholarship (FAUSTINO, 2009).

Lopes's diasporic consciousness has influenced not only his performances but also his extensive bibliography of reference works and literary fiction on the African presence in Brazil. His *O samba, na realidade* (1981) was followed by the historical/anthropological *Bantos, Malês e identidade negra* (1988) (FAUSTINO, 2009). The latter argues that the Bantu culture showed as much sophistication as the literate, Muslim Malês, but in different cultural manifestations (LOPES, 1988). He published the *Dicionário banto do Brasil* (1996), based on fieldwork in West Africa (FAUSTINO, 2009), to further education on black heritage, and he released *Dicionário escolar afro-brasileiro* (2006) to make Afro-Brazilian language and contributions to national culture accessible to students (FAUSTINO, 2009). His love of history, literature, and culture resulted in the *Enciclopédia da Diáspora Africana* (2004), which included biographies of black icons from around the world (FAUSTINO, 2009). His *O negro no Rio de Janeiro e sua tradição musical* (1992) continues the re-Africanization of national popular music (FAUSTINO, 2009). *Oiobomé* was his first novel, which was followed by *Rio negro, 50* (2015). The vignettes of his second novel tell the previous fifty years of the city's history from the point of view of black characters. His forays into prose began with *crônicas* starting with *Casos crioulos* (1987) (FAUSTINO 2009). He recently released *Contos e crônicas para ler na escola* (2015), indicating that, in his writing, he seeks not only to entertain but also to educate Brazilians on the African and popular roots of their national identity. Unfortunately, his literary prose is still understudied, giving the impression that today's black writers are more readily received as musicians than as intellectuals whose work breaks with the nation's hegemonic narrative of racial harmony, creating unique black identities³.

2. *Oiobomé*: Summary

Oiobomé, in spite of its 223 pages, tells the entire history of a hypothetical nation. The free carioca of color Francisco Domingo Vieira dos Santos founds this community on the island of Marajó. Its original inhabitants are black and Amerindian fugitives that he invites to live there. Dos Santos is the son of jejes and nagôs, grandson of the king of Abomey in the Dahomey Empire. The carioca is one of

³ Essays by Eduardo de Assis Duarte (2013; 2015), Conceição Evaristo (2010) and Sânderson Reginaldo de Mello (2010) are exceptions.

the conspirators with Tiradentes in 1789, only the hero wants to free the enslaved blacks. When Tiradentes is arrested, Dos Santos flees to Grand Pará. Dos Santos reaches an agreement with the local Amerindians to use the lands. The name of the new country combines the names of the original kingdoms of a large part of the enslaved Africans: Oyo (of the Yoruba) and Abomey (of the Dahomeyans). Its style of government syncretizes African dynasties with Western ideas of order and progress.

Oiobomé is a Zion for the African Diaspora in the Americas, but its history is tempestuous. The abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade adds more exiles to the population of the new nation in 1807. Refugees from the United States, the Bahamas, and Jamaica come as well.

In the twentieth century, Oiobomé develops into a modern nation-state. They codify the Oiobomenese language, a creole based on Portuguese but which is unintelligible to Brazilians. There are advances in women's rights and literacy. Unfortunately, Oiobomé falls into decadence until the day a hurricane destroys its capital.

The nation recovers and becomes a black utopia. After the death of its greatest leader, Apurinã, a constitutional monarchy is established under the reign of the lesbian queen Afra-Ramana I and her First Lady, Prime Minister Malvina Jackson dos Santos. Inspired by Fidel Castro, Jackson dos Santos dissolves parliament and assumes direct rule. There is universal literacy and medicine, and gay marriage is legal.

3. An Afro-Brazilian Utopia

Oiobomé interacts with other historical nations in generally plausible manners through the “end” of its history, the conclusion of its class and racial tensions and conflicts with world superpowers. The archipelago's history follows a grand narrative based on conflict between races, classes, and nations that is heavily influenced by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm von Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1830) and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1848). These three thinkers imagine history as the rise and fall of civilizations based on struggles that would eventually lead, through differing notions of progress, to their own resolution. It must be curious to some

readers that Lopes supports Castrista Communism in a novel published in 2010. That is to say, almost twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. One text that may help answer Lopes's continued bond with Marxist thought is Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), in which the philosopher attempts to argue against thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, who considered 1991 the "End of History," since Western liberal democracy had conquered the world in his opinion. Derrida salvages Marxism by claiming that the world has not yet resolved the central problems of class inequality Marx sought to resolve.

While Derrida deconstructs the West, Lopes seeks models outside of it to revitalize its philosophy. *Oiobomé* ends in the triumph and reunion of the African Diaspora in a just society where there is freedom from want, ignorance, and persecution. It reaches a utopian harmony under black majority rule, as reviewer Sânderson Reginaldo de Mello observes (2010). Communism is a *utopia*, Greek for "no place," an inexistent but desired society. Englishman Sir Thomas More's tale *Utopia* (1516) was inspired by a South American island, but *Oiobomé* makes Utopia its own in an Afrocentric renovation of Western models. In fact, the last crime committed in *Oiobomé* is the theft of More's masterpiece, as is recorded in the "constitution" (223). The crime is depicted as remarkable, since the present-day archipelago is marked by universal freedom from want so theft has not occurred since, roughly, the 1960s (based on a *Oiobomé*-Revolutionary Cuba alliance). The metaphorical "taking possession" of the Utopia, Brazil, occurs through writing literary fiction in an Afrocentric vein.

Non-fiction texts on race in Brazil like Stephan Zweig's *Brazil, Land of the Future* (1942) depict Brazil as a racial utopia, and they been used to mollify racial oppression. Brazil's unique racial and cultural mixture and world-renowned myth of "racial democracy" have created the lie of a land without discrimination rooted in a slavery that was not as violent or oppressive as that of the United States. "Racial democracy" has been the ideology informing the teaching of Brazilian history since Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933) and Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda's *As raízes do Brasil* (1936). While these works broke with the pre-World War II eugenicist tradition, they came to justify the status quo in an economically, socially, and racially stratified country (EAKIN, 1998). These authors continued to objectify Afro-Brazilians, casting them in servile roles even after slavery and not encouraging black agency. While

Freyre and Buarque's points of view are aligned with that of the oppressors, Lopes's is aligned with the oppressed: the formerly enslaved.

4. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed

I propose that *Oiobomé's* solidarity with the formerly enslaved performs a "pedagogy of the oppressed" along the lines of pedagogy philosopher, Paulo Freire (1921–1997), and his Marxist educational philosophy. This approach allows the reader to appreciate why Lopes would construct an Afro-indigenous utopia in Brazil. He is teaching Brazilians of all backgrounds, now including the racialized and poor, to imagine an alternative to the injustices of the past and present that they live daily. Freire's *Pedagogia do oprimido* presents teaching as:

a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade. (FREIRE, 1970, p. 17)

In order to accomplish similar goals, Lopes's pedagogy must draw its epistemology from not only hegemonic Western thought, imposed through oppression, but also from popular, African, indigenous, and *mestiço* sources.

5. A Pedagogy that Re-founds the Brazilian Nation

By teaching readers to align with the oppressed in the twenty-first century, Lopes is turning the elitist nineteenth-century formula of the "national novel" on its head. Benedict Anderson argues that, like kinship or religion, nationalism it is not "natural" but imagined, political, limited, and sovereign (1991). Not everyone in a nation knows one another, yet they believe in their fraternal bond. "Communities are to be distinguished," he claims, "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (ANDERSON, 1991, p. 6). These nations emerged in the nineteenth-century transition away from religions as the organizing bond for community. Anderson notes that the elite Creoles, those born in the Americas, created imagined communities

over which they would have sovereignty in the nineteenth century. They communicated this control over the land to the empowered classes through literacy, which excluded the majority of the population in Brazil and the rest of Latin America. For this reason, and the lack of a colonial university, Anderson considers Brazil to be a unique case of imagining an independent nation that continued the disenfranchisement of its illiterate masses (51). In fact, Andrew Kirkendall (2003, p. 85) considers the educated elite, or *bachareis*, to be the first example of national consciousness in Latin America: “The nations they imagined were as limited as the oligarchical political systems they designed [...]” Historian François-Xavier Guerra notes that the printing press was not widespread anywhere in Latin America, so disenfranchisement was the norm, but in different forms.

Against this historical backdrop, Lopes is creating a more democratic nineteenth-century Brazil for Dos Santos and the Oiobomenese national heroes to inhabit. They teach the oppressed masses that their culture is central to the Brazilian nation, and to themselves,. However, it is not duly appreciated nowadays. As an alternative nation, Oiobomé is imagined, sovereign, and empowering to Brazil’s oppressed. Lopes highlights the value of education in empowering the masses. Educational institutions become central to Oiobomé well before Brazil achieves even nominal democracy in 1889. Even as late as the 1870s, only fourteen percent of Brazil could read (KIRKENDALL, 2003). As in Freire’s context, “Obligatory education was seen as being linked to ‘communist and socialist movements’” (KIRKENDALL, 2003, p. 93), so Oiobomé’s literacy programs are part of creating universal enfranchisement, highlighting the fact that historical Brazil did not. This sets right the disenfranchisement of Afro-Brazilians both before and after abolition due to illiteracy (LOVEMAN, 2009). John Charles Chasteen (2003, p. xxi) notes that, unlike Anderson’s elitist focus, most Latin Americanists seek “contested meanings of nationalism,” and *Oiobomé* is no exception. It is a counter-narrative to the slave-based Brazil of Dom Pedro I and II and the nation’s systematic disenfranchisement of Afro-Descendants.

The national novel would be central to the imagining of the Brazilian nation in the twentieth century, as Doris Sommer has shown. National novels, like José de Alencar’s Romanticism works *O guarani* (1857) and *Iracema* (1865), explained and justified the political structure of Brazil through love stories. A national novel is:

the book frequently required in the nation's secondary schools as a source of local history and literary pride, not immediately required perhaps but certainly by the time the Boom novelists were in school [1930s to 1950s]. Sometimes anthologized in school readers and dramatized in plays, films, television serials, national novels are often as plainly identifiable as national anthems. As for the foundational bonds between literature and legislation [...] they were no secret in Latin America. (SOMMER, 1991, p. 4)

Sommer traces the influence of the myth of “racial democracy” from Alencar’s love stories of creoles and conquistadors to the *antropofagistas* of the 1920s and 1930s. The latter sought to define a uniquely Brazilian culture in the context of cosmopolitan avant-garde movements and looked to exotic depictions of the indigenous and African for inspiration (SCHWARTZ, 1998). Sommer shows that Alencar convinced Brazilian readers that they were descendants of Tupis and conquistadors in love and tied to the land. They were not oppressors and oppressed in conflict, while in Lopes both indigenous and African fight off colonialism. Lopes’s novel is similar to nineteenth century national romances in that “interpretations of the past articulated explanations of the present and set models for future societies” (SOMMER, 1991, 135). Like these novels, *Oiobomé* inspires a desire for an ideal new world and the creation of ideal selves for all readers, but for Afro-Brazilians in particular, like national romances once did for non-blacks in Brazil.

Lopes’s focus on racialized oppression is part of a greater resistance among critics to foundational fictions of racial harmony that associates whiteness with knowledge and power. One author, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908), whose novels like *Esau e Jacó* (1904), for example, both imagined and satirized the Brazilian national community, was mulatto. This fact was all but forgotten by critics until Eduardo de Assis Duarte’s *Machado de Assis afro-descendente* (2007). Likewise, Horácio de Almeida rediscovered the novel *Úrsula: Romance original brasileiro* (1860) at a Rio de Janeiro used book store (DUKE, 2008, p. 61). The author, Maria Firmina dos Reis (1822-1917), an Afro-descendant, argues for a Brazil without slavery, a dream that would only come true in 1888, at least in legal terms. Like the “rediscovery” of black Machado and Reis’s novel, Lopes is teaching readers that black people are sources of knowledge, power, and national identity. Hence, like Freire, he is showing that knowledge can come from the “bottom up” in an oppressive system.

6. Quilombismo and Historical Revisionism

Instead of limiting himself to narratives of powerful people liberating and/or ruling the masses, Lopes must turn to history to find models for a black-ruled society in order to show Afro-Brazilians they can also govern and teach. For *Oiobomé*, Lopes chooses the quintessential symbol of bottom-up resistance to colonialism and slavery, the *quilombo*, as the origin of the nation. In *O Quilombo dos Palmares* (1947), folklorist Edison Carneiro brought an enormous gathering of black rebels to greater national attention. Palmares is the root of another pedagogy, Abdias do Nascimento's (1914–2011) *quilombismo*.

Freire aligned teaching with empowering the masses, and Nascimento did so with a specific focus on Afro-Brazilians. He formed the United Black Movement in 1978 (AFOLABI 2010). Partly due to his cultural activism and leadership as a senator, Brazil came to require the teaching of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in all schools with Law 10.639/2003, and Law 11.645/2008 included Amerindian history. Some educators have made materials for these courses since 2003, but their implementation has been inconsistent according to Douglas Verrangia (*Diversidade*, 2009).

Nascimento's pedagogy is central to Lopes's alternative imagined community. The former went so far as to call his political philosophy *quilombismo*. His foundational hero was Zumbi dos Palmares. Nascimento's hero is Zumbi dos Palmares, military commander of Ganga Zamba, king of Palmares (ANDERSON, 1996). Like Dos Santos, Zumbi was said to be descended from African royalty. But Nascimento's vision of *quilombismo* goes much deeper than memorializing slave rebels. Nascimento sees Zumbi's image as the symbol of the culmination of a Black Awareness Week that all schools should celebrate. The seven days were to teach one black history topic per day: 1. Pre-slavery African history, 2. The Portuguese invasion of Africa, 3. The Middle Passage, 4. The slave markets of Brazil, 5. Slave life on the plantation and in the city, 6. Black resistance from *quilombos* to today, and 7. Homage to Zumbi and celebration of all of Afro-Brazil on 20 November (NASCIMENTO, 1979, p. 280). These ideals would result in Black Awareness Day on 20 November in 2003, which commemorate's Zumbi's death.

This plan was Nascimento's means of teaching a more accessible version of his

revolutionary thought. He dreamed of establishing a new Palmares where there would be no private property, African religions would be equal to all others, work would be based on civic duty, leadership would be black but all would be welcome, and half the jobs would be reserved for women.

The influence of not only black nationalism but also Marxism and feminism is clear in Nascimento's thought. Lopes follows his Marxism and pedagogy, since in Oiobomé there is no illiteracy, television only shows edifying programs, and only educational internet and videogames are allowed. While Oiobomé embraces the market to sell the jewels discovered in its earth, its government uses those benefits to create socialist healthcare and education programs like Nascimento's dream of a modern *quilombo* free of classism and racism.

Lopes creates his own fictional *quilombo*, both based in history and a metaphor for black resistance, which is born in the Age of Revolutions and tied to the Inconfidência Mineira. The conspiracy has primarily been taught as a precursor to national independence and the triumph of the First Republic, which ended Brazil's monarchy (1822–1889). In fact, the ideals of the republic revised history to justify its regime, claiming that the Inconfidência led to King Dom Pedro I declaring independence, and that this led to the coup that ended Dom Pedro II's rule, a huge leap (CORDEIRO, 2000). Tiradentes (Joaquim José da Silva Xavier, 1746–1792), the heralded leader of the conspiracy, was, by today's standards, moderate and elitist, so his myth reaffirmed the oligarchy institutionalized by the Republic. While Tiradentes was taught in schools as the white savior who was quartered for his dedication to Brazil (VILLALTA, 2014), it seems Lopes is recovering the bodies that suffered most—blacks and Native Brazilians—, so that the creole elite Tiradentes personifies could remain in power. Historian Luís Carlos Villalta notes that Tiradentes never planned to abolish slavery, even in an independent Brazil. In the novel, the free man of color Dos Santos negotiates with him on this point. But, as in history, the Inconfidência is foiled by the colonial authorities, and the white Creole betrays and abandons his accomplices. Lopes's cowardly Tiradentes embodies the betrayed ideals of an enlightened monarchy followed by a series of republics that were democratic in name only. Dos Santos is the hero Tiradentes should have been, since he came from the oppressed and governed using their principles and worldview.

Dos Santos's subject position as a free person of color in a racist society poses disadvantages for him, but his diplomacy in advocating with and for the oppressed leads to a democratically founded nation. Once the Inconfidência is discovered, he fears capital punishment for sedition and flees to Belém do Pará in the Amazon. There, he meets a Frenchman named Bastide who sees in his revolution the “liberté, égalité, fraternité” of the French Revolution (LOPES, 2010, p. 44). The Frenchman's name is an homage to Roger Bastide (1898–1974), the French anthropologist who listened to the oppressed and became a leading expert on the religious and cultural traditions of Afro-Brazilians. While named for a twentieth century thinker, Bastide embodies the eighteenth century enlightenment. Bastide and Dos Santos, though white and black, share ideals of democracy and an understanding of *quilombos* as putting similar ideals into practice. Dos Santos forms alliances with the *quilombolas* of the Amazon and negotiates the rights to Marajó, an archipelago on the Amazon ruled but unoccupied by the indigenous Kaxuyana people that today consists of only eight families (Instituto Socioambiental, “Kaxuyana”). To win their respect during negotiations, Dos Santos draws on the Yoruba spirit of lightning and fire, Xangô or Hevioçô (49). Using alcohol, he blows fire from his mouth in the name of the deity. The indigenous people marvel at the flame, but their interpretation is through their own cosmology: they see him as embodying the *japu* bird, who controls fire in their tradition. Thus, through a combination of enlightenment and non-western ideas and tactics, a *mestiço* nation is born for the descendants of enslaved Africans that replaces the harmonious but still stratified cultural and political miscegenation of Alencar, Freyre, and Buarque de Hollanda. It becomes a safe haven for *quilombolas* from throughout the Americas, including 3,000 under the leadership of the historical Cosme Bento of Maranhão (1800-1842). It is founded and governed by the oppressed, like the *quilombos* that inspired Nascimento.

Quilombismo is very close to the telos driving the history of Oioiomé. The novel closes as Dominga, the ideal capital city (a foil for Brasília), is christened by an enlightened lesbian couple. One is a black beauty queen who becomes African-style monarch and her partner is the prime minister Malvina Jackson dos Santos. Like Nascimento's just division of employment between women and men, Lopes attempts to write women of color into the nation as something more than the sex objects they were

in *Casa-grande e senzala*. Duarte sees their reign as transcending the death of the family patriarch (2013), and the dos Santos family is analogous to the nation they found as in national romances (UNZUETA, 2003). In the novel, girls aspire to become one of the African-inspired warriors that fight off Brazilian invaders. This battalion was inspired by Dahomeyans fiercer than the Dahomeyans but who protect the homeland. They have an active, strong role in asserting the sovereignty of the nation and preserving African traditions. Lopes's Afro-Amazonians are not the nineteenth century *ángeles del hogar*, bourgeois white women whose primary role in the nation was to stay at home and care for children (UNZUETA, 2003, p. 154). But they are still sexualized to the point that some invaders actually want to die in their arms crying "Mata, mãezinha!" (LOPES, 2010, p. 128). The Oyobomenese Amazonians feminize and embody *antropofagia*, claiming it for Afro-Brazil.⁴ Whereas cultural *antropófagos* like Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) depicted Brazil as a nation that "cannibalizes" other traditions, assimilating them, the Amazonians show women as "cannibals" who can control who is and is not allowed into the nation.⁴ The Amazonians have a parallel in the small nation's Women's Rights movement (138) and the Associação das Filhas de Daomé (Association of the Daughters of Dahomey) (180), who turn knowledge into domestic political action and advocate for education.

7. Vitalismo: Knowledge from Below

Women are important to the uniquely Oyobomeyanese religion, Vitalismo, as in the cases of the spiritual and cultural experts Agontimé and Eufrásio Teodora, who embody a Freirian ideal of knowledge from below. Vitalismo shares an intimate role in culture and government, which is based primarily on African monarchy, something it shares with Palmares. It is animist and has an official worldview based on fluid notions of time, space, and death. It is a syncretic faith akin to Umbanda, Candomblé, Santería, or Vodoun, so the stigma of these faiths in historical Brazil is lifted. These religions are a supplement to Western forms of liberation. One must not forget that the rejection of theocracy and enlightenment declarations of universal citizenship often overlooked or even justified Europe's enslavement of millions.

Lopes claims Vitalismo is a complex understanding of time and nature. Vitalismo, not enlightenment motives, is the reason Oibomé breaks relations with the

⁴ Duarte sees the subtitle as an allusion to *Macunaíma* (2015, p. 8).

Catholic Church, pointing out the continued influence of colonial Christianity in Brazil, the world's largest Catholic nation. Vitalismo rejects Christian claims of humility in favor of a “caráter empreendedor e guerreiro” like the Orixá Xangô (LOPES, 2010, p. 92). This is appropriate, since Xangô's axe is on the nation's flag and he occupies a role similar to a patron saint or *alafim*. The *Grande livro do saber e do espírito*, Oiobomé's bible, is a compendium of wisdom of the elders. It states that time is not linear and material but simultaneous and mythical: “O ser humano tem que entender que o passado, o presente e o futuro existem ao mesmo tempo” (LOPES, 2010, p. 93). One can see *Oiobomé* as Brazilian history turning back to its origins to correct its course of slavery and racism.

The novel's focus on the past, not the future, is also rooted in reverence for the Elders, those who hold traditional wisdom, as in many African cultures. They believe God exists, but He is inaccessible to humans. In his stead are “divindades secundárias [...] intermediárias” and wise “ancestrais” (LOPES, 2010, p. 93). They are the “heróis civilizadores” of the novel (LOPES, 2010, p. 93). In this syncretic nation, these earthly and spiritual heroes have a similar function to the Great Men and Great Thinkers of the nineteenth century nationalist tradition. However, this wisdom is frequently transmitted through trances during ceremonies involving sacrifice, music, dancing, and reverence. For this reason, I call Lopes's pedagogy the “pedagogy of the possessed,” not only because it lays claim to Brazilian territory, but because it lays claim to Brazilian *terreiros*, presenting these temples as centers of culture and learning, not a marginal space for taboo practices.

In Oiobomé, the first centers of learning are the *terreiros*, and the islanders later add to them a school in each community to empower citizens through literacy in the nineteenth century. Among the works taught is the foundational text *A alma oiobomense*, a nationalist alternative to the dominant Eurocentrism. It posits an “espírito civilizatório afro-indígena, enraizado em nossa terra e em nossos corações negros e índios, que queremos y devemos mostrar ao mundo. Não para o impor, mas para que o mundo o compreenda e o aceite em seu direito de se manifestar” (129–30). Despite its own form of ethnocentrism, it makes the nation visible on an international scale and it is adapted to empower Oiobomé's citizens through *centros de pesquisa da cultura oiobomense* (130). These parallel the núcelos of the Centro Popular de Cultura (1962–

1964), which produced Freirian-Marxist cultural production that depicted workers' struggle and supported progressive politics (DUNN, 2001).

Oiobomé's institutions standardize the creole Oyobomenese language (130). Though it is based on Portuguese, it bears the mark of numerous other languages from throughout the Americas. There are also borrowings from Yoruba, Kikongo, and other African languages, as well Tupi. Only a few sentences appear in the language in the whole novel, terms for death (*jirapé*) and God (*Zambidiê*) (LOPES 2010, p. 134). The language reates national cohesion and inverts the colonial attitude that European languages convey intelligence and power. The Portuguese word *boçal*, today a synonym for "idiot," once referred to enslaved Africans who could not speak Portuguese or were not Catholic (PESSOA, 2003). *Boçais* were often called *negros de nação*, which is to say ethnic Africans (CHASTEEN, 2003, xi). Thus, Lopes reclaims non-Western language and ideas as fonts of knowledge to subvert cultural imperialism.

Lopes's kingdom goes far beyond an Enlightenment republic: it makes it a nation rooted in African as well as European cultures. In Oyobomenese, African terms are a point of pride, and their combination with Antillean English and French, the languages of maroon exiles, continues to celebrate Brazilian-like creolization and miscegenation while challenging Eurocentrism. It also sheds light on the many linguistic traditions that make up the unique variants of Brazilian Portuguese, revealing Brazil itself to be an imagined community with African roots.

8. Lessons from Haiti

In language, religion, and politics, *Oiobomé* goes back in time to reimagine the nation as a runaway slave community. However, it is not the first country to do so. Lopes's version of Brazilian history mimics the Haitian Revolution, or how the Revolution should have been, had it resulted in economic prosperity. This has not been the case for the Americas' poorest country. Nonetheless, allusions to its heroic origins permeate the text. The first reference to Saint-Domingue is the heroic tale of the Brazilian *quilombo* leader Solonga, apparently Lopes's creation. In addition to vexing plantation, Church, and slave owners, he plots to return captives to Africa. Once apprehended, he is charged with bigamy, blasphemy, and witchcraft, and they publicly

burn him at the stake. Solonga's tale is much like that of Mackandal (d.1758), the maroon leader and Vodoun master whose subversion was punished in the same spectacular manner (JANIK, 2010, p. 486). But the cry "Mackandal sauvé" reportedly broke out among the slaves who did not learn to obey by watching their hero burn (JANIK, 2010, p. 485). Some reportedly saw him fly away just like Solonga. The rebel's escape is told with reverence for the African magical thinking and deities and parallels Mackandal:

sabe-se lá por que artes de que deuses africanos, talvez Aganju, talvez Xangô, talvez Zaze, talvez Hevioçô—ou quem sabe Elegbá—, o negro Solonga, corpo em chamas, desprende-se do poste e transforma-se ele mesmo numa tocha humana, num arête em chamas (ou um pássaro de fogo, atravessando o mar em busca de Ruanda?)” (LOPES, 2010, p. 23).

Witnessing Solonga's execution teaches Dos Santos, who is a child at the time, the opposite of the intended lesson. Instead of fearing the colonial powers, he is inspired to rise up against them, becoming himself an initiate in a syncretic brotherhood and eventually founding Oiobomé with the help of African saints. The "bird of fire" image would reappear when Dos Santos joins the indigenous to found Oiobomé, indicating that the child learns to join the oppressed and fight colonialism when he is a man.

Oiobomé's bond with Haiti also illuminates Brazil's virtually untaught history of entanglement with French Guiana through the historical maroon leader Pompée (GOMES, 2011). He led a slave revolt in 1802, which coincided with the Revolution of Saint-Domingue. Napoleon then reinstated slavery in Guyana in 1802. In the novel, when Dos Santos declares independence from Brazil, the maroon gives him an elegant French military uniform. This would surely make Dos Santos look very similar to Toussaint Louverture (1743–1803), the great Haitian liberator. Like the latter, Pompée is not only a leader of maroons but also an embodiment of the French Rights of Man and Citizen, and it is the philosophe-inspired banker Bastide who introduces Dos Santos to him. It was through Toussaint's war on Napoleon that Portugal used Brazil to invade French Guyana. While Haiti weakened and distracted Napoleon's armies, Britain convinced Portugal to take Cayenne from the French. The inchoate Oiobomé, near Cayenne, is attacked and burned to teach a "lesson" to the enslaved, but like Solonga's execution, it inspires the Oyobomenese and the reader to rebel against colonialism.

9. Lessons from Cuba

Lopes ends the struggle to found and maintain sovereignty over Oioibomé with an alliance with Communist Cuba. When Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, his government radically changed how the history of the Cuban nation was written. In his 1961 speech “Palabras a los intelectuales,” he celebrates that, now that Cuba has truly declared independence, even an elderly former slave can tell her story (SKLODOWSKA, 1992, p. 10). Miguel Barnet interviewed a 104-year-old maroon and veteran of the *mambises*, Esteban Montejo, for what would become the *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966). The indomitable rebel’s winding story creates a history for the majority-Afrodescendant nation that places those Afrodescendants at the center, just like *Oioibomé*. *Cimarrón* can be seen as a new “national novel” along the lines of *Oioibomé*, even though it is not a sentimental work.

Lopes seems so taken with *Cimarrón* that it plays a key role in the characters stopping a war in his alternative Brazil. Soon after the Cuban Revolution declares itself to be Communist, Oioibomé’s prime minister Malvina Jackson is faced with the choice of allying her nation with Cuba or with the United States. An African newspaper claims blacks are not leaders in the Cuban military, but Montejo comes to mind alongside Afro-Cuban Juan Almeida. She recalls Castro’s declarations of a struggle against racism on the island. Alejandro de la Fuente has shown Castro’s use of Afro-Cuban identity to be strategic and not always of great benefit to the black population. It is clear that Lopes respects Castro’s sovereignty over Cuban territory and does not decry the Revolution’s problems.

Oioibomé takes a course that is influenced by Cuba that is Afro-diasporic. The United States threatens to invade it for its political alliances. Instead of declaring solidarity with Castro, she sends a telegram to Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Huey Newton declaring “contem com Oioibomé para o que der e vier,” which results in a near-miss with the US Navy when the message is leaked (LOPES, 2010, p. 208). Simultaneously, a Haitian-Cuban *santero* arrives from Santiago named Barbarito Vaillant. The *santero* calms Prime Minister Jackson with a ceremony while cowardly Oioibomenese dissidents flee for Miami like the Cuban elite. For the tiny islands, the

naval threat is like the Cuban missile crisis, but the denouement is different. Due to the priest's magic, the US threat turns out to literally be a nightmare from which Jackson awakes. Like Oioibomé's Swiss-like neutrality in the World Wars, Jackson also seems flippant toward the Cold War, acting like her predecessors who joked "eles que são brancos, que se entendam" (LOPES, 2010, p. 160). This political positioning is an interesting counter-narrative to Brazil's official history, of which the nation celebrates being an important Ally in World War II and joined the United States in World War I. On the other hand, like Haiti and Cuba, Oioibomé's origins and success lie in exporting revolution, but an Afro-Diasporic revolution. In the nineteenth century, they support uprisings among the Cuban conspirators of the Year of the Lash in Cuba (1844), maroons of Trinidad and Jamaica, and the Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia. They provide refuge to the Afro-indigenous Garífunas of Saint Vincent and Guatemala. While Cuba could not successfully export its revolution any more than Haiti could, Oioibomé takes both of them as a source of inspiration for a reimagining of Brazil as part of a pan-African culture.

10. The Pedagogy of the Possessed

Lopes's novel teaches the reader that knowledge and national identity should come from below. In this way, it exemplifies Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. It reclaims the lessons of Palmares, Haiti, and Cuba for Afro-Brazilians, showing that they can hold sovereignty or possession over their land, be that as Brazilians or *quilombolas*. It teaches them that their struggle is allied with the indigenous and blacks throughout the New World. It shows them that education that focuses on Afro-Brazilian history can point a way forward to a just, even utopian, society. But that education should not only be Western but include the African faiths that make up Vitalismo. It teaches them that Brazil has much to learn if it is to be the land of the future.

My one criticism of Lopes's novel is that it is just that—a novel. This genre may encourage literacy, which continues to be lacking in Brazilian's marginal areas. It provides Afro-Brazilian role models for today's youth. But perhaps one day soon the novel will also be adapted for film, television, and YouTube or other popular form of media. In this way, the novel would return to the popularizing and educational function

it had in the nineteenth century as one of the first examples of mass culture. Like the novels of old, these new texts would inspire viewers and readers alike to take action and create their own Oioibomé in Brazil.

In conclusion, Nei Lopes is a sophisticated Afro-Brazilian thinker who manages more discourses than samba. His novelistic work compels us to re-examine his other works. His large oeuvre demands further examinations along the lines presented here, because it is an attempt to reimagine Brazil as a *quilombo* where politics, society, and culture better serve the needs of the country with the largest population of Afrodescendants in the Americas.

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