

Swaying Between Continents:

The Role of Winds and Waves in the Formation of Brazilian Identity

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With a relatively short national history in 1865, the date in which *Iracema* was first published, José de Alencar sought to manipulate Brazil's written historical record in order to give the nation further distinction from its partially-severed European roots. To do so, he resorted to the first known inhabitants of the land, the Amerindian tribes, to recount the myth of the birth of the nation, while also creating a national hero that Brazilian citizens could look to instead of their European predecessors. The process by which Brazil went from a colony of Portugal to a nation of its own involved many human, ideological, and geographic actors; not the least of which were the waves of the ocean and the winds that brought explorers across the watery expanse.

One of the explorers these winds and waves carried, the European protagonist of the novel, Martim, is found many times throughout the narrative lying in a hammock. While this minor occurrence may seem irrelevant to the plot and the inherent symbolism of the novel, further examination reveals a deeper meaning. His act of swaying back and forth while he tries to find rest is representative of his trying to be at rest while oscillating between his fascination with the New World, and his longing for his Portuguese homeland. The space over which he metaphorically swings between these two physical locations, the Atlantic Ocean, served both as a link and a divide between Europe and the South American continent during the period in which the novel takes place. Alencar's endeavor to write *Iracema* was an attempt to emphasize its role as the latter—that of a division—in order to fulfill his nationalistic agenda. Thus, the winds that steered Portuguese ships towards Brazil and swayed Martim's hammock, as well as the ocean over which he swings, represent major elements in the creation of the Brazilian nation and the development of a uniquely Brazilian identity.

Alencar provides few details about Martim's life before he set foot in the New World. He is described physically as having a white complexion with eyes containing the "melancholy blue of deep waters" (4). Alencar further elaborates that Martim left behind a "blond maiden" (48), is "Christian" and a "warrior" (10) and that because of his mastery of sailing, the Amerindians refer to him as "the warrior of the sea" (45). All of these characteristics create in Martim a perfect profile for Portuguese males during the period in which the novel is set. It is not by chance, then, that he, or any of his contemporaries, would be the European protagonist of Alencar's work. These men were driven by hopes of adventure, exploration, and the attainment of a high social status, as at that time—at least within Portugal—the attainment of such depended either on your bloodline, or your bringing glory to the crown through the conquering of goods or lands. They were also motivated beyond their quest to attain a favorable societal position, as many believed they were fulfilling a divine mandate by imposing their Christian religion on the peoples they came across during their expeditions: "For the nobles and for the church, to serve the king or to serve God by bringing Christianity to the heathen entailed rewards and jobs that were more and more difficult to obtain within Portugal's narrow framework" (Fausto 3). This "narrow framework" refers to the relatively small size of Portugal as a nation, as well as the fact that it is bounded on its western and southern borders by the Atlantic Ocean.

It is the fact that at least half of Portugal's borders are shared with this oceanic mass that brings the body of water into the development of a Brazilian identity. Famed Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, describes how the geographical layout of the country, as well as that of the rest of the European continent, is important as we begin to understand not only the justification of Portugal's involvement in maritime explorations, but also the reasons why explorers such as Martim made their way to Brazil in the first place. The opening verse to his epic poem *Message*, "First/The Castles" describes Portugal's intrinsic disposition to sea travel and expansion:

Europe is lying propped upon her elbows:
 From East to West she lies, staring
 Out, reminiscent, - Greek eyes from the shelter
 Of romantic hair.
 Behind her back the left elbow is cast;
 The right has the angle place.
 That one says Italy in its repose;
 This one says England where, gathered apart,
 It holds the hand up to support the face.
 She stares, her gaze doom-heavy, sphingical,
 Out at the West, the future of the past.
 The face with which she stares is Portugal. (1-12)

In essence, Pessoa states that the geographic orientation of the continent, with Portugal as its face gazing over the oceanic horizon, destined the nation to become a leader in overseas expansion; the country became known as "terra de mar" (Trigueiros 91). After continual border battles with its northerly and easterly neighbor, what eventually became Spain, seaward was the only way forward, and although not part of any original itinerary, Brazil—at no fault of its own—was vulnerable to Portuguese intervention as it unwittingly laid in the country's progressive path.

The first Portuguese explorers of Martim's distinction sought the quickest route around Africa in order to tap into the riches of India's spice trade. During one such attempt in 1500, Pedro Álvares Cabral and his fleet were diverted from their circumnavigation of Africa by strong winds and eventually landed on the northeasterly shores of modern Brazil. Their stay was transitory since they did not notice any immediate riches they could return to the crown that sent them. Later, the same ocean—although only mythically—brought Martim and his fellow warriors to a location relatively close to where Cabral had landed, in the modern state of Ceará; however, this time the trip was intentional. When both Cabral and Martim arrived, they encountered nothing more than a territory full of indigenous tribes; no other European nation had yet conquered the territory in the name of a European crown. It was not until 1532, more than three decades after Cabral's original landing, that Portugal took interest in purposefully developing Brazil as one of its overseas colonies, starting with a system of captaincies; the first of which was headed by Martim Afonso de Sousa in São Vicente. It must be noted, however, that at this time, there was no intent to make the Brazilian territory into a nation, for the idea of nationalism developed two centuries later.

To understand the development of nationalism, it must be understood why it came to be and which factors play into its definition. Kaplan and Herb define the notion as "an intrinsically geographical doctrine in that it seeks to conjoin a self-identified group of people—a 'nation'—within a sovereign, bounded geographical area—a 'state'" (349). When *Iracema* was written, Brazil found itself in the transition from a Portuguese colony to a monarchy ruled over by a formerly

Portuguese king. Brazil's identity was still similar to, yet different from, its European predecessor, yet the proclamation of the territory as a republic was on the verge of hatching. To make the territory solely theirs, the Brazilian elite sought to make their territory a "bounded geographical area" by reversing the role of the ocean as a means by which the Portuguese arrived, to a gulf that kept the two separate. As one of the key players in cementing this rhetoric within the Brazilian mindset, José de Alencar used *Iracema* to link "the young nation-state to a legendary past extending long before its historical establishment" (Pitt 131) in order to exalt the Amerindian tribes, the "original Brazilian," and downplay the involvement of the Portuguese in the development of the territory.

During the Romantic period, Brazilian authors were drawn to the aesthetic of Indianism to differentiate Brazilian literature from European tendencies: "Linking Rousseau's doctrine of the 'noble savage' to Lusophobic tendencies, Brazilian nativism found in the Indian and his civilization a symbol of spiritual, political, social, and literary independence" (Coutinho 143). Bradford Burns goes so far to say "that by the nineteenth century, the Indian was a pathetic remnant of his former self. Yet, although the Indian as an individual was scorned, as a symbol he was cherished. He came to represent the original Brazil before the coming of the detested Portuguese" (44). Interestingly, Kaplan and Herb note that "national identity cannot really be conceived without the presence of a nationalist territorial ideology, national identities must always contend with their geographic manifestations" (349). This is because, as they describe: "Spaces are bounded, they have texture, and they are imbued with meanings that represent different elements of the national identity" (349). As was the case with the Portuguese need to expand overseas to maintain their identity as kings of the sea, the development of the eventual Brazilian identity was dependent on Alencar's and other author's interpretations of the meanings the territory presented. They were adamant in maintaining the Portuguese in Portugal and the Brazilians in Brazil.

The Hammock, the Ocean, and Identity

Martim made the journey across the oceanic abyss and found great pleasure in the landscape and indigenous peoples he encountered, even after being shot at with an arrow by his eventual indigenous heartthrob. After their initial encounter, Iracema brought him into her tribal village where he encountered initial cultural repugnance, but grew to become one with Iracema and her people. After becoming trusted enough to remain among her family, Iracema gifted Martim with her personal hammock: "O warrior who takes with him the sleep of my eyes, take my hammock too. When you sleep in it, may dreams of Iracema speak in your soul" (26). Naturally, Martim responds gracefully and accepts the gift: "Your hammock, maiden of the Tabajaras, shall be my companion in the wilderness. Though come the cold wind of night, it will hold for the foreigner the warmth and perfume of Iracema's bosom" (26).

With his acceptance of Iracema's hammock, the wind and the ocean that had brought Martim to the territory once again came into play in shaping the formation of Brazil's national identity—this time, however, through Martim's constant oscillation between Europe and Brazil. Martim did not originally intend to stay indefinitely among the Amerindian peoples, let alone become one of them: he just wanted the glory the expedition offered him. However, once he received the hammock, he would be psychologically tortured until he chose for himself that he would to stay. Like Cabral, the wind swept Martim off his charted course as it rocked his hammock and metaphorically swayed his dreamful thoughts between his homeland and his new land, but unlike Cabral, Martim ultimately did not decide to move back on course, but to remain; a revelation of his conflicting inner desires.

While at first enticing, finding and then assimilating a new culture became difficult for Martim because they were so different. The language, customs and religious beliefs that he had left in Portugal were understandably diverse to those in the Brazilian territory, and this because of the oceanic gap separating the two continents. These differences had led to an initial tepid reception by tribal leaders, but because they saw he strained himself to learn their Tupi language, they welcomed Mar-

tim, but not without hesitance. Once within the tribal setting, Martim and Iracema were able to act on a more formal basis, making it possible for Iracema to reveal her role as the guardian of the jurema secret. The cultural divide between the two protagonists caused Iracema's role within her community to intrigue Martim's interests, while at the same time causing it to be irrelevant to him. His ignorance of what her position entailed was detrimental to both protagonists, but was required to set in order the events that led to the birth of their child, Moacir—the embodied representation of the supposed Brazilian race.

Despite their cultural differences, for Martim, Iracema was not only beautiful; she was also a threshold between Brazil and Portugal. This is because after drinking the jurema concoction, Martim “enjoyed the reality of his most beautiful hopes. Behold him returning to the land of his birth . . . But why, as soon as he returned to the cradle of his homeland, did the young warrior again leave the shelter of his country . . . follow[ing] the coy maiden's delicate trail, releasing to the wind with frequent sighs the gentle name: ‘Iracema! Iracema!’” (17). It was Iracema who had initially provided Martim with the hammock on which he swayed to sleep, and between his two homes. The jurema concoction she had served him acted as a psychological version of the hammock in that it divided his mind as to where he felt he wanted to be. Although he longed for Europe, his longing to be with Iracema was larger: “a índia ministra a Martim para que êle, voltando à sua pátria pelo sonho, a despreve, distancia-se dos seus, e reclame Iracema no ato amoroso, cego, instintivo” (Santiago 63).

This approximation, however, becomes too close when Martim takes from Iracema that which both she and her tribal community hold most sacred—her virginity. In doing so, not only did Martim disqualify Iracema from her role, but this act required that he and his new bride leave the tribe as outcasts. Martim had already left his home and now Iracema was required to do the same. While this was nothing new for Martim, for he had gone in search of new lands time and time again, for Iracema, leaving behind her old ways was a move toward her tragic end: “A esposa de Martim abandona tudo, o lar, a família, os irmãos, tudo para ir perecer ou ser feliz com o esposo. Não é o exílio; para ela o exílio seria ficar ausente do esposo, no meio dos seus” (Assis 71). In much the same way, the Americas, which had remained pure from the European touch due to its geographic isolation through much of its history, lost its virgin-like quality as it was adulterated at the hands of European explorers. The ocean, which had served as the restraining boundaries from the European groom and its eventual American bride, switched in function as it became a facilitating means to allow European sea travel and overseas expansion to occur. As the narrative continues, Alencar works to persuade the reader that the ocean's role had once again been switched in consequence of Brazil's becoming independent.

Without the protection of a tribal home, Martim was required to rely on his new bride in order to adapt and survive in the hostile jungle. Such dire circumstances stir within him an even greater longing for his European home:

Martim rocked gently, and like the white hammock that comes and goes, his desire oscillated from one thought to another. There, the blond maiden awaited him with her chaste affection; here, the dark maiden smiled at him with her ardent love. Iracema rested languidly against the rope of the hammock; her dark, resplendent eyes, the tender eyes of the thrush, sought out the foreigner and entered his soul. (Alencar 48)

His oscillation between his old life and his new life are understandable given his circumstances. Martim had left Portugal behind because he was not satisfied with the status he had been assigned. Assimilating indigenous culture was also a difficult task, but Iracema's immediately present beauty satiated his angst and for a time, he forgot his motherland and became one with tribal culture. Going back across the ocean was too much of a task; Martim thus preferred the less taxing task of becoming as of though indigenous: “It was the custom of the race, the children of Tupã, for the warrior to wear on his body the color of his nation . . . The foreigner, having adopted the homeland of his wife and his friend, must pass through that ceremony in order to become a red warrior, son of Tupã . . . Martim opened his arms and his lips to receive the body and the soul of his wife” (82).

Shortly after this point in the novel, Martim experienced a sporadic mental sequence of oscillations between territories that cause him to change his course once again—representative of the difficulty in remaining absolute in his decision to stay. As the Potiguaras and Tabajaras went to war one with the other, Martim was again enticed by the prospect of heroic glory. During the fighting, however, he became disenfranchised by tribal culture and distanced himself from what he had become—an oscillation back towards Portugal—but became stuck midway when his flesh and blood became Brazilian with the birth of his mestizo son, Moacir, at which point his metaphorical hammock came swinging back towards Brazil. With this act, it seems Martim would become grounded and that his oscillations would cease. Yet, within a short period of time, the cultural differences and longings for home became too great. Although he had betrayed everything he left behind and the divide seemed too great by this point to simply turn back, another event occurred that changed everything. Iracema died in consequence of her depressive mood for having waited for Martim to come to himself and for having given birth in such dire circumstances: “Iracema did not rise again from the hammock where Martim’s distressed arms placed her” (109). Just as the winds had brought Martim to Brazil via a ship, the winds carried Iracema out of Brazil via a hammock. Thus his strongest attachment to the territory—Iracema—disappeared and the ocean provided the distance Martim needed to be able to recoup from his languish.

This transition in Martim’s trajectory is reminiscent of the romantic ideas of longing for home sewn throughout the novel. Gonçalves Dias, one of Brazil’s earliest and greatest Romantic poets is author of the poem that perfectly describes the divide within Martim’s longing and which José de Alencar makes reference to on several occasions throughout the text. The poem, entitled “Song of Exile” evokes the idea of one going to Portugal and reminiscing on how everything was better in their native Brazil. In a style that closely resembles the poem, Alencar opens *Iracema* with a description that idealizes the Brazilian landscape: “Green, impetuous seas of my native land, where the jandaia sings amid the carnauba fronds: Green seas, that gleam with liquid emerald in the rays of the rising sun, skirting alabaster beaches shaded by coconut trees . . .” (1). In the poem itself, Gonçalves Dias evokes the image of the Sabiá bird as a means to compare the new territory with the old:

In my country there are beauties,
I can’t find here anywhere;
As I dream—alone, at evening—
Much more joy do I find there;
In my country there are palm trees,
Where the Sabiá sings fair. (13-18)

The image of this bird, translated in the novel as thrush, as well as its representation of longing for home is evoked throughout the novel. While sitting in the hammock, waiting for Martim to come out of his weary state, Iracema had listened as Poti explained: “When the thrush sings, it is the time for love; when it falls silent, it makes the nest for its young: it is the time for work” (85). Just as the cry of the thrush defined the need for love and affection, so too did its singing in Gonçalves Dias poem define Martim’s giving and affection. Because of his longing for his homeland, he deserted Iracema while he searched his mind and soul for what he truly desired: “This poetry in prose . . . rhetorically deploys language in a way that may be read to conceal the horror of the process of colonisation, portraying betrayal and destruction as true love and con-structive sacrifice” (Rothwell 288). His delay in doing was partial cause for her death, thus forcing him to come to an abrupt deci-sion of whether he would stay or go. Martim, who by this point is now in exile from his Brazilian home, continues to “dream alone at evening” while laying in his hammock, and is constantly tortured by the fact that he can no

longer claim an identity from each territory. Thanks to Brazil's need for a national hero, who is above all the character of Iracema (thus requiring the need for a Martim), these romantic authors were ultimately able to provide Martim with an identity and a home in Brazil.

In the final pages of the novel, we see how Martim realizes the extent to which he loves his new land, and how, as king of the sea and land, he returns and rejoices in his new Brazilian identity that incorporates, yet differs from, his old identity. Upon his return “to the lands that had been his happiness and were now his bitter longing” (111), Martim baptizes Poti as “he would allow nothing more to separate him from his white brother” (112). In making Poti Christian, Martim was able to reconcile his difficulty in accepting Brazil as his home, by still having traces of Portugal within society. As the European and the indigenous “shared a single heart” (112) through the two nations coming together, nothing more would separate them. No longer a Portuguese, Martim's acts were now the acts of a Brazilian. His native tongue also became Brazilianized as it became a mixture of Portuguese and Tupi. Instead of connecting the two territories as it had for centuries, the Atlantic Ocean from this point on served as a divide between the two nations. This type of emergence between contrasting cultures was not hard to accept for the Portuguese who had recast their nationality as Brazilians, for their former capital, Lisbon, “é grande cidade de muitas e desvairadas gentes. Havia ahi estantes (residentes) de muitas terras e muitas casas de cada nação” (Martins 6). With their new identity at the turn of the 18th century, however, they rejected the idea, as they let what was Portuguese be Portuguese and what was Brazilian be Brazilian.

While this transition led to reconciliation for Martim and to understanding the mythical history of the “Brazilian race”, it was cause for the unique literary style found in Iracema. As it was his intent to create a national hero, Alencar included Martim in the novel, but to serve as a catalyst in making a heroin out of Iracema—done initially by making the parallel between the European invasion and adulteration of the Brazilian indigenous tribes and Martim's violation of Iracema's chastity. Her becoming a national heroin was solidified with her unjust death. Just as the indigenous tribes gave way to their lifestyle to accommodate European intervention, “a sobrevivência de Moacir, o homem do novo mundo, custa a vida de sua mãe” (Costa 194). Iracema—representative of Amerindian tribes in general—was thus a martyr for the cause of nationalization within Brazil. Without his mother to show him how the “original Brazilians” had lived, Moacir became the “inheritor of the postcolonial order”, but who was required to also acknowledge “the historical guilt of his maternal non-European origins and [who was] simultaneously unburdened of responsibility for them, remaining free to make his own history” (Treece 177). Moacir is thus the mythical father of the modern “Brazilian race”. And although his father became a citizen, since “all Portuguese living in Brazil up to a given cut-off date, who implicitly joined Brazilian society, would be considered Brazilian citizens” (Motta 24), he constituted only a fraction of the essence of the Brazilian spirit. The true essence, according to Alencar, was the mixture of European and Indigenous blood with Brazil's unique social characteristics.

Although Brazil had become independent politically by the time José de Alencar wrote *Iracema*, the novel set the history of the territory straight according to the motives of the country's elite: “Since the nation replaces the King as the source of power legitimation, a symbolic and mythological construction is established . . . the nation demands hymns, a flag and heroes to worship” (Motta 17). Brazilian children would learn in school and on television about their national origins, and authors such as Alencar worked to ensure the source materials they learned from favored the Brazilian-centric nationalistic perspective (Rouanet 15–16): “From the perspective of the formerly colonised, one would expect the oceans to bear within themselves the notion of the cursed medium over which the coloniser arrived . . . it also transmits the idea of a cleansing of the past, of the possibility of a rebirth and redefinition of the role of the deep” (Rothwell 288). Martim's oscillation between his old and new homes reveal the difficulties in making and then severing ties between the two lands,

and Alencar's exaltation of the Brazilian territory and celebration of a national hero serve to ensure that Martim's psychological torment in remaining in Brazil remunerated the necessary price to maintain a cultural distance from Portugal through successive generations reading his myth. Imagery of the Atlantic Ocean and its winds in the novel are thus recast not as a mere mechanisms that brought the Portuguese, but as a mechanism that imbued the Brazilian territory with new nationalistic meanings. The inhabitants of the territory who identified themselves by these new terms were then able to employ the same elements of wind and waves as a grand divide and buffer from interference by their European predecessors.

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