

Confluence narratives and the representation of marginalized voices /

Narrativas de confluência e a representação de vozes marginalizadas

*Orison Marden Bandeira de Melo Júnior**

Doctor in Applied Linguistics and Language Studies (LAEL/PUC-SP), and professor of the Teacher Education Undergraduate Program in English and the Graduate Program in Language Studies of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, RN, Brazil.



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7592-449X>

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TOSTA, Antonio Luciano de Andrade. *Confluence Narratives: Ethnicity, History, and Nation-Making in the Americas*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016. 301p.

When Bakhtin wrote to *Novi Mir* literary magazine in 1970 about the science of literature of that time, he argued that it was necessary to connect past and present in the process of studying literature. For him, literature is an inseparable part of culture. Although “it cannot be understood outside the total context of the entire culture of a given epoch” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p. 2)¹, “it is even more fatal to encapsulate a literary phenomenon in the single epoch of its creation” (BAKHTIN, 1986,

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orison.junior@ufrn.br

¹ BAKHTIN, M. Response to a Question from Novi Mir Editorial Staff. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp. 1-9.

p.3), for the literary works “break through the boundaries of their own time” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.4), thus leading to an encounter between two cultures. However, according to Tosta (2016), some works already establish this type of dialogue between the past and the present. This occurs when the past is critically represented from a contemporary perspective, connecting “past and present in a way that reveals causes and consequences, links between preceding events and ongoing conditions” (p. 20). These literary works are called “confluence narratives.”

Confluence Narratives: Ethnicity, History, and Nation-Making in the Americas is the title given by Antonio Luciano de Andrade Tosta, a professor of Brazilian literature and culture at the University of Kansas. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature from Brown University (2006) and three master’s degrees: one in Comparative literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo (1999); the other in Portuguese and Brazilian Studies from Brown University (2002), and the third in Comparative Literature from Brown University (2002). He has published several articles in American and foreign academic journals, book chapters, and has co-edited two books, namely, *Brazil: (Latin America in Focus)*, published in 2015 with Eduardo de Faria Coutinho, and *Luso-American Literature: Writings by Portuguese-speaking Authors in North America*, published in 2011 with Robert Henry Moser.

As we can see, Tosta’s academic and professional life has paved his way to the writing of this rich work, which was published in 2016 by Bucknell University Press. In order to contextualize his readers with the scope of the book, he explains the meaning of the word “confluence,” which comes from the Latin word *confluere* (flowing together), as well as the reason why he calls the literary works he analyzes “confluence narratives,” that is, works that represent and examine cross-cultural encounters in the Americas, such as colonization, slavery, and immigration. Confluence, however, cannot be understood as harmonious contacts between cultures; on the contrary, the term refers to conflicting relationships in which the struggle for power is intensified by social markers of difference, such as race, ethnicity, and class (p. 3). Therefore, for a better understanding of the book’s objectives, he brings several discussions on the theme throughout the Introduction, some of which are highlighted here: “Confluence narratives are a subgenre of historical novels that examine the national identities of American nations based on one or more of their cultural encounters” (p. 1); “Confluence narratives revisit and reassess official histories [...]. They emphasize the participation and contributions of marginalized racial and ethnic groups in the Americas, revealing that race and ethnicity are essential

to the understanding of the construction of national identity in the region” (p. 9); “these novels reject the idea of a static periphery, as marginal groups often occupy a flexible position from which they [...] impose themselves as meaningful constituents of the nation” (p. 18); “Confluence narratives often reveal versions of history that have been omitted, disguised, or repressed in previous historical and literary accounts by the ruling elites who have traditionally controlled history itself” (p. 20-21).

We see that the subtitle of the book and the explanation on confluence narratives point to the book’s scope of investigation, that is, literature of the American continents. Thus, this inter-American study of confluence narratives seeks to show common aspects of the historical experiences of the American countries represented in literature, recognizing the singularities of national experiences and the discerning characteristics of each national literature (pp. 28-29). Thus, *Confluence Narratives* participates in the academic discussion that focuses on inter-American relationships and brings a relevant contribution to the field, offering a study about the literary genre ‘confluence narratives,’ a subgenre of historical novels, as the core element to study national identities and a broader American identity (p. 31). Besides, Tosta makes it clear that the book fills the gap in inter-American studies as he includes Brazil and Brazilian literature in the discussion, pointing to the important role the country plays in the Americas (p. 31). This role constitutes, thus, the architectonics of the book, for not only its content highlights Brazil’s contribution and prominence in inter-American studies, but also its form, that is, the structure of the book per se, evinces the dialogue established between a confluence narrative from Brazil and a confluence narrative from another American country in each of its four chapters (p. 32).

Throughout its 301 pages, *Confluence Narratives* brings a very clarifying introduction, which presents concepts, positions, the book’s goals, and contributions; four analytical chapters; an epilogue, in which Tosta discusses other confluence narratives and the future of inter-American studies; and other paratexts, such as bibliography, permissions, index, and information about the author. In each chapter the reader finds works that represent ethnic groups according to the chronological order of their existence or introduction in the Americas: “Native Americans (in depictions of colonization), African Americans (in portrayals of slavery), Jewish Americans (in representations of immigration), and Japanese Americans (in tales of World war II)” (p. 261). Following, thus, the order proposed by the author, the first analytical chapter brings a dialogue between Luiz Antonio de Assis

Brasil's *Breviário das Terras do Brasil* (Brazilian novel) and Laura Esquivel's *Malinche* (Mexican novel); in the second chapter, between Luís Fulano de Tal's *A noite dos cristais* (Brazilian novel) and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (American novel); in the third chapter, between Moacyr Sclair's *A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes* (Brazilian novel) and Ricardo Feierstein's *Mestizo* (Argentinian novel), and in the fourth chapter, between Jorge J. Okubaro's *O súdito: (Banzai, Massateru!)* (Brazilian novel) and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (Canadian novel).

This first chapter, titled “The Native American, Hybridity, and *Mestiçagem* in Luiz Antonio de Assis Brasil's *Breviário das Terras do Brasil* and Laura Esquivel's *Malinche*,” is divided into four sections: “Native Americans and the American nation: between past and present, belonging and exclusion”; “The hybrid Indian and the inescapable coloniality in Luiz Antonio de Assis Brasil's *Breviário das Terras do Brasil*”; “Postcolonial cries amid foundational urges: the reinscription of *mestizaje* in Laura Esquivel's *Malinche*”, and the Conclusion. After discussing about indigenous peoples in Brazil and Mexico, Tosta analyzes *Breviário das Terras do Brasil* and *Malinche* and recognizes that their authors, although not direct descendants of indigenous peoples, create indigenous protagonists to challenge the “peripheral positions in which history placed them” (p. 40). According to him, such confluence narratives “provide new versions of the colonial encounter, treating the authority of historical discourse with contempt, and asserting the Native American's prominence in the historical process” (pp. 41-42). Thus, both novels construct their plots based on historical events, but “show their skepticism toward historical discourse by pointing to its omissions” (p. 92).

The second chapter, titled “Escaping the Nation? African American History as (Trans)National History in Luís Fulano de Tal's *A noite dos cristais* and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*,” is divided into four sections: “Slavery, African American identity, historical memory, and trauma”; “National history from an Afro-Brazilian perspective: authorial presence, collective memory, and slavery in *A noite dos cristais*”; “Demanding collective representation through historical upheaval: slavery, African roots, and African American identity in *Flight to Canada*,” and the Conclusion. As Tosta writes about the enslavement of African men and women in American territory, he argues that slavery “has come to define a collective memory that haunts the present” (p. 100). For him, both novels directly or indirectly denounce the historical sources of racism that haunt us in our contemporary time and the authors “demand a more inclusive and representative understanding of their nations and the participation and

importance of African Americans in their histories and societies” (p. 100), “highlighting the significance of the past, the challenges of the present, and the construction of the future” (p. 144).

The third chapter, titled “Jewish Puzzels: Identity Search, Memory, and History in Moacyr Sclair’s *A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes* and Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo*,” is divided into four sections: “Jewish immigration to the Americas, the search for identity, and the persistence of the nation”; “On the path of Jewish-Brazilian history: identity, recovery in Moacyr Sclair’s *A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes*”; “Confluence, otherness, and history in Ricardo Feierstein’s *Mestizo*,” and the Conclusion. As Tosta discusses the Jewish immigration in the Americas and the significant role it played in the formation of the American nations (p. 151), he explains that the novels allow the main characters to “reconstruct the past, to complement or even to question history, and to fill in the gaps of memory” (p. 158). Thus, as the protagonists are “disconnected from their Jewish identities” (p. 197), they need to “discover their identities in order to reconstruct their positions in society and in the nation” (p. 162).

The fourth chapter, titled “Memory, Difference, and the Struggle for Belonging in Jorge J. Okubaro’s *O súdito: (Banzai, Massateru!)* and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*,” is divided into four sections: “Japanese immigration to the Americas and the mark of difference”; “Divided loyalties? War, history, ethnic identity, and nationalism in Jorge J. Okubaro’s *O súdito: (Banzai, Massateru!)*”; “Reclaiming identity, salvaging history: World War II and the right to voice in *Obasan*” and the Conclusion. As Tosta writes about the Japanese immigration and its incommensurable contribution to the Americas and explains the high level of discrimination endured by the immigrants, he makes it clear that the two novels “demonstrate how larger historical events affect the lives of ordinary people,” such as World War II, and denounce how the “Japanese cultural and physical differences often were sufficient excuses for prejudice” (p. 206). On the other hand, these novels also “use the voices of single protagonists to tell the stories of their families and the roles they played in national history” (p. 257), thus giving “voice to their ethnic group, and [calling] for a more inclusive nation and national discourse, one that acknowledges diversity and plurality” (p. 207).

It is noteworthy that *Confluence Narratives* also shows Tosta’s concern with the contextualization of the novels and, consequently, with the reader’s knowledge about the historical and literary context of the novels analyzed in the book. To do that, each chapter starts with the

presentation of historical aspects of the ethnic groups represented in each confluence narrative and their status quo in the Americas. For Tosta, this overview not only provides readers with the necessary knowledge they need to understand the literary analyses carried out in the book, but also “gives the project a more interdisciplinary character” (p. 262). Still related to how inclusive the book is, it is important to highlight that, although the book’s target readership is English speaking (native speakers or otherwise), Tosta brings the original passages of the novels that were written in Portuguese or Spanish and offers their translation into English by translating the passages himself (when there is no published translation of the novel) or using published translations, as is the case of *Malinche*, *The Strange Nation of Rafael Mendes* [*A estranha nação de Rafael Mendes*], and *Mestizo*.

Finally, *Confluence Narratives: Ethnicity, History, and Nation-Making in the Americas* is an outstanding contribution to inter-American studies, Comparative literature, and the genre ‘confluence narratives.’ It provides readers with knowledge about this literary genre, whose concept is discussed and argued in depth, and allows readers to notice how the novelists use historical elements to construct the architectonics of their works, in which content, material and form are an indivisible whole (BAKHTIN, 1990)². The analyses undertaken in the book take into account these constitutive elements of the literary works and raise readers’ curiosity to read the novels – Tosta’s educator’s verve for motivating readers to become critical analysts of these novels and/or others that can be classified as confluence narratives. The book is also an invitation for researchers to study these narratives as they are “becoming widespread in the literatures of the Americas” (p. 262). According to Tosta, two types of project are necessary in the field: projects that increase “collaborations between inter-American scholars throughout the Americas” and projects that “not only study, but also originate from different locations in the American continents [to] broaden the scope of the field” (p. 263). Thus, *Confluence Narratives: Ethnicity, History, and Nation-Making in the Americas* is an invitation for readers and researchers to participate in this inter-American dialogue between the world of art and the world of life.

² BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art. Translated by Kenneth Brostrom. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp. 257-325.