



THE VISUALITY OF HUNGER

■ LUCIANA MARTINS

Professor of Latin American Visual Cultures, Birkbeck, University of London. l.martins@bbk.ac.uk

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Archie Davies' book provides a compelling rereading of the life and work of the Brazilian geographer Josué de Castro, placing him at the centre of the history of geographical thought in the twentieth century. Drawing upon Davies' biographical approach, which I find very fruitful, I would like to draw upon some examples from the Brazilian visual archive that complement the rich picture of the sociocultural context presented by Davies, which fermented Castro's ideas. As Davies aptly puts it in Chapter 3 – the 'Cry in the Sertão: Art and the Universal in the Geography of Hunger' – instead of tracing influences, it is a case of following the threads of

a shared conjuncture, in which they [Castro and his fellow artists] were part of creating, in leftist intellectual and artistic practice in Brazil in the middle of the century, a concern with hunger that produced a distinctive interpretation of its politics and spatiality (Davies 2022, p.94).

I would like to start with Castro's portrait by the Brazilian painter João Candido Portinari (Figure 1). It is indeed 'a delicate sketch', as Davies puts it, displaying traces of a portrait that remained in unfinished form (Davies 2022, p.93). However, this was probably not a quick sketch, as Davies contends. Firstly, it is quite a large drawing of 39.00 x 51.50 cm, which indicates Portinari's intention to spend some time working on

it; and secondly, it was carefully drafted, not just an inconsequential study. Produced in 1936, when Castro was a 28-year-old professor of anthropology at the University of the Federal District in Rio de Janeiro, it skilfully captured the preoccupied gaze of a young man already deeply concerned with the problem of hunger in Brazil. Castro wrote his 'habilitation thesis' (livre docência) on the physiological problem of poor nutrition in Brazil in 1932. As Normando Jorge de Albuquerque Melo (2010, p. 149) points out, when Castro published his thesis as a book in 1939, he omitted 'physiological', signalling the broadening sociocultural and political dimension of his understanding of the question of hunger.



Figure 1. Portrait of Josué de Castro, João Candido Portinari, 1936, charcoal on paper, 39 x 51,5 cm, FCO 4025, Catálogo Raisoné: CR-627 [<http://www.portinari.org.br/#/acervo/obra/4025/detalhes>]

The son of Italian immigrants, Portinari was born in 1903 on a coffee plantation in Brodowski, in the interior of São Paulo. He had witnessed the brutality of the plantation system in Brazil and the misery of Northeastern migration to the metropolitan centres of the Brazilian Southeast. In one of his paintings of the series 'Retirantes' (Figure 2) that Davies sensitively examines in his book, the emaciated bodies of the family of migrants, their clothes in tatters, are depicted in the same tones as the dried landscape, their gazes without hope or direction (Davies 2002, p.94). Vultures

frame the family group, while the prominent belly of the boy on the right-hand side indicates Schistosomiasis, a disease caused by parasitic worms found in the filthy water reservoirs in the region. I keep the title '*Retirantes*' in Portuguese because the English word 'migrants' does not convey the specific association with the harsh Northeastern reality. In Brazil, 'migrants' move from anywhere, while *retirantes* refer specifically to those forced to leave the Northeast due to its adverse conditions. The fact that a particular word is used to refer to this recurrent phenomenon speaks volumes about its impact on the dynamics of space, culture and society in Brazil.



Figure 2. *Retirantes*, João Candido Portinari, 1944, oil on canvas, 190 x 180 cm, MASP, São Paulo, Brazil

Images of hunger and misery were thus far from a novelty in the country. In 1878, the photographer Joaquim Antônio Correia, whose studio was established in Fortaleza, in Ceará, produced a series of 14 *cartes-de-visite* showing the devastating effects of the drought of 1877-1878 in the Northeast region. A lithograph based on two of those images by the Portuguese cartoonist Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro was reproduced

in the magazine *O Besouro* on 20 July 1878 (Figure 3). Held by a skeleton hand of death, the cartoon draws attention to the ‘state of the *retirante* population’, criticizing those who sent them ‘falsified flour’, speculating in their misery. Addressing directly ‘His Majesty, Mr. Government and the Suppliers’, Bordalo attempted to draw attention to the tragic situation in the region. He mentioned his ‘friend and colleague,’ the journalist João do Patrocínio, who provided him with the original photographs, which he obtained during his travel to the Northeast to report on its dire poverty (Andrade and Logatto, 1994).

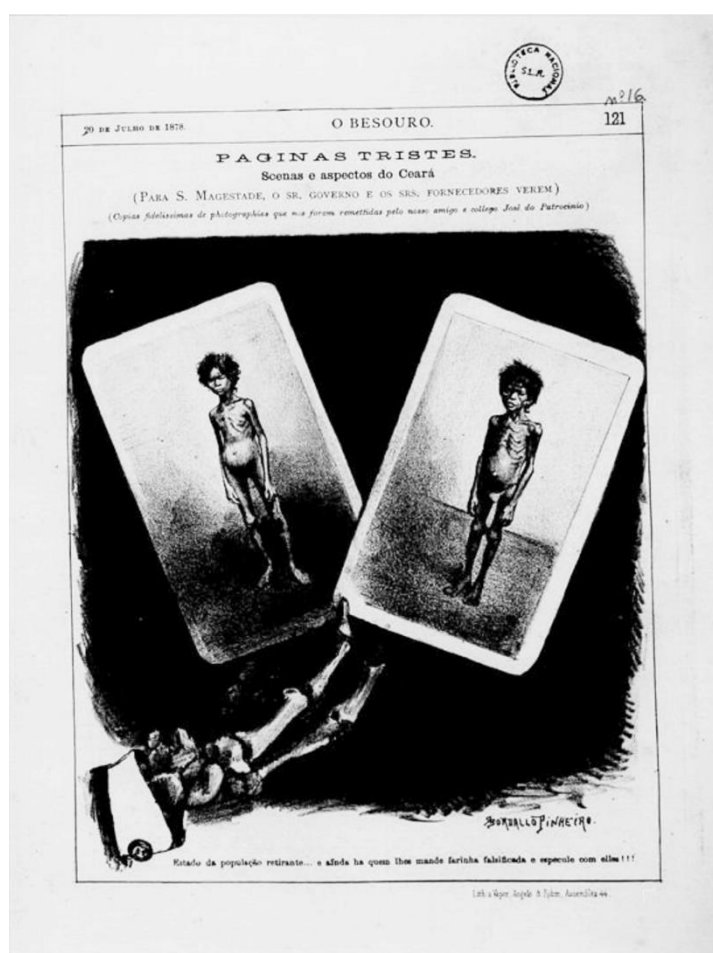


Figure 3. ‘Páginas Tristes’, *O Besouro*, 20 June 1878, Fundação Biblioteca Nacional

More than thirty years later, in 1911-1913, the Oswaldo Cruz Institute, based in Rio de Janeiro, undertook a pioneering survey of living conditions of the populations in the interior of Brazil. The photograph by José Teixeira of a cassava flour mill (the staple food in the Northeast, together with dried meat) in Jatobá, state of Bahia, taken in one of the public-health expeditions requested by the Inspectorate of Works against Drought, gives visibility to the poverty and wretched conditions of the population

(Figure 4). Depicting children of various ages working with ragged clothes and bare feet, with an older man in the background, very likely their father, the rough wall made of rammed earth sets the scene. Led by Belisário Penna – a sanitary reformer and intellectual who believed that ‘the real obstacles to the national progress resided in the precariousness of health conditions as much as in the lack of public education’ (Santos and Figueiredo, 2012) – and Arthur Neiva – a doctor specialised in prophylaxis and medical entomology – this expedition, along with the four others to the Amazon and Centre-West regions, produced a visual archive that exposed the immense gap between the metropolitan fantasies of national integration and the harsh actualities of everyday life in the interior of Brazil (Martins, 2013, p.5-6). In fact, Penna and Neiva complained that the Northeasterns had no concept of ‘Brazil’ as a nation (Thielen et al., 1991 p. 58).



Figure 4. Cassava flour mill. Jatobá (BA), june 1912. Instituto Oswaldo Cruz, IOC (AC-E) 2-29.

In 1923, Penna was invited by the then President of the State of São Paulo, Washington Luís, to produce works related to education and health. The educational pamphlet *Higiene para o povo: Amarelão e Maleita* (*Hygiene to the people: malaria and hookworm*), published in 1924, was targeted at primary school pupils (Carvalho, 2021 p.5). In it, the figure of ‘Jeca Tatu’ had his life changed by the miracles of sanitation (Figure 5). Jeca Tatu, popularized by the writer Monteiro Lobato, was the stereotyped peasant from the interior of São Paulo (*caipira*), who was deemed to be the cause of its

own failures. For Belisário Penna, it was disease not his lazy character that hindered his progress.



Figure 5. The transformation of Jeca Tatu, Belisário Penna, *Amarelão e maleita* (São Paulo, 1924)

A different understanding of the Brazilian conundrum was put forward by the intellectual Mário de Andrade, with whom Castro had a significant correspondence. As Nísia Trindade Lima and André Botelho point out, ‘empathy’ for the populace was key to understanding Mário de Andrade’s critical approach: instead of the willingness to integrate the ‘backward’ populations within a national project framed by a medical discourse, he sought to valorize their forms of sociability and popular manifestations (Lima and Botelho, 2013). Incidentally, Mário de Andrade was also sketched by Portinari (Figure 6), but in pen and ink (this one probably a really quick sketch, since it was a study for a finished portrait). Both from a humble background, Mário de Andrade and Josué de Castro also shared their mixed ancestry – they were both *mulatos*, to use a term of the time, making them vulnerable to face prejudice when mingling with a conservative elite.

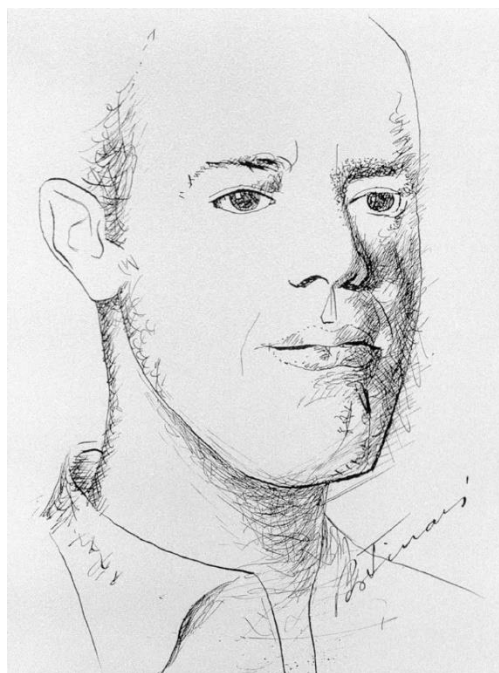


Figure 6. Sketch for a portrait of Mário de Andrade, João Candido Portinari, 1935, pen and ink, 11 x 17 cm, FCO 5604, Catálogo Raisoné: CR-513 (<http://www.portinari.org.br/#/acervo/obra/5604/detalhes>)

On his visit to the arid regions of the Northeast in the late 1920s, Mário de Andrade witnessed the misery around him. In Caicó, he noticed the suspension of the construction of a road that linked Rio Grande do Norte to Paraíba by the Federal Government, leaving 400 families without salary and assistance, struggling to eke out an existence in the unfavourable environment: ‘the drought became tangible, hunger, death or desertion’ (Andrade 2002, p.626). Under these circumstances, he reacted vehemently against the undisputed reputation of the celebrated work by Euclides da Cunha:

I can reassure you that “Rebellion in the Backlands” is a false book. The climatic disgrace of the Northeast can’t be described. You have to see what it is. It is awful. The book by Euclides da Cunha is of a brilliant beauty (*boniteza genial*), but it is a hideous falsification. Repugnant. Yet it seems that we Brazilians prefer to pride ourselves on a beautiful literature than to leave literature aside and undertake our work as men (*sic*). Euclides da Cunha rendered into brilliant-sounding sentences and sophisticated images what is an unbearable blindness towards this vast landscape; transformed into heroism, into epic, what is sheer misery... It has nothing to do with heroism. It is just paltry, insufferable, gruelling misery. Excuse me for denying longevity to the enduring ‘Northeastern’ (*nordestino*). But to call this heroism is to ignore a simple phenomenon of adaptation. The stronger emigrate (Andrade, 2002, p.262-264).

Mentioning the inefficient measures of the Federal Government, which had little impact on the life of the ‘rural proletariat’, Mário de Andrade provided a clear picture of the economic benefits of migration of ‘strong youth’ (*moços fortes*) to the Southern regions of Brazil, attributing the penury of the backlands to the latifundia ‘that still exists colonially in these parts’ (Andrade, 2002, p.265). Here we can see a tangible convergence between the thought of Mário de Andrade and Josué de Castro.

I would like to conclude these comments with a last image – this time a still from a moving image, the image of the *homem-caranguejo* (in this case, that of *mulher-caranguejo*: Figure 7). This image is taken from Silvio Tendler’s 1994 documentary *Josué de Castro – Cidadão do Mundo* (Tendler, 1994). The poignant scenes of the mangrove, where people and crabs mingle indistinguishably in the mud, are deftly edited with the voiceover by the famous actor José Wilker reading extracts of Castro’s romance *Homens e Caranguejos* (Castro, 1967). In its preface, Castro candidly states

from all I have seen and learned in life, observing these various types of society, I was led to reserve, until today, the largest parcel of my compassion to the mangrove society – a society of crabs and of men, their milk brothers, both sons of the mud (Castro, 1967, p. 16).



Figure 7. Still from Josué de Castro – Cidadão do Mundo (Silvio Tendler, 1994).

Castro’s compassion towards this ‘amphibious society’, squeezed between two economic structures, those of capitalism and agrarian feudalism (Castro, 1967, p.16), goes hand in hand with Mário de Andrade’s empathy with the Brazilian population of the interior of the country. Castro’s father had fled the 1877 drought, and his accounts

made a deep impression on him. But it was the muddy waters of the Capibaribe River that fed his imagination. As he reported,

[t]he truth is that the history of the men of the Northeast impressed me much more through my eyes than my ears. It got into my infant's avid eyes under the form of these images that were far from being always light and happy (Castro, 1967, p.18-19).

As Davies aptly puts it,

[t]here is something *unheimlich* about this anthropophagic crab broth: in Castro's formulation crabs are both foster brothers and dinner. But the entanglement of bodies and environments is always uncanny and uncomfortable (Davies, 2022, p. 245-246).

There is much more to enjoy in Davies' book. Here I have followed just one thread – that of the visuality of hunger – that caught my imagination. Future readers will undoubtedly discover many other exciting paths through Josué de Castro's life and work that this inspiring book opens up.

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