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Challenging *Açorianidade*'s isolationism through art: The Walk&Talk Festival

Although one of the key aspects of the traditional concept of *Açorianidade* is that of isolation, new artistic and cultural productions are creating the space to challenge this definition. Vitorino Nemésio has stated that isolation is a fundamental part of Azoreanness, or *Açorianidade*: its geographic isolation therefore makes its cultural and artistic expressions insular. The archipelago of the Azores is still very much geographically isolated from the rest of the world, however with the rise of global communication and specifically the Internet, cultural and artistic production has been given access to material which has informed new cultural production. This paper will answer the following question: does the Azorean cultural and artistic production of The Walk&Talk Festival challenge Vitorino Nemésio's traditional concept of Azorean identity's isolation?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From isolation to integration in Açorianidade. Vitorino Nemésio, an Azorean author who has written extensively on the Azorean identity, outlined several universal traits of this particularly identity. One of these traits is that of the isolationist, a quality that permeates throughout the actions and souls of the Azorean people¹. By being geographically separated from the rest of Portugal as well as other nation-states, the Azorean people and their culture have been shaped by this isolation. Although the islands were settled by, among others peoples, the Flemish, Portuguese, and Spanish, further immigration and contact was limited to largely an economic relationship with little of these cultures reaching the archipelago. Additionally, the Azores were further isolated, even within the Portuguese nation-state, during the Novo Estado period from approximately 1933 until its fall with

¹ "Uma espécie de embriaguez do isolamento impregna a alma e os actos de todo o ilhéu. . ." see Nemésio.

the Carnation Revolution in 1974. With the fall of the isolationist regime in 1974 and the establishment of an autonomous regional government in the Azores in 1976, the platform for integration into the world began to take shape. Furthermore, with Portugal's entry into the European Community in 1986 the traditional isolationist policies that were entrenched in the Azores would come into conflict with integrationist cultural and political policies that were a part of joining the European Community. These included freedom of movement for citizens of its member states, further facilitating the movement and introduction of others cultures and art into new frontiers such as the Azores.

AN EXAMPLE OF INTEGRATION

Cultural integration through art. The Walk&Talk Festival took place in 2011 from July 30th to August 14th in Ponta Delgada on the Azorean island of São Miguel. According to the festival's website, it is the Azores' "first urban art festival" ("Walk&Talk" a.). The festival showcased a number of International artists as well as Portuguese Mainland and local Azorean artists. The artists were mostly graffiti artists who, among other types of installations, produced large murals on the sides of local buildings. This exemplifies the internationalist approach of the festival, to show that the archipelago is not isolated from the broader cultural world and that people, in this case artists, from other geographic locations are aware or are becoming aware of the Azores and their artistic production. Furthermore, the festival's manifesto makes the goals and purpose of the month-long socio-cultural production very clear:

The local proverb "Muros brancos, povo mudo" (White walls, muted society) is an example of the reality we want to change: we want walls with color and a proactive society, which motivates interaction and respect with what surrounds us ("Walk&Talk" b.).

The acceptance and promotion of integration and interactivity of the public space is also the rejection of isolation and smothering of the public's voice. This voice includes artistic expression as

a vehicle of and proponent for the opening of Azorean cultural silence described by Vitorino Nemésio in the 1930s. The Walk&Talk Festival is therefore more than just a festival, a celebration of art in the traditional sense of the word, but also a dynamic instrument for socio-cultural change.

In the last paragraph from the same manifesto, the festival makes clear their vision of the use of space for the Azores, and specifically the city of Ponta Delgada as a way to: “ Reinvent the urban space, affirming Ponta Delgada as a dynamic center for street-art, positioning the city and the Archipelago of the Azores as a multidisciplinary art stage” (“Walk&Talk” b.). The festival’s characterization as a “stage” for art further solidifies its nature as an instrument for a change, going beyond that of a simple act of solemnization. This demonstrates a firm vision by the festival and more specifically its Azorean organizers, Diana Sousa and Jesse James, of their geographic location being used as a tool for the promotion of and a public space for cultural and artistic expression. This concept of public space as a forum of expression is supported by Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the use of public space as a medium for communicational change.

Lefebvre’s space as a forum for expression. If isolationism is the sequestering of space, then the theory of French sociologist and professor Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the use of space a tool for cultural and artistic expression is applicable to the Walk&Talk Festival. In 1970, Lefebvre stated that: “The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become 'savage' and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.”

(Lefebvre 19). Without specifically referring to graffiti art in this theory, the inscription on walls metaphor is very literally what graffiti art is and also happens to be the most popular art form used by the artists in the Walk&Talk Festival. In their manifesto, the Walk&Talk organizers state that one of the objectives of the festival is to challenge the local idea of “white walls, muted society”. This is a clear example of the changes taking place in the Azorean culture of isolationism and, in essence, in the very nature of *Açorianidade* itself. When Lefebvre talks about the urban space as “a place where speech becomes writing” (19), he is also referring to the reaction to the physical space.

This conversational speech, the public voice, informs the writing which in the case of the Walk&Talk Festival is its paint on public spaces. This is not a one way conversation as one informs the other and vice versa, creating a multidirectional conversation that is not limited by geographic space but by the human imagination. By introducing an alternative to the class-based approach to power so often part of Azorean tradition, whether the landowner-peasant relationship or political authoritarianism of the Novo Estado, the isolationist space is rearranged into an integrationist space of inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Through global communication and the integration of the Azores into the global community, the traditional element of *Açorianidade* isolationism, as described by Vitorino Nemésio, is being marginalized as demonstrated by the Walk&Talk Festival of 2011. The rethinking and repositioning of public space as a way to express themselves as Azoreans, using international influences and artists, confirms a confrontation with isolationism as a key element in the traditional Azorean identity.

Works Cited

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