

# Intervening in the Colonial Past

## Review of Patrícia Lino's *The Survival Handbook of the Portuguese Discoverers in the Anti-Colonial World*

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Postcolonial studies was first coined as a term for academic purposes in the 1960s.

In their early years, postcolonial studies primarily focused on critical engagement with literature and revealing the impact of colonization in everyday life. *The Survival Handbook of the Portuguese Discoverers in the Anti-Colonial World* belongs to this kind of literature. The book was published in Brazil (Edições Macondo) in October 2020, and it was later published in Portugal (Douda Correria) in December of that same year.

*The Survival Handbook*, which has not yet been translated into English or German, makes a relevant critique that postcolonial studies need to investigate. In this article, I present the book's postcolonial critique.

Several handbooks and instruction manuals for explorers were created in the colonial period, such as *Guide for Scientific Observations in Travelling*, which illustrates German colonialism. The contents of these handbooks range from how to start a plantation, to instructions on how women should behave.

The author of *The Survival Handbook*, Patrícia Lino, is a Portuguese researcher, multimedia artist, and assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. Lino uses everyday objects to criticise colonization. She selects forty modern items and as a visual artist too, she modifies them to remark on colonial legacies. Some objects have not been modified by Lino, like a scale or a kitchen bowl, however she renames and transposes the objects into the colonial context, through their material aesthetics and language. The book is arranged so that on one page is the title, and on the other is a picture of an object. The accompanying poems start with the question, "What is ...?" and are followed on the next page by the name of an object and a "How to use ..." explanation. The title, the image and the two "instructional" texts that teach "what it is" and "how to use" each object are in harmony and should be read together. The reader recognises the texts as poetic because of their form, content, and satire, while the manual genre is evoked by descriptions.

Lino uses irony and absurdity to depict Portuguese colonial history through everyday objects, such as a mint gum package, a Portuguese language handbook, a board game, and a stress ball. This layout is comical because the way the author attends to these objects is unexpected. Moreover, Lino uses concrete poetry to criticize what Kaplan names "imperial gaze" (Kaplan 60). The author presents a narrative montage of photographs, poetry, and postcolonial critique that inspires feelings of estrangement in the reader. The book has gained popularity because it is an open historical archive, where one finds everyday objects in a colonial context and in a manner that borders between laughter and fright.

If, on the one hand, there is the repetition of the aesthetic procedure of modifying these objects and inserting them into the colonial context, which shows the fictionalization, on the other hand, the colonial discourse is materialized in the object. Lino changes the design of some objects, such as a radio and a smoke machine, and others are totally fictitious, like the CD *A Colonial Love*

from the band Esteróis do Mar. In attributing the colonial discourse to the object, the author uses scansion, rhyme and parody. The objects created establish a critical relationship with Lusitanian speeches and colonial arguments used historically to legitimize its colonization and its “greatness.” This is relevant considering the colonial practices in the day-to-day life of Portugal and the former Lusitanian colonies themselves. This remnant materializes also in the monuments, historical sources, photos and postcards that can still be bought at the flea market (*feira da ladra*) in Lisbon and its direct relationship with structural racism itself. In the same way, by materializing the colonial discourse in the objects, the author exposes the very fictionalization and imagery present in these discourses and exposes them to ridicule, making them unacceptable in our daily lives.

The poems and objects in *The Survival Handbook* encourage those who resist or even disbelieve colonial history to revisit it critically. I classify Lino’s book as postcolonial literature because of its use of historical narrative strategies that force the reader to confront colonial history. I will further describe some objects to illustrate how Lino uses them.

“DescobriMENTOS” is a portmanteau, a blend of the word *mentos*, a mint candy, inside the Portuguese word *descobrimentos*, which means “discoveries” (Lino, *Kit de Sobrevivência* 23), with the intention of ridiculing the idea of discovery. After all, a long-standing critical debate in Brazil about the use of this word, “discovery”, argues that the land was not discovered by the Portuguese because indigenous people had been living on the land before (Krenak 21). This debate was initiated by the *Movimento Negro*

(Black movement) and the Indigenous social movement, which were both established in Brazil in the 1980s (Gonzalez 246). Through the work of social movements and the colonial debate in the public sphere, now is taught about indigenous and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in primary and secondary schools, in accordance with the National Education Plan (PNE), particularly the Brazilian Law No. 11.645 from March 10, 2008.

*Colonia* is a board game that uses a similar design to Monopoly and depicts the names of the former colonies. The game acquires meaning through the history of its origins and its connections to imperialism, as Andreas Tönnemann points out in his book. Lino’s accompanying text “What is *colonia*?” says, “The aim of the game is to rebuild the Portuguese geographical, religious and spiritual empire and prevent the loss of territories. Unlike Monopoly, there are no losers,” and in “How to use” she gives the instructions: “(3) After advancing X territories and stopping at a territory of their choice, the player must shout loudly: IT’S MINE! (4) The game ends when all the territories are under the control of the participants” (Lino, *Kit de Sobrevivência* 95).

*Bola mundo* is a small ball imprinted with the image of the world map and is used to relieve stress (Lino, *Kit de Sobrevivência* 11). The “How to use” text reads as an imperative: “Use the black pen to encircle the former Portuguese Empire. Repeat ‘Portugal is the center of the world’ until you calm down.”

The reactions to the book were primarily comments and reviews. Universities, schools, and associations in Brazil extended invitations to present the objects. Other countries, such as

the United States, Mexico, Colombia, Poland, and Sweden, have also extended invitations to have the objects showcased. Many Brazilians asked themselves: Why is a Portuguese academic talking about colonialism in Brazil? This question was publicly posed in February 2021, by one member of *Read Women*, a book club project in more than 100 cities in Brazil and four countries, when the book was recommended and selected for the book club.<sup>1</sup>


In the online session of *Read Women* in Assis, São Paulo, in August 2021, Lino explained that as a lesbian and from a non-privileged family, she does not identify herself as Portuguese. The question of why Lino would write about colonialism in Brazil indicates the need for critical engagement with the notion of identity and the limits of imaginary identities (Anderson 6). Lino’s background has not deterred her from critiquing the effects of Portugal’s colonialism.

If *América Ladina*, as Lélia Gonzalez would say, has been debated for some time, interest in the subject is beginning, decisively, to reach the other side, the old world. This review of the *The Survival Handbook* is an appeal for the book to be circulated, translated, interpreted, and critically debated in Europe. The relevance of Lino’s book lies in its literary materialization of the colonial debate, contributing to expanding conversations about the colonial period, from Brazil to Portugal, from Latin America to Europe. As Lino states in an interview, “A Portuguese woman writes as cynically as she does critically about the great Portuguese past whose decorative paradoxes and illusions [...] are familiar to readers of many other languages and cultures” (Lino, “Não Há Realmente”).

<sup>1</sup> *Read Women (Leia Mulheres)* is a project influenced by the British author Joanna Walsh that aims to encourage reading, discussion, and intellectual and literary dissemination by women authors. The meetings are open to everyone and take place every month around Brazil, with volunteer work by more than 300 women.

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