

Weaving Tradition

The Invention of the Brazilian Northeast

by
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But there are points in time that provide us with a foundation,
Made up, in each one of us,
Of eternities of seconds,
Nostalgia for which extinguishes our voices.
And life keeps making connections
Almost impossible to break.
All the things we love are living pieces
Of our innermost being.
—Manuel Bandeira, “A vida assim nos afeiçou”

Nostalgia is what we feel when we perceive ourselves as losing a cherished part of our very being—of spaces we have occupied as our own. Nostalgia can also be a collective feeling, one that can affect an entire community when it loses its spatial or temporal references or an entire social class when it loses its historical position, seeing the symbols of its power that once seemed eternal swept away by the irresistible march of history.

The Northeastern region, which arose in the imaginary landscape of Brazil around 1920 to replace the old regional division of the country into North and South, had its roots in nostalgia and tradition. This article discusses how this geographic concept was created—how a “Northeast” that could serve as a topic of academic study, a theme for museum exhibits, and a subject for television programs, novels, paintings, motion pictures, plays, political speeches, and economic policies came into existence, why it was based on nostalgia and tradition, and what this meant politically.

The Northeast is not in fact inherent in the natural world. It is not some eternal given. Geographic divisions and regions are human creations—pieces of the magma of history solidified by conflicts, attempts to drop

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anchor in the lava flow of the social struggle that once upon a time erupted and engulfed this territory. The Northeast is a geographic division created in history and given reality by a tradition of thought, a way of looking at things and of writing about them. Its creation was, however, a process of fragmentation, not to be confused with the natural, orderly development that we would expect from the evolutionary view of history that seeks signs or footprints in the past pointing toward such an outcome in advance—precisely one of the strategies used by the *nordestino* regionalist discourse to legitimize the creation of this spatial division. Before this new unity called the “Northeast” emerged, countless “Northeasternizing” practices and discourses had to flourish on their own and then be brought together. This article will show how this new spatial fabric was gradually woven as Brazil’s older regional divisions melted away through historical change.

A multiplicity of lives, histories, practices, and customs makes up the reality that lies behind what we now know as the Northeast. It is only the erasure of this multiplicity, however, that allows us to believe in such a unity of image and discourse. My interest here is therefore not the “real” Northeast or the gap between representation and reality but the actual creation of this constellation of consistent patterns in practice and discourse that has come to constitute a region we can imagine and talk about. In this creation of the Northeast as a discourse we have not so much a place as a *topos*, a group of references, a collection of characteristics, an archive of images and texts. It is like a quotation—something derived from a fragment of a text, an extract from something previously imagined, an eternally repeated image. This Northeast is, as it were, a bundle of recurring memories. It is not something that has grown in a straight line whose identity is from the beginning assured and preserved—far from it. We find instead the absurdity of a historical origin in which practice and discourse fail to match up. The idea that the Northeast had a simple, straightforward origin is false: it was something invented to hide the fact that it is a recent artificial political and cultural construct foisted upon us as a “natural,” “neutral,” or “historical” verity.¹

The “Northeast” came into existence in reaction to the strategies of nationalization brought about by the idea of nationhood and the formation of a discourse on the Brazilian people and nation. It could therefore no longer express just the simple particularist interests of individuals, families, or groups of state oligarchs. It was a region born of a new type of regionalism nevertheless rooted in the discourse of tradition and a position of nostalgia in relation to the past. The Northeast arose from the construction of a political and cultural totality: the response of the traditional producers of sugar and cotton and of the businessmen and intellectuals linked to them when they began to fear that they were losing their economic and political space. They

reached out for *topos*, symbols, types, facts with which they might create a new unity to protect them from the threat of being dissolved into a greater whole that they could no longer dominate: the Brazilian nation. Their forces united around a new division of national space whose appearance was contemporaneous with that of the great public works designed to combat the area's periodic droughts. New boundaries were traced out to serve as an entrenchment behind which these local oligarchs could resist the threat to their power. In the heat of the battle they found their common interest. They closed ranks to secure their space against the threat of invasion by outside forces. The "region" was invented as a protection from the "nation."²

The need for a new geographic division of Brazil led to an exhaustive survey of the nature of the area and its economic and social history, along with a huge effort to work out a social, cultural, and artistic memory that could serve as the basis for its institution as a region. This meant establishing an image and an original text for a varied region presenting a multiplicity of contrasts, and therefore they had to agree on a common approach in observation and discourse that would become a fixed code. A range of ways of looking at the Northeast had to be coordinated into a coherent determination of static patterns, tones, and shades. All research to be carried out around the idea of the Northeast had first to localize such elements as would guarantee the region's identity, its similarity, and its spatial homogeneity and would fix the perception and discourse of a "Northeast."

FROM NORTH TO NORTHEAST

The term "Northeast" first occurs as a way of denoting the area of operation of the *Inspeç ria Federal de Obras Contra as Secas* (Federal Inspectorate of Works Against the Droughts—IFOCS),³ created in 1919. In this institutional discourse, the Northeast is the part of the North that is subject to drought and, for this reason, worthy of special attention from the public authorities at the federal level. The Northeast is, to a great degree, the child of the drought, the product of a whole series of images and texts created with regard to this phenomenon ever since the Great Drought of 1877 made it the area's most important problem. This discourse and all the practices created by the drought gradually turned it into a particular spatial division of the country (Freyre, 1985 [1959]: 5–6; Albuquerque, 1988).

It was the drought that caught the attention of the media and of the southern Brazilian press in particular and made them aware of the existence of the North and its "problems." The drought was, beyond doubt, what first differentiated the North from the South, particularly because it happened in an age

when it was normal to consider the geographical environment, along with race, as a decisive factor determining social organization. It was at times of drought that the people of southern Brazil found themselves called upon to contribute to campaigns raising funds for relief for the North, with their newspapers publishing the names of "worthy" donors. Given the shortcomings of Brazilian internal transport at the time, these campaigns were nearly unique as forms of contact between populations so far apart. When Oswald de Andrade visited Recife in 1925, he remarked on how little Southerners knew about the city, despite its being one of the largest in Brazil. For most Southerners the first pictures they ever saw of the North were those that appeared in their newspapers in connection with the drought and its victims. It was through shows, games, and festivities aimed at raising funds for the victims of the drought that those in the South first heard talk of their "northern brethren."⁴

In the early 1920s the expressions "North" and "Northeast" were still used as synonyms; this was a transitional period in which the idea of "the Northeast" had not yet crystallized: "There took place this evening in the Cinema Hélios a show for children in benefit of the victims of the drought in the Brazilian Northeast. . . . Directors of the Harmonic Society and organizers of the great ball in benefit of the victims of the drought in the North . . . of a gala that has constituted a real and most brilliant social occasion" ("Pelas vítimas das secas," 1920: January 6, 9). The separation of "the Northeast" from "the North" was still developing. Only now did speakers start to differentiate between the former and the Amazon area (which included the western part of the North). Initially, the chief reason for making such a distinction was concern about the migration of "Northeasterners" to become rubber tappers in the Amazon, with the danger that this posed to the labor supply of the traditional agriculture of the Northeast: "Brazil's policy in the North is the formal negation of civilization; it is wholly and fundamentally wrong in all respects and only serves to plant desolation and desert in Amazonia and abandonment and social misery among the populations of the Northeast" (Serra, 1920).

The great political and cultural task imposed by the need to institutionalize "the Northeast" was that of overcoming the narrow local view of space to which the oligarchs of the northern states were prone. A view hitherto restricted to the area over which the individual oligarch or his clan exercised dominion had to be broadened so that he and his fellows could join their forces against the increasing subordination that they were suffering. Instead of identifying their particular interests with those of their state, they had to start thinking of the interests of a larger unit, the region, a spatial division in which everyone was now headed in the same direction (Albuquerque, 1988: 286–288). The South was the "other" against which the identity of the

Northeast was defined. The Northeast was born of the recognition of a defeat; it was a response to the closing of a subaltern space in the network of powers by those who could no longer aspire to dominate the nation.

The exclusion of the provinces of the North from the Agricultural Congress that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1878 was perhaps the first time that representatives of the oligarchies of the area made an issue of the difference between “North” and “South.” The crisis in sugar production, the drought, and the sale of a large number of slaves to the South turned the Agricultural Congress of Recife, organized as a reply to the 1878 one, into a forum for severe criticism of the regime’s discriminatory actions in relation to this area concerning investment, taxation, public works, and manpower policy (Quadros, 1977).

The drought of 1877–1879, the first to have an impact on the national press and the first to affect the middle sectors of landowners, brought a considerable volume of resources to the “victims of the chastisement” and made the “Northern” benches of parliament realize what a powerful weapon they had in their hands for demanding treatment equal to that given to the South. The drought from then on became the problem of all the provinces (post-1889, read “states”) of the North. The congressmen from the North succeeded in having included in the 1891 Constitution an article obliging the Union to set aside special funds for aid to areas suffering natural disasters including droughts. This institutionalization of drought managed to create more and more room in the apparatus of the federal government for the dominant groups from the “North,” as became clear with the creation of the Inspectorate of Works Against the Drought (Inspetoria de Obras Contra as Secas—IACS) in 1909. This agency, designed to “fight drought,” became the institutional locus of a regionalist discourse that grew increasingly inflammatory as the public policies of the new republic increasingly favored the oligarchs of São Paulo and Minas Gerais who dominated it (Albuquerque, 1988: 276).

With the creation of the IACS during the administration of Epitácio Pessoa, the intellectuals and politicians connected with the agency, such as Guimarães Duque and João Palhano, in an effort to make the new spatial designation effective, sought to standardize the way it was used. They wanted to get rid of the “different Northeast that clogged up the bookstores, some genuine, others not so” (Tejo, 1928) and construct a single homogeneous image of the region and a unique text. For the term “Northeast” to be really effective politically, there had to be only one way in which it could be viewed and understood.

At the Conference of Sugar Producers held in Recife in 1920, the discourse denouncing the “privileges of the South, principally those granted the

coffee industry,” acquired separatist implications. Faced with an enormous crisis in the sugar market at a time when production methods were being modernized, to the great detriment of the more old-fashioned growers, and receiving no government help above the state level, the promoters of the conference wanted to speak with a single voice, in the name of a single defined region, under a banner of discrimination and victimization. They drew up a line of confrontation between the Northeast and São Paulo that served to decide the direction of the discussions, which consequently came to center on questions of the nation, the region, and national identity. In the same year, the representatives of the northern states in the federal Congress formed the so-called Northern Block (“Bloco político do Norte,” 1920).

The suppression of banditry provided a further motive for an increase in solidarity among the members of this Northern Block. Banditry was no respecter of state lines, and fighting it effectively required joint action by the law enforcement agencies of all the northern states. The creation of the Northeast as a region was also motivated by fear of a revolt by the underprivileged—by the oligarchs’ fear of losing power to the “mob of thieves who infest the outback.” The feeling of weakness that was taking hold of the traditional producers of sugar and cotton brought with it also the fear of a loss of control over their own space and, in turn, created a growing concern that they should join forces to combat the revolts of the lower classes—revolts whose underlying causes also lay in the changes that traditional society was undergoing. It was not just banditry but also rebellions by messianic religious movements that lay behind the need to create a closed-off space, a defined region wherein continuance of the traditional hierarchy of power and domination could be guaranteed.

The formation of “regional intellectuals,” “representatives of the Northeast,” actually began when the sons of the state oligarchs converged on Recife, for this city was not just the business and exporting center of a vast area of the “North” but also its medical, cultural, and educational mecca. The Recife law school and the Olinda seminary were the places where successive generations of these offspring of wealthy country landowners obtained their higher education, their status of *bacharel*. From the 1800s on these two institutions were privileged sites for the production of a regionalist discourse and for the construction of a common worldview. They were colleges in which all the intellectuals of the local establishment, except for those few who were able to go abroad to study, were educated. It was here that people who were to become influential at a national level and those who would serve as state governors and mayors got to know each other, formed friendships, and exchanged ideas on politics, economics, culture, and art. These institutions functioned as the intellectual center where this local elite could pool and

share political and economic ideas that transcended provincial (or, after 1889, state) boundaries, especially after the region's decline began to make them feel that they were being marginalized at the national level. Those who aspired to high political office became united in indignation at the way the federal government discriminated against them, and the crisis threatening the traditional bases of their wealth and power made them concerned for their own personal futures (Barros, 1985: 192–193; Miceli, 1979: 35–36).

Recife was also the newspaper circulation center for a huge swath of territory from Alagoas to Maranhão, as Gilberto Freyre came to realize when he did research on the advertisements placed in the *Diário de Pernambuco* throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. He used the area of influence of this newspaper to define the limits of what would become the Northeast region. José Lins do Rêgo said that this paper would have served many planters' children as the text for their earliest reading. As time went on, it became the principal vehicle for the dissemination of the complaints of the Northern states, just as it made itself the first instrument for promoting and spreading the arguments for a new regional division, that of the Northeast (Rêgo, 1981 [1956]: 125; D'Andrea, 1992: 49).

It was in the pages of the *Diário de Pernambuco* that Gilberto Freyre would publish the series of 100 numbered articles, dispatched from the United States, in which he began to define what he called regionalist and traditionalist thought. This newspaper also published the short stories of Mário Sette, such as *Senhora de engenho* (Mistress of the Sugar Plantation) (1937), which gave Freyre the idea of planning a regionalist and traditionalist novel. It was in 1925, on the occasion of the newspaper's centenary, that the first attempt was made to establish a Northeast region going beyond a geographical, natural, economic, or political definition. *O livro do Nordeste* (Book of the Northeast), edited by Freyre, would provide this regional division with a cultural and artistic context, searching out what would become its traditions, its memory, its history. For José Lins do Rêgo, it was there that "the Northeast was discovered as a homeland." In the preface to *O livro do Nordeste*, Freyre (1925) declared the book to be "an investigation of life in the Northeast, the life of five of its states, whose destinies are merged into one, whose roots have been interwoven over this past century."

O livro do Nordeste in some ways anticipated what happened at the Regionalist Conference of Recife in 1926. Although it was not clearly either a cultural-artistic gathering or a political one, the conference served, according to Joaquim Inojosa, "to unite people from Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, and Sergipe, in a single regional patriotism," stimulating "love of our native soil, that healthy enthusiasm and burning ardor that lies at the root of true patriotism." It sought to save the "Northeastern

soul” from the threat of slow but inevitable destruction that was facing Rio and São Paulo. This was how the Northeast could be safeguarded in its Brazilianness from the cosmopolitanism that was destroying the very essence of these cities (Inojosa, 1975: 208–209).

This conference was organized by the Regionalist Center of the Northeast, founded in 1924, which planned to “collaborate with any and every political movement that aimed at the moral and material development of the Northeast and would cooperate in defense of its interests.” The center’s program took the unity of the Northeast as something already clearly defined, although it assumed that one of its tasks would be to put an end to narrow local loyalties in the interest of creating a wide regional community. It was fundamental that this unity of the Northeast be demonstrated to the federal government and the other states of the Union by its efforts to bring about material and moral improvement. The center was to function as an institution capable of gathering together the “elements of Northeastern life and culture, organizing conferences, excursions, and art exhibitions, creating a library of the intellectual productions of the region, past and present, and publishing the journal *O Nordeste*” (Inojosa, 1975: 208–209).

The sudden emergence of the Movimento Autonomista (Home-Rule Movement) in Pernambuco, the creation of the Regionalist Center, and the Regionalist Conference’s subsequent violent struggle against messianic religious movements resulted in endless attacks on Northeastern separatism in the press. What particularly bothered the Southern press was the criticism of a republican regime that “did not know how to limit the almost imperialist outrages committed by the big, rich states” and the demand that “states of Brazil be governed by men with strong, local roots and not by professional politicians who live in Rio de Janeiro and have only contempt for the rest of the country.” How radical this Northeastern regionalism became is evident from the number of middle-class elements and even leaders of the working class who took part in Pernambuco’s Home-Rule Movement. In his *Moleque Ricardo* (1970 [1935]) José Lins do Rêgo reproduced scenes he had witnessed while a student at the Recife Law School, in which the political demands of the working class appeared side by side with those of regionalism (Freyre, 1967 [1926]: 32).

All these various events and actions created and institutionalized even among the less privileged sectors of the population the idea of the Northeast, an idea gradually developed and shaped until it became the most clearly defined regional concept in the country. As such, it came to serve as the basis for demands for economic favors and government jobs that had a success quite out of proportion to the region’s economic importance or political strength. Even the Revolution of 1930 was supported by the regionalists of

the Northeast as a way of putting an end to the Old Republic and thereby to the hegemony of São Paulo, a hegemony that had arisen because the social forces dominant there had found themselves in a position to trade their support for a power pact that let them maintain control of important political areas. At the same time, however, the new federal regime's nationalist policy in the wake of the 1930 Revolution, fostering modernization and industrialization, only served to widen the difference between the Northeast and the South, making the former increasingly subordinate and forcing it to accept an inferior position in the national power structure. In compensation, initiatives such as the Departamento Nacional de Obras Contra as Secas (National Department of Works Against the Drought—DNOCS) and the Instituto do Açúcar e do Alcool (Sugar and Alcohol Institute—IAA) were undertaken. These were institutions designed to speak for the region and distribute the crumbs that fell from the heaven of the federal government into the pockets of the great landowners and businessmen but that only encouraged technological obsolescence while gradually stifling productive investment. This had turned the Northeast into a region virtually living on the institutionalized charity of subsidies, loans that were never repaid, the fraudulent diversion of funds for combating drought, and special tax concessions.

What we can conclude is that the creation of the Northeast arose from practices that had already been slowly mapping it out as an area with certain common characteristics—the struggle against drought, the repression of messianic sects and brigandage, the cabals of political elites working to keep their privileges, etc. But the Northeast also arose from a series of discourse-based efforts to make its inhabitants feel they all belonged to it and to produce a body of knowledge of a clearly regional character.

THE INVENTION OF THE NORTHEAST

“What has been done so far about the Northeast has been to sew it together with its own thread” (quoted by Barros, 1985: 59). This phrase, attributed to Agamenon Magalhães, is perhaps a good way to express the invention of the Northeast in discourse and image.

The first task undertaken by the cultural movement begun by the Regionalist Conference of 1926 to legitimize the geographical division known as the Northeast was to establish an origin for the region. This retrospective regional history sought to give the region a legal definition that was at once both regional and historic. This would reinstate a truth in a continuous historical development in which the only discontinuities would have a negative connotation: things forgotten, illusions, and things hidden. The region was

inscribed in the past as an unfulfilled promise or one never perceived—as a set of indications that foreshadowed or presupposed its existence. The past was to be examined and a list of facts drawn up to show that a regional identity was already present. The history of the Northeast was treated as if it had begun in the sixteenth century.

According to Freyre, for example, one of the factors in the differentiation of the Northeast was the seventeenth-century presence there of the Dutch: he claimed that it was distinct from the rest of Brazil from the moment when Recife was made the administrative center of an area equivalent to the present-day Northeast and a Judaico-Dutch financial, trading, and intellectual center to boot. He attributed to the Portuguese administration the formation of a “regional consciousness” stronger than any sense of nationhood because, had the latter existed, it would have imperiled the colonizing power’s dominion. In this way, he pushed back into the colonial period the awareness of its being a region, the actual existence of the Northeast, and at the same time presented it as one of the factors in the formation of Brazilian national identity. For Freyre the birth of the region came before that of the nation (Freyre, 1977 [1936]: 319–320). Regionalism itself was seen as an element of Brazilian nationality from its earliest beginnings, when their enormous spatial separation bestowed autonomy on each initial focus of settlement and the consequent rivalry between these foci developed simultaneously with a growing animosity toward the mother country. Thus the different regions of Brazil, although defined by their own particular histories, were a string of settlements with similar outlooks that developed convergent customs, heroes, and traditions.

It is fundamental that while Freyre, in tracing the history of the transition that led to the Northeast of 1925, made the drought of 100 years earlier one of its stages, he did so chiefly for its “moral and social consequences.” Although the periodic droughts, like the fact of miscegenation, continued to play their part in any history of the region, it was no longer dependent on the facts of nature to define it. Rather, its origin and development of consciousness were the product of historical facts, especially those of a cultural nature. It was the founding of the Law School, the impact of the *Diário de Pernambuco*, the Dutch invasion and the Pernambucan uprising, and the revolts of 1817, 1824, and 1848 that he presented to us as the origin of this regional identity. The legitimization of the geographic division was now based not on geographical arguments but on historical ones (Freyre, 1941: 107–108).

Looking for the true roots of the region in the cultural field leads to the need to invent a tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1984). The invention of a tradition is an attempt to establish a balance between the new order and the earlier one, to reconcile the new territorial division with the old social and

existential territories. The maintenance of traditions is, in reality, their invention for new purposes—in this case, to ensure the continuance of privileges and social positions that were under threat. Fear of having no place in a new order, of losing the individual and collective memory, of seeing one's world evaporate is what led to the emphasis on tradition in the creation of this Northeast. These traditions were needed as guides on how to behave in a society being transformed and as far as possible to prevent any historical discontinuity. By opting for tradition as a defense of a past in crisis, this Northeastern regional discourse chose misery and paralysis, ensuring that the social groups connected with the long-established ownership of great landholdings retained some of their power at the cost of rendering the region more and more backward in every aspect that we might consider.

To function, the discourse on the region has come to depend on an archive of clichés and stereotypes that can be easily and instantly interpreted and on the prejudices of both the ruling class and the masses as well as on the “known facts” produced by studies on the region. There is above all a recourse to individual or collective memory of the sort that presents the tranquility of a smooth, unbroken reality, of a discourse that works through analogies, ensuring the survival of a past that history is seen to have condemned.

The search for a regional identity is a response to two processes of universalization that interact. The first of these is the globalization of the world through capitalist social and economic relations and worldwide cultural influences, the results of modernization. The other is the nationalization of power relationships—their centralization in the hands of a state that is increasingly bureaucratized. A regional identity allows a memory to be woven, traditions to be invented, an origin to be found that ties the people of the present to a past and gives some sense to existences that seem increasingly meaningless. The “traditional Northeast” is a product of modernity, which can only think of the present.

The feeling of loss is the process whereby the individuals affected become aware of the need to construct for themselves something that is disappearing. As the country's economic, political, and social structure loses its regional character and local cultural codes enter a crisis, the need arises to think about the region and invent it: a place created out of romantic nostalgia, a fantasy portrait of places that no longer exist, a spatial fairytale. It is not for nothing that the supposed traditions of the Northeast are always sought in the fragments of a rural and precapitalist past, in patterns of social interaction and sensibility that are patriarchal if not indeed holdovers from the time of slavery. The “folk,” their lore, and their handicraft production are idealized and regarded as closer to the central verities of the “land” (Magnani, 1948; Neves, 1972).

The work of Luís da Câmara Cascudo stands out in this idealization of the folk element. His writings, far from making a historical or sociological analysis of the folklore data, simply assemble material referring to the rural, patriarchal, and precapitalist society of the Northeast and see folklore as a decisive element in the defense of regional authenticity against the flood of cosmopolitan culture. Although folklorists such as he are presented as defenders of folklore, they are, paradoxically, its worst enemies and detractors because they marginalize it, insisting on its unchanging permanence over time and thus thwarting its creativity, which is tantamount to implying its obsolescence. For such researchers, folklore serves to reveal the essence of the region on the grounds that it is an emotional survival. They see it as a constellation of prelogical elements that predated any culture. Folklore for them is the repository of a repressed regional subconsciousness, an ancestral structure in which we can recognize the ghost of our regional culture. It is the expression of the mentality of the people and, in turn, of the mentality of the region (Fernandes, 1944; Ramos, 1954).

In this discourse, the idea of the “folk” is confused with the ideas of the traditional and the antimodern. The elaboration of a Northeast in words and images has enormous power to affect and convince the underprivileged classes because they can easily recognize themselves in them. What this creation of a regional culture institutes is the idea of a solidarity and a homogeneity between popular cultural codes and the dominant traditional codes. Ordinary people are therefore only reactive to the modern element. Folklore is an element of the integration of the lower orders into this regional whole. It facilitates the absorption of this regional identity by the social classes that seek integration into the new society being formed. It therefore performs a disciplinary function, one of education and the formation of a sensibility based on the perpetuation of customs, habits, and conceptions. It constructs new social codes capable of eliminating the trauma produced by modern society. The use of the folklore element allows the creation of new forms that, in fact, echo old forms of seeing, saying, acting, and feeling that help in the invention of tradition. It is a way of building something new while denying its novelty, attributing it to a fake continuity—exactly what is being done with the region itself. It becomes the link between past and present, allowing “states of the spirit to be perpetuated” (Fernandes, 1979).

This creation of the Northeast has been the work of various intellectuals and artists of various periods. It begins with Gilberto Freyre and the “Recife traditionalist school,” in which writers like José Lins do Rêgo and Ascenso Ferreira participated in the 1920s and 1930s, and continues with the music of Luiz Gonzaga, Zé Dantas, and Humberto Teixeira, from the 1940s, and the plays of Antônio Suassuna, from the 1950s on. Painters such as Cícero Dias

and Lula Cardoso Aires, the poet Manuel Bandeira, and the novelists Rachel de Queiroz and José Américo de Almeida, despite their enormous differences, share this vision of the Northeast and are among those who helped create it.

THE NORTHEASTERN VISION AND DISCOURSE

Traditionalist artists and intellectuals have used memory to support the regional vision and discourse. Their work is in fact a way of organizing the present, a present that seems to elude them. It is as if, in the past, their forebears controlled their own history and that of others and now they see themselves controlled by others and no longer even able to govern themselves. The more history propelled this social group toward its extinction, the more it felt threatened. If this movement were not stopped it would put an end to them and their history and ultimately to history itself. Therefore, like any social group in crisis, this traditional elite tried to ward off its death, to ward off history. To struggle against history is to struggle against finality, and the only guarantee against finality is memory.

The traditionalist discourse regards history as the place where memory is produced, as a discourse of reminiscence and of recognition. In its use of it the subjects of the present recognize themselves in the facts of the past. It presents the region as already existing in the past, needing only to be announced. It uses history to assert an identity, continuity, and tradition and provide evidence of a truth that always existed but was hidden. History in its disruptive aspect is effaced, and in its place an unhistoric regional identity made up of imaginary stereotypes suggestive of moral character is conjured up in which politics is regarded as a destabilizing factor and geographic space as stable, nonpolitical, and natural, divided only in two dimensions: internal and external. The contradictions of the internal dimension are eliminated or minimized, and it is defended against the external dimension, which seeks to deprive it of its essential nature.

The turning of the Northeast in on itself—seeking its identity, its character, its soul, its truth—occurred precisely as the device of nationhood and the formation of the national-popular discourse were promoting the elimination of regional differences and their “integration into the national.” To maintain the “life of this region” was really to keep alive this threatened ascendancy. The spatial memory is, in fact, the memory of an ascendancy in crisis. The region thus arose as a “spatial double,” a space closed to the changes that came from without. The Northeast turned in on itself as a way of protecting itself from the other, the industrial and urban space that was being developed,

notably, in the South of Brazil. The Northeast was a distortion of the national space that began with an alliance of forces that sought to stop the process of national integration originating in the South.

The Northeast of the regionalists and traditionalists is a region formed by depressive, decadent images like those in the novels of José Lins do Rêgo—images that evoke a part of tradition that is being lost, as in these verses from Bandeira's "Minha terra" (1955: 340):

I was born a child of my native country
 I spent thirty years away from it
 Now and again they would tell me
 Your country has changed completely
 It has broad streets, high-rise buildings . . .
 And it's now a fine city!
 My heart stayed that of a child
 I saw my Recife again at last
 It has indeed totally changed
 It does have broad streets, high-rise buildings
 It is today a fine city.
 The devil take those who have done this to it.

The sociological writings of Gilberto Freyre and the writings of the so-called 1930s novelists make memory the principal material of their work. These novelists endeavor to build the Northeast out of their memories of their childhoods, in which the forms of social relationships that are now under threat were dominant. They make their own narratives a manifestation of traditional and popular culture threatened by the modern world and use them as expressions of the regional. While in São Paulo the modernist writers strove to break away from traditional narrative and accepted that the novel itself was in crisis in the modern world, in the Northeast the regional and traditionalist movement turned around and brought back folktales and memory as the only place in life for a modern humanity torn apart by machines. For the regionalists, narrative was where one found oneself again, away from a place where one's identity was threatened. Their novels sought, as in an epic poem, to ensure the continuity of what was being narrated—to guarantee that future generations would reproduce their world, purified and suspended in memory, the world of the "region."⁵

For a region to be created by memory implies that the idea of survival exists in a vacuum. The past appears in all the joy of rediscovery and provokes, at the same time, the sad awareness that it is gone. This mechanism of recall that is the Brazilian novel of the 1930s is also the mechanism of destruction—the bringing back to consciousness of a lost era.

The emphasis on memory on the part of the traditionalists comes from this wish to prolong the past into the present and (who knows?) turn it into the future. They loathe history because it establishes a divide between different epochs. It is the discovery of the historicity of everything and, hence, of its transitory and changeable nature that provokes this feeling of anguish.⁶

This spatial memory, aesthetically recalled, was supposed to inspire the creation of a better future, free of *nouveaux riches* and bourgeois affectation and utilitarianism: a regional space made to endure over time, built out of monuments, landscapes, human types, social relations, symbols, and images strewn across this power-based territory. It is in the memory that the fragments of history, personal memories, catastrophes, and epic facts that shape the face of this region all come together. It is a space without gaps, filled completely by the texts, images, and sounds that give it density—a space in which nothing is provisional, in which everything seems as solid as a stone-built plantation house, with furniture of mahogany and jacaranda wood, where everything seems calm and delightfully lazy, like relaxing in a hammock or moving to and fro in a rocking chair, a region of permanence, of gentle rhythms, of a settled culture, of family, affectionate and childlike.

This childlike and affectionate visibility of the region is outstandingly expressed in Ascenso Ferreira's poetry, although the technique he used to express it shows him to have been one of the first artists in Pernambuco to follow the path of modernism. His vision of the Northeast, in his own words, "was shaped by his contacts with the people who came to his uncle's ranch, where he worked: where men from different places came together, bringing the sounds of the sugar mill, of the outback, coconut, tap dancing, viola music, ghost stories, hunting, fishing, journeys, tales, etc." This material from his life in *Fronteira* (the name of his uncle's ranch), between the country and the city, this range of popular and folkloric material would be written up bit by bit as Gilberto Freyre's articles "awoke in him a love of the things of our rural tradition." He gathered traditional material that he used to compose, employing modernist forms of expression, "a poetry to express the regional reality" (Ferreira, 1963: 6–7).

For Ferreira, the Northeast was the timeless home of a Brazilian social fellowship threatened with destruction by "foreign civilization." He wanted his poetry to help preserve this Northeastern soul, "sometimes lighthearted, sometimes bitter, its festivals, its plantations and its wilderness." In his poetry, as in the paintings of Cícero Dias, there is no wish for social justification. It seeks only to "understand the totality of life in the Northeast, expressing its pure essence, its soul unstained by modernity" (Ferreira, 1963: 6).

Understanding the "soul of his native land" and discovering his own identity were also the concerns of José Lins do Rêgo. For him, organizing his

personal memory was equivalent to organizing the regional memory. The discovery of a “regional psychology” was the discovery of the region itself, and it emerged from the discovery of his own identity as a person and as an intellectual. The Northeast is the spatial image internalized in his boyhood on the Santa Rosa plantation, the land of the (upper-, landowning-class) Carlos de Mello, and the (lower-, peasant-class) Ricardo—a melancholy space and one full of shadows, a space of nostalgic memories (Rêgo, 1981 [1956]: 6). His initial intention had been to write a memoir of his grandfather as his contribution to ensuring that the younger generation would remember the men who had created the glory of a past epoch in the region. This idea became transformed into a series of novels written under the direct influence of his friend Gilberto Freyre as a way of putting the region’s memory into words. His claim to spontaneity and truthfulness turned this work with memory into something uncritical of the past. Although he claimed to be impartial, in fact his novels express a particular way of seeing reality—it is from the porch of the big house, seated beside his grandfather, that he looks out at “his country,” the Northeast (Rêgo, 1971 [1932]).

This concern to understand the soul of the country, its spirituality, rooted in the supernatural, transcendence, and religious belief, also permeates the work of the poet Jorge de Lima. In his position as a “Catholic” poet, he attempts to capture the dark wells of memory and the subconscious of a Northeastern Catholicism in which the sacred is mixed with nature and with concrete social ties. His is a Northeast of a black soul, mystic, spiritual, and oppressed, seeking redemption in God, a Northeast where the mixture of blood is confused with spirits and social roles (Lima, 1949: 237–238):

There flow in my veins
three runaway slave girls, two bandits,
the father of a third, two vagabonds, one railroad engineer
two brawlers.
There was born one native American woman,
one Brazilian maiden,
one with blue eyes,
one going to her first communion.

Raquel de Queiroz is concerned with the dichotomy of time and space. For her time, in contrast to space, had no stability; one could not go and return within it. What happened in time disappeared, went away and never came back. To her great sorrow she realized that the past was something that could melt away, flow away like water through the sieve of time. In her work, the dimension of time is painful for humanity because the only marks it leaves

are memories, whose witnesses are people who also pass away and are transformed. We have no control over time; we only suffer it, defenseless. Time passes through us, but we cannot pass through it. Time uses us up like garbage, diminishes us, and enlarges us. The eyes we had when we were 30 disappear, as does our way of seeing things. It is reason, for which space is the repository of the memory, of the marks of time, that should protect us from this sense of vertigo. Space should be the preserving dimension of life (Queiroz, 1948 [1932]: 125; 1989: 136–137).

Likewise in the music of Luiz Gonzaga, awareness of the lacerating character of time—this modern view of time—often gives way to a cyclic view that emerges from the very image of the region as close to nature. His is a Northeast where time describes a circle between drought and rain, a region divided between sadness and joy. Even for those who leave the region, the migrants, the Northeast seems like a fixed space of nostalgia. The Northeast appears always to lie in the past, in the memory, evoked as a place to which one wants to return, a place that will remain unchanged. Places, loves, family, beloved animals, little farm are as if suspended in time in the hope that one day the migrant will return and find everything just as he left it. The Northeast is wilderness, space without history, hostile to change, a wilderness where the campfire still warms the heart, without radio and without news of civilized lands.

Ariano Suassuna's plays and novels are also attuned to building the Northeast as a traditional space on a sacramental vision of memory, where "a rough aristocracy and simple people lived together with the temporal and the permanent on a single plane of particular and immediate interests." For Suassuna, time is a dimension of death, which, along with hunger, thirst, sickness, want of clothing, suffering, chance, bad luck, and need, was destroying the region that he tried to preserve in his work—the Northeast, with death its heraldic blason, savage death, the mother of all (Muzart, 1977: xv; see also Suassuna, 1964; 1965; 1977). Suassuna's Northeast, unlike Freyre's, is the Northeast of the outback, the "enchanted kingdom of the hinterland." His work is directed at identifying this area as the real Northeast, which had "nobility" rather than just "crazy, stupid religious prophets and filthy, cruel bandits"—a nobility comparable to that which flourished in the "civilization of the sugar plantations" but without the pretensions and affectations of the "massas" and their ladies. It is this Northeast "kingdom," deprived and poverty-stricken, that is the basis of his work, the reason for its existence, the motive behind his epic and his poor, lost heroes.

In his struggle with history, Suassuna constructs the Northeast as the kingdom of myths, of the dominion of timelessness, of the sacred, of the lack of differentiation between nature and society. Seizing on the epic genre, mythic

narrative structure, and, especially, the narrative structures of the magical realism of Brazilian chapbook poetry, he invents his Northeast, “kingdom of bandits, epics, and the sacred”—a backlands space constructed in the city through childhood memories and folklore, a space that has not yet lost its magic, a kingdom of mysteries in which the wonderful is mixed with the cruellest reality and gives it meaning. This is a Northeast directly linked to the medieval past of the Iberian Peninsula, a baroque, anti-Renaissance, anti-modern Northeast. The discourse of the Northeast—the language in which to express it—must therefore be sought in the theatrical forms of medieval Spain and Portugal and in those of ordinary people—in the folk tradition that has retained many of these “archaic” forms. Suassuna’s work represents the use of the narrative forms of chapbook poetry—forms well suited to representing a space in which there are no borders between the real and the imagined, between the sentimental and the antipoetic, between pagan and divine, between tragic and comic, between madness and reason (Queiroz, 1972: xi–xii).

Although their works are very different, these writers have in common having been the constructors of a Northeast whose ways of seeing and speaking are centered in memory, in reaction against what is modern, in the search for a past as a temporal dimension indicated positively in their relation to the present. This Northeast is a mechanism of image and discourse that works against personal independence and originality and supports routine and submissiveness, even when this routine is not an explicit objective. It is a discursive mechanism that tries to prevent people from taking command of their own history, making them live a ready-made history provided by others who considered it only natural to live always in the same way, with the same injustices and miseries. If the past was better than the present and is the best promise of the future, then all of us should fight to bring back the former territories that history has ruined.

NOTES

1. On the question of the origin in history, see Sússekind (1990: 15–21).
2. On the relationship between the socioeconomic crisis, politics, and regionalist elaborations, see Bastos (1986: 236–37); on the feeling of fragmentation caused by modernization, see Helena (1985: 21–22).
3. IFOCS was not in fact formed until 1924. The election of a nordestino (Epitácio Pessoa) as president in 1918 so invigorated the existing IOCS that it was reformed as IFOCS at the accession of his hostile *mineiro* successor Artur Bernardes, precisely to enable him to trim its budget and reduce its effectiveness. With a revival of federal interest, following the Revolution of 1930, IFOCS was in turn replaced by DNOCS. —Translator’s note.

4. On Oswald de Andrade's visit to Recife, see Inojosa (1975: 259). On the repercussions of the drought on São Paulo and the fund-raising campaigns, see "Pelas vítimas das secas" (1920).
5. On the crises of the novel in the modern world and its function as a reproducer of tradition, see Benjamin (1985: 197–198).
6. On the coexistence or linear succession of temporalities, see Deleuze (1987: 83–93); on the emergence of history as a paradigm of the modern episteme, see Foucault (1985: 231–233).

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