When “I” Am Also the “Other”: The Dual Nationality Dilemma in *Cunhatai*

Cintia Paula Andrade de Carvalho  
Federal University of Bahia, Bahia, Brazil;  
Bahia Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology, Bahia, Brazil  
Nancy Rita Ferreira Vieira  
Federal University of Bahia, Bahia, Brazil

The novel *Cunhatai* (2003), by Cuiabàn writer Maria Filomena Bouissou Lepecki (1961), besides paying attention to a barely represented segment in historiography—including the literature directed towards the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870)—with the representation of women in the feud and the interpretation of the conflict from a female point of view, employs another stratagem to erase the notion of nation and its unfolding: the dual nationality. The book addresses Ângelo’s dilemma, who gets married to Micaela which is the plot main character. This Army Officer is son of a Brazilian man and a Paraguayan, and he ought to live with an effusion of ethnic and cultural heritage, that is disturbing due to his role as a spy inside the Brazilian Imperial Army. Ângelo speaks Portuguese and Spanish, but when he is dreaming he speaks Guarani. This paper presents a reflection about the Ângelo’s ambivalent condition through the war scenario as an example of sliding of superposed and negotiated identities which opposes the essentialist perspective of national identity.

*Keywords*: *Cunhatai*, nation, dual nationality

**Introduction**

Throughout the Ph.D. research, I have been trying to analyze how historical fiction narratives, visiting the theme of the War of the Triple Alliance, cause erasures to the identity project of the countries involved in the conflict, setting in motion a heterogeneous and complex scenario of representation, enunciation, and negotiation of identification from various sources. The raised hypothesis is that contemporary fiction narratives, which compose the *corpus*, reflect the tension between cultural differences intrinsic to the nations and, at the same time, the external resemblances to the national state, which wipes the idea of nation as a homogeneous “imagined community”, concept coined by Benedict Anderson (2008). Therefore, in broaching this theme, such narratives were suggesting the idea that the nation is losing its privileged place for producing sense of identity.

According to North American cultural anthropologist Katherine Verdery (2000), the symbol of nation has been changing its meaning, since the modern States are unable of fulfilling all promises of autonomy and well-being inherited from the 18th century, becoming what is called “basic operator” amongst diffuse
categories in “a vast social classification system”. This argument assumes significant importance for this study when it is observed, in the analyzed works, different types of relationship between characters and the symbol of the nation.

The novel Cunhataí, published in 2003 by the Cuiaban writer Maria Filomena Bouissou Lepecki, is part of the research corpus. The narrative, besides paying close attention to the representation of women in the War of the Triple Alliance and the interpretation of the conflict from a female point of view, employs another stratagem to erase the notion of nation and its unfolding: the dual nationality. This article aims to ponder Ângelo’s ambivalent condition through the war scenario as an example of sliding of superposed and negotiated identities which opposes the essentialist perspective of national identity.

**A Spy of the Dual Nationality**

The Ângelo’s character is “son of a Brazilian father with the purest Lusitanian lineage and a Paraguayan mother, descendant of Spanish” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 29). Besides being fluent in Portuguese and Spanish languages and familiar with both cultures, he dominates the Guarani, the second spoken language in Paraguay. Amerindian language which has not lost itself in contact with native Spanish colonizer and it is very present in the character’s memories: from the songs modulated by his nursemaid who cradled him when he was a baby, to those songs sung by his fellows of nursery rhymes.

Having lost his parents when he was a child, Angelo was brought up by his Paraguayans grandparents. At 14, he received López’s invitation to accompany him on a diplomatic trip to several European countries. López asked the boy’s grandmother’s permission, she was Solano’s mother’s friend. The narrative mentions that the request is more like an order. And abuela authorizes it, “not daring to deny permission, both by the man’s charm in front of her as by the twinkle in her grandson’s eyes...” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 126).

During the trip, the Commander’s generosity struck the young man. After all, in his first night in Paris, he had arranged his night out with beautiful Mimi. From that moment, Ângelo began to venerate Solano “as a leader, as a friend and as a father”. Between them came up “a strong bond: some kind of code of honor, a macho camaraderie” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 128).

In 1854, when Ângelo’s grandmother entrusts him to Solano, the teenager follows the Paraguayan entourage to Europe. The group includes Captains Yegros, Aguiar, and Brizuela, and Benigno—the Commander’s brother. The narrative mentions the trip’s goal: “to establish new commercial contacts, to narrow diplomatic alliances, to purchase weapons and to order ships” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 126). For that, Antônio López’s son has carried lots of money and, according to the text, this caused a good impression on England.

Nigel Cawthorne, in *The Empress of South America* (2015), disagrees with the version that Solano had impressed all British. According to the researcher, Queen Victoria refused to receive him. However, in France, he was received by Louis Napoleon and the Empress Eugène.

But Solano did not limit himself to diplomatic actions. In Paris, he alternated “official commitments with parties and banquets” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 126). The narrative also mentions how Angelo witnessed the beginning of the relationship between Solano López and Elisa Lynch.

Wistfully, Ângelo recalls that the general stood up against his family when he decided to take Elisa to Paraguay. He remembers the discussion between Solano and Benigno when he tries to discourage his older brother from his decision, arguing it would be stupidity and “it could cost the López family name and his father’s political reputation!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 129). After all, the religious and moralist society in Asunción
would never accept his relationship with a married woman. Solano refused his brother’s intervention and said: “Benigno, esa mujer me la llevo al Paraguay. No me importa lo que piense ni lo que diga el mundo entero!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 130).

Madame Lynch was also fond of Ângelo, “young man who was always close to his general, who had to follow all chapters of this romance. He became increasingly closer to Solano” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 129). The officer used to join the Solano family meetings. From my point of view, he was considered family member (Lepecki, 2003, p. 33).

After one of these dinners, in the presence of Madame Lynch and the children at the table, the sovereign announces to Ângelo that “he was about to declare war to Brazil and there was an especial mission for him at the Empire” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 33). He convinced Ângelo to infiltrate in the Imperial Army as a spy for the Paraguayan government, claiming the boy had the perfect alibi: legitimate Brazilian documents, residence in court, and some years of experience from the Military School in Rio de Janeiro.

Although considering this very risky and unseemly mission, Ângelo’s loyalty prevents him from denying the request: “Yo tengo toda la certeza de que soy y seré siempre leal al país de mi madre y abuelos que me criaron!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 34). He feels stuck to Solano and to Paraguay: “Even his friend making an unlimited number of mistakes, [...] what brought them together was something tenuous like a thread, but it had the strength of a thousand men: the honor of a word given” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 130).

It is known that Brazilian people refers to Solano as a dictator: “Bloodthirsty wasn’t strong enough. Everyone considered him a monster” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 131). Even so, “the monster was his friend” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 131). For Ângelo, people certainly called him that way because they did not know El Mariscal’s other characteristics: “the great mediator Solano was in the conflicts between provinces? Do they ignore his decisive participation in Argentina’s unification, something that general Urquiza was hugely grateful for?” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 130).

He acknowledges that, by the time the conflict started, the president enjoyed prestige amongst Paraguayan people: “Didn’t they know that Paraguay and Solano were one? Didn’t they know the people venerated him and they referred to him as El Supremo, priously Francia’s nickname?” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 130). Ângelo sees people’s immersion into the El Mariscal’s figure in a way that even being outnumbered by the Brazilian Army they were convinced of fighting by their country. By their point of view, in Paraguay, “they were all soldiers! Because defending the republic was to defend their land” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92). The rejection to monarchy is embedded by this feeling, because different from Brazil in Paraguayan territory “every man was responsible by their own piece of land and ate what planted” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92).

To underline the dilemma Ângelo was facing, the narrative mentions, at various moments, digressions pointing out the character’s reflexive state. By those passages, the novel exposes historiographical data about the war and historic characters. He recollects Solano’s extravagant demonstrations of love for Elisa. One of them was the farm he gave his companion as a gift: “‘The largest farm of the world’, [...] more than 74,000ac inward Brazil. From North to South, I wouldn’t even know to precise the distance” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 186).

We have to emphasize the wealth into the López family hands. Michael Lillis and Ronan Fanning, in Calúnia (2002), point out that Elisa not only received many expansive presents from Solano but also became a very successful woman as soon as she arrived to Paraguay. Following the president’s family example, she purchased lands and she got involved in cattle commerce and Tabaco, as well as lent money with high interests to people.
Ángelo remembers how Solano had planned the invasion, when he kidnapped the Brazilian ship Marquês de Olinda, in December 1864. The steamship was transporting the future governor of Mato Grosso province and several authorities who accompanied him to the inauguration day. As for the ongoing war, there is no doubt of El Mariscal’s cleverness and it is absolutely certain that Solano “always has a card up his sleeves. If a door closes, a window always opens” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 188).

At the same time, he recognizes the heroic endurance of the Brazilian soldiers, at the moment of the invasion to the Coimbra fort. There is a mention to Lieutenant Antônio João, who after giving the retreat order to the citizens of Colônia Militar de Dourados decided to defend the post from the Paraguayans:

Him and thirteen other soldiers! As if they did not know it was impossible, with all the Paraguayan cavalry at the city doors. Thousands of soldiers! A hero is truly a hero when he is recognized as so by his enemies. A fearless that Lieutenant! (Lepecki, 2003, p. 187)

But Ángelo is not naive about El Mariscal’s intimidating power. The same way he is led to believe that Solano considers him as a member of his family, by the way he is treated; he knows what the man is capable of doing to the family members who disagree with his ideas.

The young man faces difficulties to keep contact with the espionage chain. Despite having the Coronel Mayor Patent amongst Paraguay forces, at the Imperial Army Ángelo Zavírria de Alencar becomes Engineering Lieutenant. He lives under constant pressure, afraid of being found out. By attempting to divert Captain Ildefonso Santa Cruz’s attention Ángelo began to court Micaela. By her side he sees himself “relieved for a moment, which was a lot, considering how much the increasing worries ravaging him” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 45).

Captain Santa Cruz mistrusted Ángelo; he questioned him many times about a red handkerchief he used to wear. Indeed, it was a signal for the Paraguayans he intended to meet them. The code word was a reference to Madame Lynch: “Do you know where the most beautiful woman in the world is?” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 31). The countersign was “in the decorated room, third floor of Rive Gauche” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 32). For the Captain, there was something wrong with the Lieutenant who couldn’t hold his look, “a typical attitude of a fake person” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 44).

At the balls held out to the officers, the Lieutenant amused himself in Micaela’s company, taking her many times to dance. But his actions had consequences: A young woman cannot dance repeatedly with the same man, and mainly, in more than one event without getting compromised. The constant company of the Lieutenant endangers the girl’s honor; when Ángelo realizes this, he decides to marry the girl, just before leaving Campinas.

Weighing the reasons that led him to marry Micaela, he considers himself “a fake husband” who uses the girl as a war weapon. Immediately he imagines what his Paraguayan grandmother would think of his behavior: “Certainly would be outraged if he had despised so much this holy sacrament!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 65). So, he reasoned how “unfortunate was Solano’s idea of making him a spy, making him “a traitor of Brazil”. With so many moral doubts no one can be a good spy!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 65).

It is clear that, not only moral principles were causing anguish to Ángelo: “A light had lit deep in his spirit. [...] It results of years of severe religious education and came up at that time to hinder again his intentions” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 65). In several excerpts, the narrative states his concerns how disgusted his grandmother would be. Even the possible opinion of the brothers, who shared a room with him when he was single, bothered him:
What would the priest say if he had knowledge he prayed for Paraguay? At least was the same God, which put the Creator in an uncomfortable situation: Who He would listen to? What the Almighty would do in such impasse? (Lepecki, 2003, p. 35)

So, his grandmother’s steady voice haunted him: “Dios hace siempre ló mejor, m’hijo, aunque nosotros no logremos nunca entender” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 35).

However, Ângelo is aware that there is no way back at this point. He decides not to consummate the marriage. After all, “not being necessary to the glory of Paraguay, and having fulfilled the distraction role, it was not required to dishonor the girl. Despite being a spy he was also a gentleman! In a disturbed way, but noble!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 66). Besides, he does not expect to see her ever again. And even if the marriage was not annulled, “at the least she would be a young widow when he was presumed dead or missing in action. She could even inherit his father’s house in São Cristóvão, next to Imperial Palace! She would have some kind of reparation…” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 66).

But the things did not happen as he had planned. When Micaela, disguised, follows the Imperial troops, it is inevitable the narrowing of the young woman’s connection with her husband during the trip. It presents itself one more reason to Ângelo’s uncertainty about his actions in war.

If the espionage mission was not stressful enough for the Lieutenant, even more disturbing, is facing the situation immersed in a bolide of ethnic and cultural heritage. Ângelo’s strong bond to the Guarani culture represents a threat to his disguise, because in his terrible nightmares he speaks and screams in Guarani language. For that, he was always careful to sleep amongst the monks, because he thought they had the heaviest sleep and “they did not question his absences in the middle of the night” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 28).

Besides all that, there were his Brazilian friends. He sympathizes with the group:

It got harder and harder to see them as enemies. Would he be able to kill them in combat? How would his friends look at him in a confrontation? That was something he wanted strongly never happened. Killing a total stranger wouldn’t be that hard. In a fight, it would be another imperialist Brazilian, a slave owner, enemy of the Republic and Paraguay. But how could he shoot at close range at Chinchorro? Could he thread a bayonet point in Taunay? If his life was in danger or any Paraguayan person, yes, and that is the worst part. (Lepecki, 2003, pp. 131-132)

At certain point of his marriage, the officer realizes he is in love with his “countryside wife”. This only increases his desperation. He curses the war, the Brazilian slave owners, and the nightmares. The conflict between the love for his wife and the love for his country becomes “the cruelest of the ambushes”. He feels condemned, “divided being”, a “half man”. He knows to win the battle “man has to be a whole. He needs to be in harmony with himself” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 183).

He also knows taking her with him is out of question: “Take her? For what? For sooner or later incur the wrath of a Paraguayan any, maddened with the holy and righteous because of his war? Never […] He cursed the war!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 132). His fellow Paraguays would not accept her. In a dead end, he decides to abandon Micaela and his mission, forging his death.

In fact, in the Lieutenant’s identity constitution his references of Paraguayan nationality are stronger than the Brazilian ones; he recognizes himself as a citizen and soldier Paraguayan. His admiration for Solano reinforces this identification. He is a man who contains within himself a space of conflict.

In certain excerpts, the officer tries to convince himself that he needs to fight for su patria. So, he tries to establish contrasts between Brazil and Paraguay, from the recognition that, in the first slavery is an evil that devastates the country while the second configures itself as a nation of free men: “And [Solano] had the full
loyalty of the people, something that certainly did not happen with the emperor. It was just looking at that black army. An army with numerous deserters!” (Lepcki, 2003, p. 188).

Ângelo’s thoughts do not sound biased, but a logical inference about the feeble loyalty from the Brazilian soldiers towards the promoted ideals by Imperial government. It is noteworthy that among the Paraguayan population there was few Paraguayans of African origin. Not to mention that Carlos Antonio López started the slavery abolition process in the country in 1842, long before the United States and Brazil (Lillis & Fanning, 2009).

According to Ângelo’s perception, “the poor of Paraguay were natural warriors who admired and feared Solano and fought with determination and courage for the homeland honor. There was no man who was not a soldier. In Brazil, there were slaves and chains” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 91). They were, therefore, nations “different in dealing with the people” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 91).

Aware that the army is composed largely of volunteers, Angelo wonders how far the Brazilian soldiers’ loyalty will go. He suspected they would remain to fill the ranks of the battalions as long as “good times, payment of wages and the food” kept coming. While acknowledging the existence of genuine volunteers, he is aware of the large number of former slaves composing columns. He has knowledge of the numerous cases of wealthy farmers that had children claimed by the army and they sent some slaves to replace them. Or yet did as an “owner of a mill in Paraiba that renamed the property: Paraguay. He hid the young men of the family there and, when they noticed the absence of the boys in the city, he said proudly,—they went to Paraguay!—He was not lying...” (Lepecki, 2003, pp. 91-92).

So he asks: “How many were enlisted by force, under threat of the whip? And how many were enlisted by the simple promise of freedom and the first pair of boots? (Lepecki, 2003, p. 91). “Could they be patriots? How prepared were they? (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92). At Ângelo’s understanding “this was certainly one of the points in favor of Paraguayan glory” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92).

On the other hand, the idea of dual nationality, near of the dual origin concept, affects him. At some other parts, the narrative shows Ângelo’s impressions with regard to the similarities between the two countries. At the same time in which they are both exuberant—in the “strength of Prata basin and the dryness of the savannas of the countryside; the heat of the fords and the cold of the mountain range; calm winds and fierce storm”—they share the shame of sustaining social gap between “rich sophisticated” and “poor farmers” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92). In the case of Paraguay, for instance, there are just two possible situations: “to belong to a restricted group of friends of López family—the elite—or being a peasant. But everybody knew the letters and the numbers, and there was nobody starving in Guarani land!” (Lepecki, 2003, p. 92).

The text operates the deconstruction of Paraguayan identity illusion essentially closed to show how much Ângelo is bothered by acting as a spy among the Brazilians. The conviction he is supposed to fight for su patria is constantly crossed by questionings. He resents the fact he used Micaela as an instrument of war. It terrifies him the idea of, at some point, returning to Paraguayan side and having to fight some of his peers of the engineering body, with whom he established a friendship. The Lieutenant is, as we can say, in-between places, to use, for the purpose of this text, the term coined by Silviano Santiago.

In Homi Bhabha (1994)’s words,

“The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity—cultural or psychic—that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the cultural to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historic reality. If, […] the subject of desire is never simply a Myself, then the Other is never simply an It-self. (p. 74)
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This perspective of interpretation from the process of the subject’s identification, mentioned by Bhabha, is powerful to think Ângelo’s condition. The young man’s identity formation, until certain point of his life, is not constructed from some sort of refusal of the Brazilian characteristics. During his time in Brazil, his Brazilian ancestry is not rejected. This occurs only by deflagration of war. The officer declares Paraguay as being sua pátria and he decides that the Brazilian people, from this point on, become the Other. On these terms, the refusal to be Brazilian is not necessary to make them his enemies.

However, for Angelo this operation is not that simple because his identity constitution is already undermined by the presence of reference cultural features from those he seeks to define as his Other, that is, at certain times, his Other, the Brazilian, is also Himself. The experience he had with Brazilian culture left marks. The friendship and love for those who should be the Other had affected Ângelo in his inner Self.

In the war scenario, he does not see his Other the same way that his Paraguayan compatriots. In this sense, we must consider Stuart Hall’s statement that culture is not a return trip, but a trip focused in production, to bring forth yourself.

**Conclusion**

Through Ângelo’s dilemmas, Maria Filomena Lepecki’s novel enhances the discussion around the concept of a fluid and fragmented identity, argued by Hall, contrasting ancient narrative representations which favor identities around the “centered individual”. So, we follow up the “conflicting representation” of the character, which faces the predicament of porosity in territorial and cultural boundaries of the being, at the same time, Paraguayan and Brazilian man.

Maria Lepecki, while Brazilian, darkens the notion of writing produced on the precepts of a purely nationalist approach. Through Ângelo’s character, she raises questions about which side is the correct one. The Paraguayan officer defends Solano and exposes his qualities and his motives to face the war. With that, the author puts in perspective the motivations of the own Brazilian nation in participating at this conflict. It is the exposition of the reasons of the conflict built under another prism.

In this sense, it can be said that Cunhatai (2003) allows you to think about the possibility that contemporary fiction, which reinterprets the War of the Triple Alliance, questions the hypothesis raised by some literary scholars that, in recent decades, the production of Brazilian literature is entering a process of thinning of nationalism paradigm.

**References**


