

Kesha Fikes

**MANAGING AFRICAN PORTUGAL**

Chapel Hill, NC, Duke University  
Press, 2009, 195 pages.

*Managing African Portugal* by US anthropologist Kesha Fikes is an ethnographic account of how Portugal's mid-1990s economic and social integration into the European Union (EU) fundamentally changed everyday encounters between Portuguese citizens and African immigrants. Fikes' book is a thoughtful assessment of how colonial legacies

impact contemporary social relations in an EU context and is a poignant critique of how government-sponsored "multiculturalist" programs can increase the marginality of the people they purport to help. She records the roughly fifteen years of "Europeanization" in Portugal, a period defined by "modernization," profound shifts in the job market, and changing attitudes towards race. During this time, Portugal ceased to be a country from which people left, but instead became a "country of immigration," a shift corroborated by the visibility of African migrants.

Fikes' protagonists are the Cape Verdean *peixeiras* (fishmongers) of Cais do Sodré (a transportation hub in Lisbon), who experienced a "racialization" of their low-wage workplace starting in the mid-1990s, as Portuguese women left to find work in less-stigmatized professions. As Portugal joined the Euro monetary zone in 1999, the Cape Verdean *peixeiras*' fish selling near Cais do Sodré became increasingly criminalized, often under the guise of sanitary concerns; their marginal, but fulfilling livelihoods came to be seen as incompatible with a vision of Lisbon as a European city of global commerce and tourism. Yet *peixeiras* continued their work amidst police harassment and indifference on the part of citizens, "moraliz[ing] the act of selling fish as a working-class necessity and thus as a righteous political stance. [*Peixeiras*] thereby embedded themselves in the national working-poor narrative about the right of the poor to maintain themselves" (p. 106). Regardless, come the mid-2000s, only the few Cape Verdean *peixeiras* who had amassed enough capital to rent or purchase vending booths in newly "approved" facilities were able to continue selling fish. Notably, poor older Portuguese women continued to sell flowers and candy without licenses on an irregular basis at Cais do Sodré, while Cape Verdean *peixeiras* had left the site for good by early 2005. To Fikes, this inconsistency reveals that the government was concerned more about *who* was working informally than about the presence of a supposedly antiquated means of earning a living.

Frustrated, the majority of Cape Verdean *peixeiras* who left the trade took up the work of urban-poor Portuguese women: the *limpeza* (cleaning) of the city's homes and businesses. Though poorly paid and tightly controlled, work in *limpeza* became widespread in the 1990s. The EU-fueled expansion of the Lisbon metropolitan

area, together with the emergence of larger middle and upper-middle classes, increased the demand for cleaning and other domestic services. Through this process, attitudes were changed about the "old" divisions of labor; the country's new "Europeanness" was thought to be compromised by the presence of Portuguese women in low-wage jobs such as *limpeza*. Fikes attests that the association of poor African women with *limpeza* came to "confirm" Portugal's newfound modernity, as they took up their "proper" role in service of white Portuguese citizens. In the move to *limpeza*, notes Fikes, Cape Verdean women were disempowered vis-à-vis a drastic reduction in their monthly income and estrangement from the general populace with whom they could no longer interact as self-functioning entrepreneurs.

Portugal's integration into the supranational EU and neoliberal global market during the 1990s profoundly changed the relations between the state, its citizens, and immigrants. In the ethnographic portion of her text, Fikes describes these "distant, yet polished" interactions, in which former colonizers and the colonized "perform" normality as a strategy of coexistence. As the project of constructing a European identity accelerated, African immigrants came to be used in defining what the "new" Portugal was and was not, while their existence reinforced Portugal's rightful place in "white" Europe. Fikes asserts that the Portuguese citizen now reproduces his/her citizenship by means of "encountering" the migrant. These enactments of EU modernity gave birth to a new practice of engaging difference in Portugal, one that privileged European "multicultural" or "integrationalist" models instead of the Portuguese Lusotropicalism of the middle-twentieth century. As a result, Fikes maintains, the famed *mes-tiço* colonial subject became "Africanized," and the former collective Lusotropical

empire gave way to the separate spaces of “Lusofonia”. These efforts served to clarify any pre-existing Lusotropical confusions regarding who was and was not Portuguese.

Fikes’ work in Portugal has not been without its critics. Luís Batalha (2004, *The Cape Verdean Diaspora in Portugal: Colonial Subjects in a Postcolonial World*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books: 146-147) writes,

“According to [Fikes], there is a ‘national, racialized public conflict’ between the Portuguese state and the black *badia* [from the Island of Santiago] *peixeiras*, through which the Portuguese white mainstream society was trying to disempower the black Cape Verdean women, preventing them from peddling in the streets and consequently throwing them into *limpeza*... It is as if there were a sort of national racial conspiracy aimed at cornering black Cape Verdean women in the janitorial and cleaning services, which, according to her, are seen by the white post-colonial mainstream as the proper trades for black women.”

Batalha objects to Fikes’ idea that the Portuguese state is “racializing” the job market of *limpeza*, “forcing black Cape Verdean women out of peddling and throwing them into the domestic and janitorial services” (Batalha 2004: 148). Believing that Fikes misrepresents the world of *limpeza* in Portugal, Batalha disagrees with her assertion that cleaning is the only work currently “allowed” to African women, citing as evidence that jobs in *limpeza* are offered to women from other migrant groups as well.

In her interpretation of the fish selling-*limpeza* trajectory of Cape Verdean women, however, Fikes neither points to a “conspirator” who explicitly prevented the *peixeiras* from selling fish and cast them into *limpeza*, nor she does mention a conspiracy “[to route *peixeiras*] into *limpeza*” (Batalha 2004: 150) or that the Portuguese state has

promulgated a racial conflict. To postulate the “turn” to *limpeza* in terms of a conspiracy to disempower Cape Verdean women and help Portugal define an EU “identity of opposition,” as Batalha believes Fikes’ work does, implies causality, a mechanism of causation, and a certain notion of historical time. Rather, Fikes explains why the Cape Verdean *peixeiras* went to work in *limpeza*, but she does not say this change was inevitable. Like Foucault, Fikes practices a history that exposes the contingency of what came to be, without saying that there was a plan that steered events toward an intended result. It seems that she would agree with Foucault’s premise that “there is no locus of power that dictates social order; rather, power functions in capillary form through decentred networks of institutions and apparatuses” (Michael Hardt, 2010, “Militant life”, *New Left Review*, 64: 152). Furthermore, Batalha’s mention of non-African women working in *limpeza*, a fact recognized by Fikes herself (pp. 139-142), does not sufficiently refute Fikes’ assertion that the field came to be thought of as “black” work. That Cape Verdean women are not the only workers in *limpeza* does not mean that the field cannot be associated with the African woman. Lastly, Batalha overstates the definitiveness that Fikes gives to her own work. Like many works of contemporary anthropology, Fikes’ ethnography is provisional and non-teleological, and she makes no universal claims about the authority of her project. This “impermanence,” however, does not mask her hope for real change and progress towards achieving what she values, namely a more just world for people who suffer from discrimination, a group that includes the Cape Verdean ex-*peixeiras* of Cais do Sodré.

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