Enhancing Cultural Studies through a Web-Enabled Database

Else R P Vieira

Enhancing Cultural Studies through a Web-Enabled Database

The Sights and Sounds of the Emerging Culture of the MST

Else R P Vieira, Queen Mary, University of London, UK

Abstract: The web-enabled database "The Sights and Sounds of Dispossession: The Fight for the Land and the Emerging Culture of the MST (Movement of the Landless Workers of Brazil)" projects, through more than 500 resources across several media, the expressions of over twenty million dispossessed people who formalized this major Social Movement in 1984. This bilingual database (in Portuguese "As Imagens e as Vozes da Despossessão: A Luta pela Terra e a Cultura Emergente do MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra do Brasil)" can be accessed at "www.landless-voices.org". The international and interdisciplinary project that gave rise to it featured the first-hand collection of the "sem-terra's" own voices and images to validate their self-expression and to fill major gaps in existing research material. This paper initially contextualizes the Social Movement and the Project. It then describes the database's tripartite presentation (the "sem-terra's" own expressions; the voices of those who speak "with" and of those who write "about" them). A discussion of the Project's bridging of the Humanities and Information Technology runs through the paper. Focal points in the interdisciplinary dialogue between the research director and academic editor (Dr. Else R. P. Vieira) and the designer and producer of the web-enabled database (Dr. John Walsh) include: the advantages of multimedia and of the hypertext to convey the specificity of the "sem-terra's" cultural expressions across several media; the software developed to translate complex concepts of culture into technological tools; the development of multiple routes to the resources to enhance research and learning tools and to prompt reflection. The achievements of the Project's collaborative work are discussed with particular reference to scholarship, transferability, public reach and, crucially, its contribution to the culture it protagonizes.

Keywords: Database, MST Culture, Data Collection, Categorization, Plurality of Expressions, Media Specificity, Interactivity, Multiple Routes, Research Tools

1. Background

1.1. Land Rights, Land Wrongs, and the Rise of the MST

CONTINENTAL-SIZED BRAZIL IS land-hungry; in the fifth-largest country in the world (3,287,000 square miles of land) malnutrition can be widespread among countless landless rural families. Landlessness bespeaks unhealed wounds in the body of Brazilian history underscoring today's bleak paradoxes. Five hundred years of landlessness can be traced back to successive papal bulls in the 15th and 16th centuries whereby territory yet to be discovered (but already inhabited by others) was granted to Portugal and Spain, ostensibly for the propagation of the Christian faith yet, no less, for exploitation by indissociable sovereign powers. In 1534, Portugal divided the country into 15 strips of land, thereby introducing the model of vast hereditary estates. Rooted in the mentality of the Brazilian ruling class is the figure of landownership as a symbol of the power arising from these vast estates, Brazil's notorious *latifundia*.

The drawing of a ten-year-old landless child, Fábio Junior de Lima, deconstructs official history upon the occasion of the quincentenary of the discovery of Brazil by the Portuguese. Using an eye motif, he looks at the colonial enterprise from the prism of the dispossessed. Brazil, represented by a map inside the iris of a human eye, cries over its 500 years of history. The three long tears suggest the persisting tragic fate of those who were the most victimized by colonization and colonial slavery: the woman, the black and the native:

Brazil cries over its 500 years of History. Drawing by Fábio Junior de Lima. Reproduced by permission of the MST

The legacies of empire and the subsequent development policies adopted by successive regimes, notably the military dictatorship (1964-85), encouraged multinational agribusiness, thereby aggravating the condition of dispossession inherited from colonial times. Two thirds of the country's arable land is owned by fewer than 3% of the population and by international conglomerates, resulting in an economy in which innumerable rural workers have been laid off, with very few, if any, compensatory social benefits. Landlessness entails denial of access to the land as a means of production and subsistence, as well as exclusion from any social benefits to be derived from territorial stability, such as education, health assistance and housing. It also means lack of affiliations and recognition which consolidates the asymmetries of power, both symbolic and otherwise, which the *sem-terra* perforce inhabit (see below).

The Movement of the Landless Rural Workers of Brazil – MST – was officially set up in 1984, precisely at that moment when the social tragedy which still today bedevils over 20,000,000 million people in Brazil was escalating. There are ways in which the emergence of the Movement's militant culture interacted with the death throes of a Brazilian dictatorship (1964-85). On the one hand, the dictatorship provided the opportunity structures for the Movement to be born. On the other hand, dialogue between State and citizens remained difficult at this conjuncture of transition. Even though, borrowing Althusser's terms, the State no longer functioned through such physical forms as imprisonment and torture, the administrative apparatus was impregnated with the repressive forces of two decades of censorship and authoritarianism. The State had unlearned how to cope with opposition and dissidence; conversely, the population was seeking new ways of expressing opposition and their claims. Thus, even though the demands of these rural workers were legitimate, constructive dialogue remained difficult: the government would grudgingly, if at all, listen to them.

Finding a public voice has grown more difficult for the *sem-terra* given that power-broking and decision-making increasingly appear to be the prerogative of transnational markets and bodies. Emerging cultures in general, and this one in particular, reflect the key role that social movements have played since the 1960s as oppositional forces within global economies. A collective identity is often the only way in which communities or activists can express their choices and needs.

1.2. Strategic Visibility: Exclusion as a Sign

The momentous 1997 National March of the Landless to the capital, Brasília, afforded the *sem-terra* unprecedented — and positive — visibility (Gohn, 2000:137). For two months, Brazil followed the daily progress of the three columns advancing from three different regions of the country, through TV coverage or in newspaper headlines. On April 17th 1997, a year after the notorious Eldorado de Carajás massacre in the northern state of Pará, the three columns merge as they arrive in the country's centre of power:

Photo by Durval Praxedes, MST, São Paulo. Reproduced by Permission of the MST

As also pointed out by Gohn, the March brought the unthinkable into Brazilian homes, namely, that exclusion can become a social *locus*. Through this March, landlessness established itself as the visible sign of an identity which, although constructed around an *absence*, could still be displayed through its icons and symbols. Still, in her view, the greatest impact of the march was that it demonstrated the way in which that very lack, binding several excluded peoples together, can begin to be transformed into a positive symbol; the MST thus became a reference point, a banner for identities constructed in and on absence yet a model of the struggle against destitu-

tion (Gohn, 2000:137).

Also of great relevance in this context is the MST's creation of a geography of resistance. Marking out and mapping a shift from non-existence to existence, from invisibility to visibility, certain politicized sites have become critical for those who have been silenced or marginalized. Alternative spaces occupied by the *sem-terra* include their improvised houses of black plastic at the sides of the road. Miles of fragile black sheeting – sprouting towns of substandard accommodation in encampments – have thus become a spectacle for the world driving by:

Primeiro de Abril Camp, Fazenda Haroldina, Mirante do Paranapanema. Photo by Bernardo Mançano Fernandes. Reproduced by permission.

2. The Project "the Sights and Sounds of Dispossession: The Fight for the Land and the Emerging Culture of the MST (Movement of the Landless Workers of Brazil)"

2.1. Landlessness as Lack of Institutional Affiliations and Cultural Capital

The *sem-terra*'s cultural production lacks the symbolic dimension of recognition from publishers and critics in Brazil. It tends to circulate mostly within their milieu. With the exception of rare moments of positive newsworthiness and the visibility afforded by their sites of resistance, those dispossessed of land are deprived of a space to publicize their identity and cultural expressions. They lack all the symbolic forms of capital (academic capital, cultural capital, social capital) and are cut off from the social and institutional framework which authorizes, enables, empowers and sustains cultural and artistic practice, as posited by the lineage of theorists of cultural circulation and consumption associated with Bourdieu. The conditions in which their work is utilized—during marches or in their encampments, scattered throughout the interior of Brazil—divorce them from the networks of circulation and consumption (museums, libraries, and so on). The few existing written records of their predominantly oral poetry were on loose papers or in draft form in personal files. They have used CD technology but their music has remained internal to the Movement and outside commercial distribution.

Their production may also have remained unrecognized by mediators because of their disavowal of individual authorship whereas the institutional system, in general, requires the display of a signatory for property to be codified. Another possible reason is that the *sem-terra*'s dignification of their rural origins through the rehabilitation of the Brazilian *caipira* (bumpkin) may cause difficulties outside intellectual and academic circles. The anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro has stressed that losses, cultural traumas and resistance to change have historically shaped the *caipira* (Ribeiro, 1995:363-89). The sociologist and critic Antonio Candido, in turn, focuses on the *caipira*'s impressive process of cultural resistance and differentiation. He reads their maintenance of outdated customs as a sign of their cultural and economic non-conformism; they refuse to yield to the pressures of fashion and of economic modernization, even at the cost of penury. Conversely, they have been disqualified by city people as poorly educated, with rustic and awkward manners and outdated speech and customs. In order to highlight their own prosperity, city people have also perversely transformed the *caipira* into a

caricature or used them as a deformed spectacle (Candido, 1993: 249-51). Such rehabilitation by the *sem-terra* may further distance them from the aesthetic values of mainstream Brazilian culture.

The *sem-terra*'s lack of affiliations and of social and cultural capital may at times have made it difficult for them to mount more effective campaigns which, in turn, may also have led to some instances of ill-chosen techniques of protest. These, magnified by the media, have at times brought them into disrepute and legitimized their oblivion by the patronage.

Internationally, this may have been particularly the case until the web-enabled database (*www.landless-voices.org*) arising from the Project below was launched in January 2003. This project has aided in the creation of a public space for them to express their anguish, traumas, hopes and political platform. The University of Nottingham, in turn, in the capacity of publisher, has created for them an institutional niche from which their sights and sounds are disseminated internationally and, through a boomerang effect, nationally.

2.2. Inclusion of the Brazilian Landless in the International Academic Agenda: Teaching and Research

The unavailability of their cultural expression became quite evident when I introduced the module 'The Literature of the Land in Brazil' (February 2001) as part of my Senior Research Fellowship in the Department of Hispanic and Latin American Studies of the University of Nottingham, under the auspices of the integrated project *The Interface of Critical and Cultural Studies* with the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Important canonical artists were brought to bear: Glauber Rocha, Candido Portinari, Graciliano Ramos, João Cabral de Melo Neto, Chico Buarque and Haroldo de Campos. But what of *sem-terra*'s own voices and images on the experience of landlessness from their perspective? A new two-year project was born. It was devised and implemented under my Directorship.

2.2.1. Data Collection: International Collaboration

This stage involved two Universities in Brazil and one in the US. The collection and transcription/scanning of the *sem-terra*'s poetry and photographs was carried out by myself with the support of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. My own task, in the capacity of main investigator of the Project, later included the collection of other resources (Music, Lyrics, Essays by the *sem-terra*, Children's Drawings and Compositions; Films;

Statements by Intellectuals and Artists; Essays by academics; the Photography of Sebastião Salgado). This task was greatly facilitated by the MST in São Paulo and Minas Gerais and by the Movement's *cantadores*/poet-singers (see 3.1 below). Dr. Malcolm McNee (Brazilian Studies, University of Minnesota) collaborated with the collection of resources grouped under Dance, Murals, Paintings, Sculpture and Theatre. Professor Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, from the State University of São Paulo at Presidente Prudente (UNESP) and from the Brazilian Association of Geographers, was the main contributor to the references (bibliography; cartography and tables) and to many entries in the Glossary.

2.2.2. *Towards A Web- Enabled Database*

The decision to use a web-enabled database was multi-layered. The Freire-inspired framework used for the Project (see 3.2) implied that editorial interventions would be kept to a minimum, especially the *a priori* limiting of number and types of resources. The web's open-ended accommodation of resources thus had overriding advantages over the page-bound format of books. Multimedia was also important for the expansion of the notion of texts beyond the solely verbal. Printed books would not do justice to the *sem-terra*'s range of cultural expressions and particularly to the oral and visual functionings of this specific culture. Music, a foremost expression for them, would be silenced in books. Photographs, a major source of information on the history of the culture, would make publication unaffordable. The web format would thus project this culture in a completeness unimaginable in a traditional print format.

2.2.3. *The Technology Leap and the Major Role of the University of Nottingham*

The participation and support of the School of Modern Languages became particularly evident with the major decision of creating the electronic database for this project. Its contribution covered direct costs of approximately 200,000 dollars and the crucial collaboration of John Walsh, at the time the University of Nottingham's Humanities Technology Officer (see 3 below). The University was also active in research meetings and conferences in the UK, Brazil and Morocco. Professor Bernard McGuirk, at the time Head of the Department of Hispanic and Latin American Studies, was the main facilitator of the Project (see also 2.2.5). The School of Modern Languages is also the publisher of the web-enabled database.

2.2.4. *A Pilot Project*

The School further intended this project on the emerging culture of the MST to be a pilot for the acquisition of technical expertise for the umbrella project *Landless Voices* that welds together Nottingham's School of Modern Languages around a programme of interdisciplinary research into areas which present shared characteristics regarding loss of land, loss of territory, exile, immigration or deprivation (see 4 below).

2.2.5. *Translation*

Professor McGuirk's poetic gifts were brought to bear in his rendering into English of the *sem-terra*'s poetry and songs. Two other translators, based at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Thomas Laborie Burns and Edson Lopes, as well as myself (Nottingham/UFMG), were involved in the translation of all other resources.

3. Weaving Cultural Concepts and Web Technologies

3.1. *The Project's Aims and Objectives and the Process of Developing Software*

A radical form of interdisciplinarity, which bridges the gap between the Humanities and Technology, informs the Project. John Walsh, the web producer and designer, has stressed that the achievements of the Project stem from the

> [m]eaningful collaboration between subject and technical experts [which] is critical if projects are to fulfil intended aims and objectives, if projects are to be successfully designed for purpose (2007).

As mentioned, the Project's aims and objectives were the first-hand collection, organization and dissemination of the *sem-terra*'s various forms of self-expression, both to validate their cultural expression and to provide the bases for the expansion of scholarship on the culture emerging from this major Social Movement. These would have been lost if technology had failed to organize information so as to faithfully recreate the *sem-terra*'s cultural expression and to translate complex underlying concepts of culture into tools for research and learning. Walsh explains how 'a synergy between the project's purposes and web technologies' was achieved and the software he developed for this purpose:

Instead of solely performing a technical role, the work of the designer and producer of the website thus becomes that of, firstly, an enabler and secondly, a collaborator in the research process. For the former, an iterative software development process was employed. Iteration involves a continual moving forward and going back over development stages, gradually working towards the end product through re-working and re-designing the software. Iteration served as an enabling schema in this project, which allowed Else Vieira to intervene in and contribute to the technical development process so that culture rather than technology began as, and remained, the project's primary concern (Walsh 2007).

In what follows, I describe the database's tripartite presentation of the *sem-terra's* own voices and images, of those who solidarize with them and of those who write about them – three independent blocs but which allow for interconnections, mutual illumination and complementarity. This conceptually complex articulation, as befits culture, is also user-friendly both for academics and the general public. It results from the combination of specific views of culture inspired mostly by Paulo Freire and Russian semiotics of culture, on my part, and Walsh's masterly devising of software to organize information

and to generate multiple routes to enhance the tools for research and learning.

3.2. Insights from Paulo Freire on the Cultural Expression of the Oppressed

One of the most renowned Brazilian social theorists, Paulo Freire, amongst others, was quite illuminating to this project as a whole. Of particular interest were insights from the method he developed along his career to enable a culture to speak for itself and thus move away from the well-known form of oppression which is the denial of voice and expression to the other (Freire 1999:120). Validating and empowering a culture through its own discourses and ideas was in fact a major concern for Freire (Haddadin, 2003). No less important is his view that the process is associative and intersubjective. This means that a cultural universe emerges from communication among subjects on a knowable object (in our case, dispossession and struggle for land), rather than the individual's relation to a knowable object (Freire 1973). The collection of resources was thus oriented towards the *sem-terra* themselves providing, initially through their poetry, the themes that evoked and created their cultural universe, not as objects of research but as subjects of their thinking. This view of culture which protagonizes the landless gave rise to the first bloc that makes up the main bulk of the database, thus configured by Walsh:

[http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/index.phtml?ng=e]
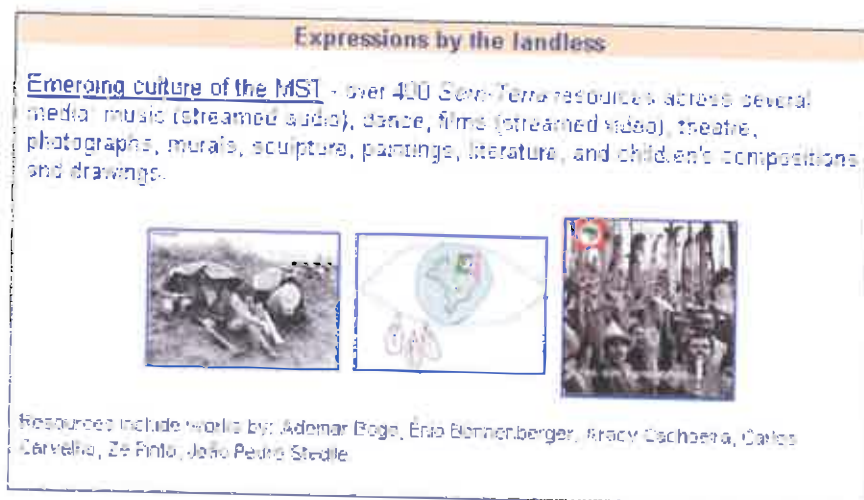
Attention is drawn to the fact that the *cantadores* (poet-singers) were crucial to the process of giving shape to the culture. They assisted in the Movement's birth across the country and, through their voices and music, have given expression to what is shared by the culture across the nation but also to its regional specificities. The scholar Sávio Bones (2003), relying on Gramsci, has in fact described the

MST's *cantadores* as 'organic intellectuals', who give it

homogeneity and the consciousness of its own economic, social and political functions (Gramsci, 2000:15). Those collaborating were: Zé Pinto (from Minas Gerais; migrated to the Amazon region; now in Rio Grande do Sul); Araci Cachoeira (from the

north of Minas Gerais); Ademar Bogo (from Bahia), Ana Cláudia (from the North-East); and Charles Trocate (from Pará in the Amazon region).

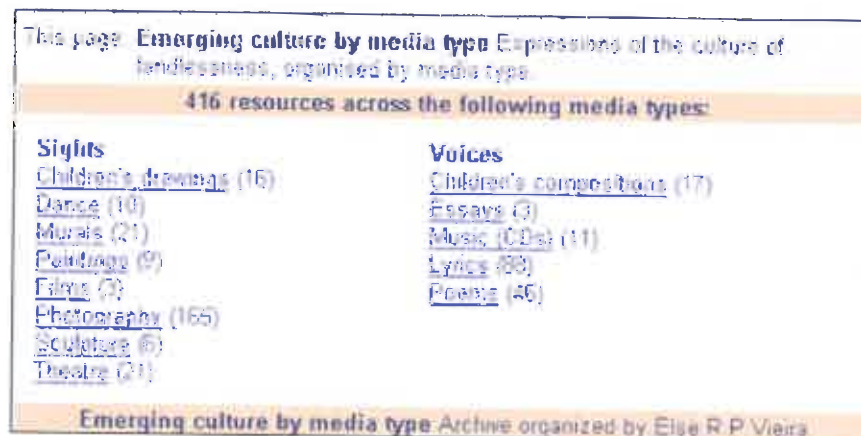### 3.3. *Culture as Interacting Semiotic Systems*

Freire's word-based network of associations for the creation of a cultural universe was extended so as to absorb other media. Relevant insights came from the Russian semiotics of culture, particularly the Leningrad lineage that found its way to Tel Aviv. Itamar Even-Zohar developed an equally relational and functional view of culture as a polysystem to highlight a dynamic system made up of multiple and interdependent sub-systems.[1] A polysystem is a network of simultaneous relations among sub-systems and the value that each one takes on is relative to the function of the other (Even-Zohar 1979:290).The merge of these mutually complementary theoretical frameworks enabled the Project to feature culture as the networking of a

plurality of media having the *sem-terra* not as objects but as the subjects of various

expressions. A polysystem also projects beyond itself and interacts with other polysystems. The page-bound format of books is limited to show semiotic systems and cultures working by association. The hypertext, that links several texts, in turn, has enabled the representation of the *sem-terra* culture as a complex network of several media interacting.

3.4. *An Aural and Visual Culture*

The first organization of the resources, per media, immediately brought into light the most productive ones to describe the culture: photography (165 resources) and lyrics (88 resources). The juxtaposition of sights and voices reflects a fundamental trait of the *sem-terra*'s culture: it is markedly visual and aural (a point to which I return), as projected by the screen shot of culture by media type:

This page Emerging culture by media type Expressions of the culture of landlessness, organized by media type

416 resources across the following media types:

Sights
Children's drawings (16)
Dance (10)
Murals (21)
Paintings (9)
Films (3)
Photography (165)
Sculpture (6)
Theatre (21)

Voices
Children's compositions (17)
Essays (3)
Music (CDs) (11)
Lyrics (88)
Poems (46)

Emerging culture by media type Archive organized by Else R P Vieira

[http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/archive-03.phtml?ng=e&sc=1]

This juxtaposition which, according to Walsh, is not possible through printed means, importantly, also prevents the research director and the producer from prioritizing a given medium on the basis of their own criteria. As Walsh puts it, 'the web archive privileges hybridity instead of a hierarchy of cultural artifacts' (2007). The sheer number and variety of visual resources stresses the *sem-terra*'s own prioritizing of that medium which confirms Gohn's perception of their strategic search for visibility. At the same time, the data obtained relativizes this claim. Their lyrics and recited poetry are also major components of the expression of this equally oral culture.

Crucial decisions are also reflected in the organization of this broad range of expressions per

media. A difficulty was the default alphabetical arrangement of resources within the archive. Cultures do not operate alphabetically. Dates, themes, authorship and origin, for example, are more genuine. Thus the practices of organizing and editing texts had to be reconfigured, e.g., into chronological sequences or thematic chunks. Culture, rather than computer technology, provides the criteria for organizing resources.

3.5. *Networks of Solidarity and Knowledge Production beyond the Sem-terra Cultural Universe*

---

[1] His specific work exemplifies the relationship between translated and nontranslated texts, but his construct is flexible enough to be used for any semiotic system (say, music, film, painting, performances, etc).

The militant and oppositional culture of the MST, viewed as a polysystem, is not an island entire of itself. It projects beyond itself and interacts with other segments. Such is the case of those renowned Brazilian artists and intellectuals who share their accumulated cultural knowledge and social capital with the *sem-terra*. Committed intellectuals and artists are in fact a tradition in Brazil.

The second major block of the database, 'About the landless', thus includes statements by intellectuals and artists such as Frei Betto, Sebastião Salgado,

Chico Buarque, Haroldo de Campos, Antonio Candido, Oscar Niemeyer and Tetê Moraes who revita-

lize this tradition expressing solidarity and thus empowering the *sem-terra* from outside their own circle.[2] This bloc also provides reference material, including academic work and relevant cartography and human geography to situate today's *sem-terra* and to contextualize the whole problematics of landlessness.

[http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/index.phtml?ng=e]

Voices also resonate, images are also mirrored by others elsewhere. The *sem-terra*'s visibility and ability to survive also require horizontal solidarities. Their collective identity is thus also defined by those equally excluded whom they speak *with*, such as roofless people, beggars, and racial and sexual minorities. This is a point particularly featured under the cultural category 'Creating a canon of exclusion' (see below).

3.6. *Cultural Categories*

The specificity of the culture is not only a function of media but also of descriptive categories. Yet, the project director and the web designer shared the view that existing categories, such as those used in library

cataloguing systems, in their generality, tended to obscure important aspects of the *sem-terra* culture or to crystallize it according to a pre-defined model. At times, a Procrustean use of categories alienated the *sem-terra*. Freire has warned against this 'cultural invasion', a term he uses when people are approached as objects rather than subjects and their culture is nullified or reduced to silence. This, of course, runs counter to the project's aim of giving voice to and validating the culture of the *sem-terra*. I thus faced the challenge of in-depth analysis of the broad range of the *sem-terra*'s own artifacts, beginning with poetry, to elicit the categories provided by the material itself. The most productive categories immediately stood out, namely: 'Rehabilitation of Traditions and Country Culture' and 'Icons, Symbols and Monuments'.

---

[2] The database also houses a historical recording, Paulo Freire's last public statement before his death, in the capacity of mentor of the educational project of the MST. He talks of the task of education within the context of the *sem-terra*, as an exercise in citizenship and re-insertion into history.
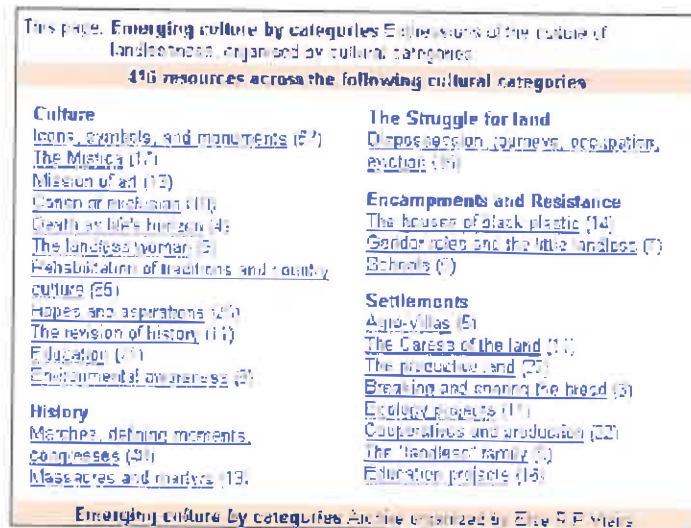
3.7. *The Development of Multiple Routes to Resources to Prompt Reflection*

Walsh's view is that a standard, 'mediation neutral' generic database, displaying an alphabetized list of resources on a webpage would not create 'learning and research tools which contribute to our understanding of landlessness'. There is a need for research processes to be compatible with the relational structure of culture:

> In a cultural context, research can be thought of as a process of identifying and elaborating connections and relationships between artifacts, ideas, people etc. [...] In the same way that an online book store, such as Amazon, would not be viable if their web presence consisted of a library-style [...] list of books, Vieira's archive would not fulfill its purpose if the resources were handed over to technologists for standardized processing and display [...] Instead of (with)holding each resource within a set place, thus stating definitively 'here is the resource, in its place' (and tending to be an arbitrary place such as an alphabetical list of authors or resource titles), the archive works to prompt reflection, to prompt an openness to the positioning and context, and thus the meaning, of each resource (2007).

He uses the example of the landless child's drawing (see 1.1 above) to demonstrate the multiple routes to each resource and the openness to context provided by the archive:

> [...] the drawing 'Brazil cries over its 500 years of history' by Fábio Junior de Lima [...] is

situated within three contexts. The resource is accessible, firstly, within the 'Children's drawings' section of the 'Emerging culture by media type' web page, and secondly as part of 'The revision of history' sub-section of 'Culture' within the 'Emerging culture by categories' page. Lastly, the resource is cross-referenced on the 'Media specificity' page under the 'Children's drawings' media listing, within the 'Culture' category sub-heading of 'The revision of history' (Walsh 2007).

3.8. *The Media Specificity of Cultural Expression: Opening up Avenues of Research*

An additional perspective upon the resources – another research tool – is provided by media specificity. The cross-referencing of medium and cultural category is, in my view, the privileged feature of the database. It opens up a wealth of possibilities of research on the *sem-terra*'s culture. This can be clearly visualized in the table 'The distribution of cultural categories per media' (below). The category 'The rehabilitation of traditions and country culture' also stands out as the most productive one across the range of media, whether visual, aural or related to the performing arts.

Media specificity sheds light on a major distinction: the politicization of the landless identity, signalled by the spelling shift from *sem-terra* to *Sem Terra*. Lower-case and hyphenated *sem-terra* connotes the condition of dispossession of those rural workers who, in a Marxist sense, do not have access to the land as a means of a production. It is related to the initial stages of the struggle for land, involving

the setting up of encampments in non-productive *latifundia* or by the sides of the roads as spaces of resistance. Upper-case, non-hyphenated *Sem Terra* designates a political subject, the rural worker who has already received a plot of land but who remains a participant in the Movement in solidarity with those who have not yet been granted the same benefit. Approximately ¼ of all photographs (95 out of 416) fit in 'Settlement', the category that subsumes the *Sem Terra* identity (highlighted in pink in the table below). Photography, then, is the preferred medium to project the achievements of this militant culture.

Medium Categories	Total	Children's Drawings	Essays	Poems	Lyrics	Theatre	Films	Children's Drawings	Murals	Painting	Photographs	Sculptures	Others
		16	2	44	111	26	1	18	26	5	168	6	6
Culture	*Total*												
Icons, symbols and monuments	57			5	8		1	2	16	8	12	1	
The Media	17				1	6					10		
Mission of art	13		1	3	5								
Dream of equality	10			7	2			1					
Death as the horizon	4			4									
The militant woman	6			4	1				1		2		
Rehabilitation and/or a country culture	65		1	2	15	20			1	8		6	6
Hopes and aspirations	25	9			11			5					
The revision of history	11				1			9	1				
Education	21			21									
Environmental awareness	9			9									
History													
Marches defining moments, convergence	40	7	1	7					11		22		
Massacres and martyrs	13			7	2						4		
The Struggle For Land													
Dispossession, eviction	35			5	20		1	2			10		
Encampments And Resistance													
Houses of black plastic	14			3	2						7		
Camps, life in them	7										7		
Schools	5										5		
Settlements													
Agro Vilas	5						1				6		
The Gauze of the land	11			4							7		
The productive land	22										20		
Breaking sharing tools	3										3		
Ending people	11			2							9		
Cooper & production	22			4			1				17		
The broken family	6										6		
Education Projects	16			1	1						14		

Table: The Distribution of Cultural Categories per Media

The category 'Icons, symbols and monuments' features high in most of the visual media: films, children's drawings, murals, painting and photographs. Logically so, 85 photos out of 416 display the icons of the culture and register its landmark events. But its greater prominence is in murals, not in photography, as would be expected. This suggests a number of fruitful researches to be pursued, for example, on the connection between the prominence of murals and the tradition of revolutionary muralism in Latin America and in Mexico in particular. Malcolm McNee, in turn, looks at the murals, a co-creation

with experienced artists from organizations such as the Movement of the Artists of the March, as examples of the democratization of the right to beauty and of individuals to develop their own creativity (2003). The merge of the aesthetic and the political, I suggest, would be another fruitful topic for research.

Lyrics come second in terms of a privileged medium of expression. Their specificity opens up innumerable possibilities of research, some of which

I have started to explore in 'Music, Poetry and Politicization of the Landless Identity' (2007).[3] The striking number of lyrics related to education, I have suggested, has to do with the *sem-terra*'s orality, inherent to lyrics not only as a mnemonic device but also as a means of revitalizing their rural cultural traditions, and which the schools explore (Vieira 2007). The sense of loss associated with dispossession and eviction also stands out in lyrics. Loss of a way of life comes out particularly in music, hence my point that music, evocative as it is of deep linkages, aids the *sem-terra*'s revitalization of the roots from which they have been severed. But there is also a tone of indignation and exhortation in these songs (Vieira 2007). This more political tone of the lyrics contrasts with the more confessional one of 18 out of 46 poems which thematize exclusion and death ('Canon of exclusion', 'Death as life's horizon' and 'Massacres and martyrs'). This further relates to the well-known potential of poetry to express such deep feelings as the fear of death, the pains of a contingent life, and the sufferings attendant upon destitution (Vieira 2007).

4. Launching and Debriefing the Project

4.1. *Launch*

The web-enabled database, published by the School of Modern Languages of the University of Nottingham, was launched in the UK at a reception at the House of Commons (Westminster, London), hosted by the All-Party Anglo-Brazilian Group (Chair Bob Blizzard, MP), on the 16th of January 2003. The following week, it was launched in the meeting of the Via Campesina and in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

4.2. *Transferability*

This project was born under the aegis of transferability. It has laid down the foundations for the ongoing *Bosnian Gardens Project*, on the landless refugees from Bosnia and their search for identity in community gardens. This is the second of the umbrella project *Landless Voices*, of Nottingham's School of Modern Languages.

4.3. *Peer Assessment*

Among the internationally recognized accolades, mention is made of the 5* rating achieved in the review by Multimedia Educational Resources for

Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT). Assessors praise 'its excellent development of learning and teaching materials', and highlight the interactivity and complexity of culture it sets out to convey: 'this site makes superb use of media to reach a wide variety of learning styles and audiences. It cross references its resources on the various pages so as to give the user a more complete portrait of the worker's reality'. The various entrances are also highlighted: 'One can take a cultural, historical, political and/or scholarly approach to the topic, simply by focusing on particular resources and the various cultural themes'.

Another is *INTUTE* , a service created by a network of UK Universities, providing access to the best Web resources for education and research: 'This exceptional archive offers the researcher and student invaluable access to the emerging culture of the landless in Brazil, encompassing a comprehensive variety of media'.

4.4. *Reach*

The Project has produced output accessible to both a wider public and specialist audiences. It is listed by world-distinguished institutions (for example, the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies of the University of London; The Association of Brazilian Anthropologists, University of Florida's Virtual Museum). MA programmes throughout the world have cited it as a set text (for example, the ISCTE in Lisbon, St Michael's College, among others).

Whereas it was photography that mostly projected the *sem-terra* before, lyrics have become their most often quoted medium; several links from universities and the public at large direct to their music and lyrics (*Museum of Knowledge, Olhos Críticos, Instituto Cabano, Forum Get Paid from Brazil* are some examples).

The visual presence of the culture also seems to be undergoing changes. The resources may not be many, but the impact of the children's drawing is quite noticeable. Increasingly, the tearful eye drawn by the landless child Fábio Junior de Lima (see 1.1 and 2.7 above) seems to become a reference both for the culture and for the database.

4.5. *Consequences for the "sem-terra"*

The first review of the database, by *Hero*, stresses that the project underlines the empowering potential of the web. Publication by a renowned institution

---

[3] In another paper (Vieira 2005) I capitalize on the potential of technology to render intertextuality across media and analyze the *sem-terra*'s use of the tango to establish a dialogue with another excluded segment, the immigrants to Argentina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in whose *conventillo* (tenement- house) culture the tango emerged as an expression of betrayal, loss and sadness. The protagonist of the song, Ana sem terra, also enabled me to render audible and visible the implicit dialogue with Ana Terra, a symbol of brave womanhood in Brazilian Literature.

was a first step towards the *sem-terra*'s authorial constitution and historical inscription. It was also another step in the dignification of the *sem-terra* beyond their own environment. A more comprehensive and non-judgemental perspective on the culture has also been made available nationally and internationally (for example, see 4.4 above).

The organization of data has helped to preserve the memory of a culture in the making. Cultural memory, of course, is a crucial issue for a predominantly oral culture. The database has potentially enabled over 20,000,000 landless people spread out across the country mutual access to their different regional and historically-shifting cultural expressions.

In my view, the greatest achievement of the Project has been as an educational tool for the *sem-terra* themselves. Some of their schools have already

contacted me for permission to use the database as a set text. Brazil, at the moment, is aggressively striving to combat the country's digital divide. But a politics of inclusion, as Sérgio Silveira has remarked, also needs to recognize, respect and disseminate via the web the various types of knowledge produced by all types of communities (2001:29). The words and images of the *sem-terra* need to circulate just like the words of those who have got social and cultural capital. This project has anticipated governmental measures. It has granted the children of 4,000,000 dispossessed families, perforce constantly on the move, the right and the access to their own history and cultural memory. A web-enabled database is not place-bound. It is cost-free especially for its protagonists.

References

Althusser, Louis. Ideology and the ideological state apparatuses. In: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971.

Bones, Sávio. With hands calloused from poetry: the formation of organic intellectuals by the MST', in 'Studies, Statements and References', in Vieira 2003. *http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/archive-05.phtml?rd=WITHHAND546&ng=e&sc=3&th=4?&se=0*

Candido, Antonio. Caipiradas. *Recortes*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993.

Even-Zohar, Itamar. Polysystem Theory. *Poetics Today*, Tel Aviv, v.1, n.1/2, p. 287-310, 1979.

Freire, Paulo. Reading the word and the world. In: Freire, Ana M. Araújo and Madedo, Donaldo (eds). *The Paulo Freire Reader*. New York: Continuum, 1998, pp. 163-85.

Freire, Paulo. *Extension or Communication*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1973.

Gohn, Maria da Glória. *Mídia, terceiro setor e MST: impacto sobre o futuro das cidades e do campo*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Cadernos de cárcere. Volume 2. Caderno 12 – Apontamentos e notas dispersas para um grupo de ensaios sobre a história dos intelectuais*. Edição de Carlos Nelson Coutinho com Marco Aurélio Nogueira e Luiz Sérgio Henriques. Tradução de Carlos Nelson Coutinho. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, 2000.

Haddadin, Diala. Paulo Freire: A Brief De-Brief. *Freire Online: A Journal of the Paulo Freire Institute/UCLA*. Vol. 1, Issue 2, July 2003, n.p.

MacNee, Malcolm. The plastic arts in the MST: beauty as a human right. In Vieira 2003. *http://www.landless-voices.org/vieira/archive-03.phtml?ng=e&sc=2*

Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) *www.merlot.org*.

Ribeiro, Darcy. *O povo brasileiro*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995.

Silveira, Sérgio Amadeu da. *Exclusão digital: a miséria na era da informação*. São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2001.

Vieira, Else. *The Sights and Sounds of Dispossession: The Fight for the Land and the Emerging Culture of the MST (Movement of the Landless Workers of Brazil)/ As Imagens e as Vozes da Despossessão: A Luta pela Terra e a Cultura Emergente do MST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra do Brasil)*. Nottingham: The University of Nottingham, 2003. *www. landless-voices.org*

Vieira, Else R. P. 'Crying out for land.' HERO — Higher Education & Research Opportunities in the United Kingdom, February 2003. http://www.hero.ac.uk/sites/hero/uk/inside_he/archives/2003/crying_out_for_land3853.cfm

Vieira, Else R. P. 'Sem Terra/ Desterrados: The Music of Dissent of the MST in Dialogue with the Tango Culture'. In Bart Vanspauwen (ed.). *The Visualization of the Subaltern in World Music. On Musical Contestation Strategies. Image and Narrative (Part 1)*. Issue 10, 2005. *http://www.imageandnarrative.be/worldmusica/elserpvieira.htm*

Vieira, Else R. P. Music, Poetry and Politicization of the Landless Identity'. In *Landless Voices in Song and Poetry: The Movimento dos Sem Terra of Brazil*. Compiled and annotated by Else R. P. Vieira, translated by Bernard McGuirk. Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2007, p. xviii-lxi.

Walsh, John. Designing for Purpose: Translating Cultural Concepts into Learning and Research Tools, 2007. *http://www.designforpurpose.co.uk/articles/DFP-0612-Landless.pdf*

About the Author

Else R P Vieira

Else R P Vieira is a Reader in Brazilian and Comparative Latin American Studies, at Queen Mary, University of London; former Visiting Professor at the Centre for Brazilian Studies, University of Oxford (1999) and a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham (2001-02); previous career in Comparative Literature at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Among her major projects, she is the Director of Research and Editor of the web-enabled database "The Sights and Images of Dispossession: The Fight for the Land and the Emerging Culture of the MST (www.landless-voices.org)". Her present AHRB-funded project involves a comparative study of 21st century social documentaries in Brazil and Argentina. Among her most recent books is "City of God in Several Voices: Brazilian Social Cinema in Action" (London, 2005). Webpage: http://www.modern-languages.qmul.ac.uk/staff/vieira.html