

ASYMPTOTE PRESENTS

FORTNIGHTLY AIRMAIL



POSTCARD TWO

Feat. Daniel Persia

*Past and present collided at the 17th annual **Flip** (**International Literary Festival of Paraty**), held in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from July 10-14. The festival, one of the world's largest, has become a pivotal event for the country—something of a “state of affairs” that engages literary conversations from around the world while maintaining a distinctly Brazilian flair.*



Paraty's Historic District Photo credit: Walter Craveiro/Flip/All rights reserved

You'll know you've reached the historic district of Paraty when you're walking, walking, walking and then suddenly about to trip and fall. A 17th-century Portuguese settlement and now UNESCO World Heritage Site, the city is lined with cobblestone streets, studded with old white colonial homes and their colorfully painted frames. Paraty as a city—as a port, as a place—is a fitting metaphor for this year's edition of Flip: a clash between old and new, between past and present, between literature the way it has been and literature the way it could (or perhaps should) be.

Each year, Flip pays homage to one of Brazil's most influential writers—a voice that has shaped the literary history and trajectory of the nation. This year, the festival honored Euclides da Cunha (1866-1909), author of the classic *Os sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*), which tells the story of the war of Canudos, fought in the backlands of Bahia. Festival curator **Fernanda Diamant** strung together a series of main events that focused not explicitly on content from the book, but rather on the themes of its three major subdivisions: (1) “A terra” (the land), leading to questions of geography, climate, and indigenous rights, (2) “O homem,” (the man), generating debate in the fields of sociology and anthropology, particularly around gender and race, and (3) “A luta” (the fight), the call to action, which resulted in the inherently political undertone of this year's festival, set against Brazil's recent presidential election and a global wave crashing toward the right.



Grada Kilomba Photo: Walter Craveiro/Flip/All rights reserved

Language and literature are, in fact, political—a message that festival headliner **Grada Kilomba** delivered with elegance and authority. Kilomba, an interdisciplinary artist, writer and theorist from Portugal (with roots in Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe) launched the Portuguese translation of her book *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, which she originally published in English over a decade ago, in 2008. The translation begins with a “letter” to the reader, an introduction that speaks to the challenges of translating terminology (much of which is raced and gendered) from English into Portuguese. In articulating the various ways in which language inflicts trauma, Kilomba provides a stellar example of how translation is always contextual, always rooted in particular ideological choices and the histories of violence they may carry with them.

Venezuelan writer and journalist **Karina Sainz Borgo** tackled the challenge of reconciling political realities at the state level, affirming that “the first death is that of language. When passing from democracy to dictatorship, a language is transformed, it loses its liberty.” Her words seemed to echo later that day, as American journalist Glen Greenwald (one of the founders of *The Intercept*) was met with a contentious reception at an event for independent editors titled “The Challenges of Journalism in the Era of Operation Car Wash”—a reference to the investigation that indicted former Brazilian presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, among others. Such events are a reminder that language does not exist in a vacuum, and that a literary festival as large as Flip has the capacity to engage its public far beyond the page.



The main stage at FLIP 2019 Photo: Walter Craveiro/Flip/All rights reserved

Conversations from the main stage trickled into Paraty's colonial homes, where over two dozen *casas parceiras* (partner houses) organized free events for the public throughout the duration of the festival. But perhaps the most significant literary and political statement of this year's Flip came not from the headliners or off-circuit speakers, but rather from the festival attendees themselves—and from the books they took home with them. Of the five top-selling writers at the festival, four identify as Black (Grada Kilomba, Portugal; Ayòbámi Adébáyò, Nigeria; Kalaf Epalanga, Angola; Gaël Faye, Burundi) and one as Indigenous (Ailton Krenak, Brazil). In 2016, Giovana Xavier, writer and coordinator of a research group for Black intellectuals at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, critiqued the festival for its lack of representation, particularly of Black female writers. The success of this year's program demonstrates a continued shift toward a more inclusive Flip—one that sees beauty in the stones that line Paraty's cobbled streets while also acknowledging the human labor exploited to put them there.