

**GRAÇA CAPINHA**

**POETRY BETWEEN PORTUGUESE DISCOVERIES  
AND PORTUGUESE IMMIGRATION:  
THE HISTORY OF AN IDENTITY**

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Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

**Correspondência:**

Apartado 3087 — 3000 Coimbra

**Graça Capinha**

**Poetry between Portuguese Discoveries and Portuguese**

**Immigration:**

**The History of an Identity\***

When speaking of the present context of globalization of the world economy what we immediately acknowledge is a new climax in the development of the capitalist economic system. A culminating point that translates very clearly into an equal climax of the internal contradictions of this system. The material and factual contradictions of modernity make nowadays clearer and clearer the equally internal contradictions of an already unsustainable discourse: the discourse of a rationalism whose claims of Humanism have been justifying our economic system for centuries<sup>1</sup>. At the turn of the century Modernism was aware of this question — although incapable of formulating, and, much less, of solving it. The question was (still is) that the linguistic support for our reality is totally inadequate. Leaving the ontological question aside, what I'm basically saying is that you cannot serve Man and Mammon simultaneously. Thanks to the crude reality of globalization, what is becoming obvious nowadays is that the discourse of rationalism as we know it can serve Mammon and *some men* only.

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\* Comunicação apresentada em Stirling, Escócia, ao *Poetry and History Conference* (26 a 30 de Junho de 1996), na Mesa-Redonda sobre "Poetry and Immigration".

<sup>1</sup>An interesting study of this question and of its relevance to the specificity of Brazilian literature may be found in Alfredo Bosi in *Dialéctica da Colonização*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1992.

It is language that "melts into air" — as Marx would put it; or, in the manner of Yeats, "the centre cannot hold". Ironically, it is ideology itself imploding language — from within.

Material and factual reality makes apparent, both to the social scientist and to the average citizen, the fictionality of terms such as "nation", "race" or "ethnic group" — the "invention of tradition" discussed by Eric Hobsbawm<sup>2</sup>, the "imagined communities" studied by Benedict Anderson<sup>3</sup>, the "linguistic artifacts" analysed by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein<sup>4</sup>. Because historical in their nature, those fictions — the fictions we, willingly, believe in, as Wallace Stevens would say— will forcibly emerge from a process of continuous recomposition, of deconstruction and reconstruction. We find the same historical recomposition in the identities that are simultaneously being constructed — and which are therefore, and so often, ambiguous. I am convinced that the only way to fully understand these phenomena — these fictions and/or identities — is through an archeology of the language that gives them their status of reality .What I am really suggesting here is that questions such as "ethnicity" or "race" are particularly interesting from a literary perspective.

My work focuses on the production of a specific literary discourse that is simultaneously a symbolic manifestation of social actors in a community that is par excellence representative of the present day globalization of the world economy. This literary discourse is poetry written by Portuguese immigrants.

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<sup>2</sup>Hobsbawm, Eric , "Inventing Traditions", in E. Hobsbawm eT. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>Balibar,Etienne e Wallerstein, Immanuel, *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, London: Verso, 1991.

I avoid the concept of "narrative of the identity" because, at least to me, the concept conotes a rationalist and sequential logic — one of cause and effect — leading to a closed and final artifact. Contrariwise, and using the case-study of immigrant poetry as an example, what I try to show in my work is how poetic discourse is built on a totally different logic: a centripetal and open logic that gathers, in the same field, forces that are only seemingly mutually exclusive.

In the discourse and field of the poem, we will not find "an identity", but rather mutable "identity configurations", as the Portuguese sociologist Arriscado Nunes calls them<sup>5</sup>. Nunes is using here a terminology that is very close to that of the American poets of the 1950s, those children of Whitman who were the inventors of the theory of the "Open Field" and "Projective Verse" (poets — those working on the word — knew these things a long time before so-called "Science" understood what was going on!...)

Directly and crudely confronted with all the ambiguities and contradictions of the system, Portuguese immigrants write a poetry of impossibility: the impossibility of choosing between a paradigmatic and a subparadigmatic discourse, in Boaventura de Sousa Santos's terms<sup>6</sup>. I mean the impossibility of choosing to be either a transformative audience or an adaptive audience. They live and write "in between".

In this poetry we always find an endless re-negotiation of the hierarchies of power in discourse. And the construction of the poet's identity(ies) occurs within this process. Through the experimentalism of poetic discourse, even if incipiently, the author tries to find a different way to

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<sup>5</sup>Nunes, João Arriscado, *Reportórios, Configurações e Fontesiras: sobre cultura, identidade e globalização*, Coimbra: Oficina do CES, nº43.

<sup>6</sup>Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, *Toward a New Common Sense. Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

deal with the contradictions and ambivalences that come up in discourses of identity — whether national, ethnic, or racial. These contradictions and ambivalences are deepened by a process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization, such as the immigration process.

I have conducted my research in the Portuguese immigrant communities of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, in the United States, and of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil. Mine is, therefore a comparative approach.

Immigration space is a frontier space. It offers a privileged positioning to observe the conflicts and ambivalences resulting both from the intersection and the clash between different languages and cultures, that are, implicitly, different ways of looking into the real. These different ways of looking are part of the intrinsic process of the construction of identity, which will always be multiple and plural. This is a process structured by language in the language.

Because the tension between the real and language is best observed in poetic discourse, I chose immigrant poetry to study this process in its vast and complex implications and articulations. Mine is thus a microscopic analysis of the immigration phenomenon as a mode of socio-cultural adaptation.

When trying to understand how identity is constructed in the context of immigration, one can not avoid the questions of ethnicity, race, community or nation. These are some of the imagined forms, that, through language, are part of the symbolic universe of Portuguese immigrants. These imagined forms are clearly inscribed in the history and in the immigration policy of the different countries involved (Portugal, United States and Brazil).



Now, the concepts of "ethnicity" and "race" are, in the Portuguese case, a good example of what the notion of "imagined forms" means. In spite of almost eight centuries of history — one of the oldest nations in the world — how can we speak of an "ethnic identity"? How far back must we go? To the Lusitanians? The Romans? The Celts? The Visigoths? The Arabs? After the Discoveries, things became still more hectic!...And, with Fascism, the question of the "Portuguese Race" leaves us in very dark waters indeed!...Just think of the hilarious report by Leo Pap in *The Portuguese-American*<sup>7</sup> about the diverse ethnic and racial denominations of Portuguese used by the confused American Immigration Services...: "Caucasian", "Latino", "Black Portuguese", "Azorean", "native of the Atlantic islands", etc.

As a literature scholar, it is very clear to me that when trying to understand "what is being imagined", one must always ask "who is imagining" and, further more, "in what context"? Only then will it be possible to follow the ambiguities and, very often, the contradictions of diverse poetic discourses. Survival strategies are entangled, simultaneous and paradoxically, with cultural resistance, on the one hand, and the wish for assimilation, on the other.

Different identity configurations are intrinsically related to the different contexts that have produced the discourse. Thus the switching of voices in poems and interviews: from Portuguese to American to Luso-American; from Portuguese to Brazilian to Luso-Brazilian. And, in Brazil, differently from what I had expected, the situation, because post-colonial, is even more complex than the one I observed in the Portuguese communities in the United States.

As a matter of fact, a common language doesn't simplify things. A history of colonization, in which Portugal played the role of a core country —

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<sup>7</sup>Pap, Leo, *The Portuguese-American*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981.

or the "centre" — and I'm now using the theory of the World-system developed by Immanuel Wallerstein<sup>8</sup> — a history of colonization was followed by a history of immigration that placed Portugal in a peripheral position vis-à-vis the former colony; and yet, nowadays, both countries share the same semiperipheral position in the context of the globalized world-economy. Portugal sees the European Community as a door way back to the centre, whilst Brazil is desperately trying to fulfill its destiny and achieve a future place at that centre. This is why I see this as a privileged moment to develop this kind of research and observe the strategies and ambiguities of a discourse that must forcibly deal with all this economical, political and social complexity. Indeed, historically, this is a discourse produced at the very centre of the struggle.

In an attempt to neutralize the tensions and conflicts resulting from the historical process — colonial and post-colonial — both the Portuguese and the Brazilian governments have been using for centuries a "rhetoric of brotherhood", whose main support has always been the Portuguese language. But paradoxically the "accent" distinguishes "the brethern", and drawing attention to it renders a discriminatory attitude that is not always veiled; the constant reference to the "accent" in relation to the Portuguese immigrants in Brazil is, undoubtedly, a sign of the failure not only of the "rhetoric of brotherhood", but also of another equally neutralizing form of rhetoric that structures the whole of the Brazilian symbolic universe: an egalitarian rhetoric that defines Brazil as a "melting pot of cultures and races".

In my approach to the various discourses of identity in the poems, I immediately noticed that they all tried to start from an idea of universalism. It

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<sup>8</sup>Wallerstein, Immanuel, *The Capitalist World Economy*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979.

is, however, the articulation of this idea of universalism that immediately originates the complexity and difficulty of the discourse: perhaps because this universalism is felt as an imposed particularism (by histories of colonialism and post-colonialism, by histories of immigration, by histories of racial and ethnic discrimination; by rhetorics of brotherhood, of multiculturalism or of melting pots of cultures and races).

The first conclusion I came to in my research was that it is impossible to try to understand language without trying to understand the power — or powers — that structure it. In spite of, and because of, the globalization of the world economy, those powers and those hierarchies vary from country to country, simply because, imagined or not, one must deal with different and conflicting historical, social, economic and political contexts.

As in the USA, in Brazil, the definition of a Portuguese identity is also a definition through the local or regional, instead of the national. This happens because the enculturation process during Salazar's days was marked by the extreme isolation of the different regions of the national territory. In Brazil too, "Portuguese" — in terms of the national — will mainly come up in the face of discriminatory situations and very often in connection with the need to give some visibility to the Portuguese presence.

In contrast to what happens in the USA, in Brazil, this discourse of "being Portuguese" becomes a kind of (neo)colonizing discourse in search of legitimation through allusion to the great historical personalities of Portuguese culture (sometimes even through identification with them), namely to the great poets of the Portuguese Language (most commonly, Camões and Pessoa).

Also in contrast to what happens in the USA, in Brazil, the variable "ethnicity" plays a totally secondary role in the "explication de texte"; and

instead, one finds another variable, that is extremely important in the Brazilian social context: the variable "class". When trying to define an immigrant identity, we always encounter questions such as multiculturalism, multilingualism and even citizenship linked to this variable "class"

I should also add that in my participant observation, I have observed deeper divisions between the Portuguese communities in Brazil (Rio and São Paulo) than between those in the USA (New Bedford, Fall River, Taunton, Providence and East Providence). Even though "class" is the most important variable in Brazil, and probably due to the intrinsic characteristics of São Paulo, a city ethnically divided by a late non-Portuguese immigration, the Portuguese community there displays a very different ethnic consciousness from the consciousness we encounter in the larger community of Rio de Janeiro, where the Portuguese colonization was much stronger.

Though in a somewhat reductive manner, I have pointed out the main characteristics and differences of Portuguese immigration in the USA and Brazil.

Let me now concentrate on the real object of my work: the poems.

Starting from a sociological approach, I try to disclose in this poetry the mechanisms of production and reproduction of the immigrants' symbolic system. One must consider the diverse rupture forms with the original milieu and, at the same time, try to understand the function that these ruptures play in the creation of imagined forms of relation to the past, because the past experience in the country of origin will be projected into the present and into the future. Immigrants keep in their language the memory of their space of origin and it will be that memory that they will project into a space that is not theirs, at least not yet. Their understanding of reality is intimately related to

their language and to the "believable fictions" they had to learn to structure it. This understanding of reality is, at least partially, inadequate to the present experience, the experience now structuring their being immigrants. It is basically here that all contradictions and ambivalences start: in relation to the country of origin and in relation to the country of arrival, with the resulting feeling of loss and marginalization.

The same may be found at the root of linguistic cases such as the "Portuguese accent" in Brazil, or the "Portenglish", in the United States. There is, on the one hand, the wish for the assimilation of the new language, or of the new way of speaking the language (and it is not by simple contingency that most of the new vocabulary will be connected to the very material elements of daily life); but on the other hand, when we read their poetry, we find a new language consciousness and, playing with the new possibilities, the exploration of new spaces and new structures — sometimes used ironically in relation to the immigrant experience and to the "believable fictions" newly created. One of those fictions is precisely the identification of the Portuguese Discoveries with the Immigration. A good example of a poem playing with "Portenglish" and being ironical about that identification is "Observações Dum Party/ASSIMilação"<sup>9</sup> ("Party Observation/ASSIMILIKEation") by José Brites, now living in East Providence:

"Party Observation/ASSIMILIKEation"

They come  
polyester themselves  
cocacole bottles to their mouths  
learn by heart the televised English in espectáculos  
some other *Amerde* -icanizations  
the reduced space can take

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<sup>9</sup>Brites, José, *Imigramar*, Newark: Pab Publications, Inc., 1981.

and bingo  
 a Portugal of the fifteen hundreds  
 in a circus of the nineteen hundreds  
 in an America of two thousand...

■ ■ ■

"Observações Dum Party/ASSIMilação"

Chegam  
 poliestram-se  
 cocacolam garrafas nos beijos  
 empinam inglês nos shows televisados  
 mais umas amerdicanizações  
 que o espaço encurtado aguenta  
 e zás  
 um Portugal de quinhentos  
 num circo de novecentos  
 numa América dois mil...

As we can see, in his writing, the immigrant poet situates his identity in relation to three different communities: the Portuguese, the American and the immigrant. And the image is clearly ironical. Brites is one of the poets of the younger generation that is a lot more critical and conscious of the hybrid identity being formed. In this poem, he shows the ambivalence generated within this hybrid process: America, the country of possibility and success, the land of progress and of the future the immigrant was in search of ("America of the two thousand") is presented in "Amerde -icanizations": polyester, coca-cola and televised "*espectáculos*" (shows); Portugal, usually presented in the poetry of the old generation of immigrants as a lost Eden, as the "superlative and fictional Motherland" that Eduardo Lourenço talks about<sup>10</sup> — is here presented, sarcastically but also sadly, as a country that was, once and very briefly, a colonial power and the economic centre of the world ("a Portugal of the fifteen hundreds"), and is now a country that is nothing but a great exporter of immigrants; and finally, these immigrants presented in a laughable reality that paradoxically wishes for assimilation —

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<sup>10</sup>Lourenço, Eduardo, "As Marcas do Exílio no Discurso de Rodrigues Miguéis", in *Gávea-Brown*, vols. III-IV, nº1-2, 1982/83.

to become part of this new centre of the world— but never letting go the Portugal of the fifteen hundreds. At least in their symbolic universe, in their memory, the immigrants keep the image of an Empire and culture that they consider superior.

The immigrant will keep and use this "memory of the centre" — especially in discriminatory situations — as a form of resistance against the dissolution of identity and dignity. I think we may consider this form of writing in itself as a part of that resistance. This poetry is, undoubtedly, a cultural particularism, a "counter-knowledge" in Boaventura de Sousa Santos' words — a particularism asserting itself in a highly homogenizing context.

Zé da Chica, the pseudonym of António de Medeiros Silva, has been writing his "Gazetilha" (Gazette) in the *Portuguese Times* of New Bedford for more than twenty years now. Every week he delivers his criticisms and satirical comments on the most recent events in the community and in Portugal. In a close relation to the folk lore and part of the older generation, this poet is always very concerned with his audience. In an interview he said: "I must always use words that "they" will be able to understand! (...) 90% of the Portuguese in here seldom read, but the newspaper is there, and there is the Gazette...and they will have a good laugh (...), yes, on the newspaper, they will read!". Zé da Chica tells and keeps the history of his people, like any other bard going through the same experiences.

Let us look at an excerpt of a poem that echoes Camões and whose title is "Os Lusíadas do Zé da Chica" ("Zé da Chica's Lusiads"). In this poem we find the passage from a colonizing power into a country of emigration fused in an image of Portugal where the sailors of the Discoveries become the immigrants:

"(...)  
Since then Portuguese adventurers

Across the never before navigated seas  
 Emigrated and fused with the sailors  
 Carrying their faith in God and honest arms  
 (...)

■ ■ ■

"(...)  
 Desde então portugueses aventureiros  
 Por mares nunca dantes navegados  
 Emigraram unindo-se aos marinheiros  
 Levando a fé em Deus e braços honrados  
 (...)"

From *Voz de Portugal (The Voice of Portugal)*, one of the Portuguese newspapers published by the community in Brazil, I would like to read another two poems of the same type. In the first one, "Herói Desconhecido" ("Unknown Hero") by Abílio Herlander, *saudade* (a Portuguese version of nostalgia) melts with the celebration of the immigrant's heroism, who, again like a sailor from the Discoveries, knows only where he came from, but never where he is going to. Echoing a celebration of the Empire, we find him laboring to rise a country:

"You, who left your homeland  
 In your tender age,  
 You may talk of *saudade*  
 From the bottom of your heart.  
 Either on the deck of a ship  
 Or on a modern plane  
 You came and gave your labor  
 To this or that other nation.  
 And you know where you come from  
 But never, where you are going.  
 (...)  
 Your hair is grey  
 You almost lost your life  
 But you are a giant, you immigrant  
 You make a country rise.  
 (...)"

■ ■ ■

"Tu, que desde tenra idade  
 Saíste do teu torrão  
 Podes falar de *saudade*



De dentro do coração.  
 Ou num convés dum navio  
 Ou num moderno avião  
 Vieste dar teu trabalho  
 Nesta, ou naquela nação.  
 E tu sabes donde vens  
 Mas não sabes, para onde vais.  
 (...)  
 Os teus cabelos, estão brancos  
 Tiveste a vida por um triz  
 Mas és gigante, imigrante  
 Tu levantas um país.  
 (...)"

*Saudade* is the bridge uniting the two times (the past and the present) and the two spaces (here and there). Based on memory, *Saudade* is thus the believable fiction on which an always renewed ethnic identity is built. Through it, the emptying out of identity is avoided and, after deconstruction, a new reconstruction is necessary. Thus the immigrant feels there is a continuity in the experience and, simultaneously, a multiplying of experiences.

Let me now read some lines of the poem "Earthwrecked" ("Náufrago na Terra") by António Guedes de Campos, also published in the newspaper *Voz de Portugal*:

"I stand on the pier. And from the pier I look  
 at the sea starting at my feet.  
 I look at it far away beyond my look  
 a giant in whose head  
 another place takes rest.  
 I look at it and I plunge into the sadness.  
 (...)  
 They are the living and they are the dead  
 They are the present and they are the past.  
 They all want me back  
 to the scarcity on that other side.  
 Their calls weigh on me  
 Like the ballast of sin.  
  
 They wait for me night and day  
 a sailor of no return.  
 There is a call in the wind.

There is remorse in the air.  
 (...)
 *Saudade* and the past calling him  
 back  
 to the original beach, but adventure  
 and challenge  
 bewitch him and put his arms around the new land...  
 "A Female  
 lying down, solid flesh awaiting".

Thus  
 THE IMMIGRANT

■ ■ ■

"Estou no cais. E do cais olho  
 o mar que aos meus pés começa.  
 Olho-o longe além do olhar  
 gigante em cuja cabeça  
 repousa outro lugar.  
 Olho-o e mergulho em tristeza.  
 (...)
 São os vivos e os mortos  
 São o presente e o passado.  
 Todos me querem de volta  
 à pequenez desse lado.  
 Pesam-me em mim suas súplicas  
 Como um lastro de pecado.

Aguardam-me noite e dia  
 marinheiro sem voltar.  
 Há um apelo no vento.  
 Há um remorso no ar.  
 (...)
 A saudade e o passado chamam ao  
 retorno à  
 praia de origem mas, a aventura e o  
 desafio  
 seduzem-no a abraçar a nova terra...  
 "Fêmea  
 deitada e sólida carne à espera".

É assim  
 o EMIGRANTE"

Curiously, after all the ambivalence between the two times and the two spaces, at the end of the poem and of the voyage, we find an erotic

image that is clearly an image of domination and conquest of the body of the new land as imperialistically taken.

Of course, these images are in the great Portuguese literary tradition: the valiant and virile sailors always find very beautiful and dangerous goddesses and nymphs that they finally seduce and dominate!... And there are other traits in this writing that will allow us to consider it as part of the Portuguese tradition of the Lyrical Poetry of the Exile dating back to the 16th.Century. Carlos Ascenso André says about this Poetry of the Exile<sup>11</sup>..:" (... ) the man that experiences exile seems to be floating between two worlds and he tries to hold to each one of them in an intermittently and changing way. From here an ambiguous relation comes forth, both to the country of origin and to the new country, and emotional shifts happen any time he is conscious of his situation of "misplacement" (...). The hidden presence of this duality must forcibly be felt at the level of the literary creativity (...). And time too is defined by two contradictory attraction poles: the present, physically actual, time of the live and sensitive real, and the past, in vague lines, in the memory, unreal time, appealing, time of illusion, of dream, of nostalgia (...).As a result of this double dualism, a third one emerges, which is the double personality of the exiled: there is one that survives, that adapts itself, that makes an effort to accept the need to destroy the mechanisms of rejection: and there is the other, the one that resists, that holds on to the origins, to the cult of heritage (...). With the latter he searches in his memory the space to create, back to his roots, as a way of asserting his identity and autonomy. Mythifying the past and the motherland he was forced to abandon (...)"

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<sup>11</sup>André, Carlos Ascenso, *Mal de Ausência. O Canto do Exílio na Lírica Novilatina Portuguesa do século XVI*. Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra (Dissertação de Doutoramento)

The motifs that André enumerates are exactly the same that we find in poetry by immigrants: the space (description and juxtaposition of the here and there), the departure and the voyage (the two moments in between the two spaces), the community (in here and in there, always related to the language question), loneliness, the time (hovering above all these other references) and, linked to it, the memory and *saudade*.

I believe that this brief description will be enough to make clear that, even at the level of the literary tradition, a poetic identity is built on an ethnic identity that comes from the identification with and the reconstruction of the literary models related to the Discoveries.

But the voyage is not over yet, as João de Barcellos shows us in his poem/book entitled *A Lusitanian in Sampa Island (Um Luso na Ilha de Sampa)*<sup>12</sup>:

Hey men, breaking through the island's jungle  
I put on the jesuit's clothes and, as in the April's  
dawn  
I learn a life in the new.

But the ship still  
awaits, one must not loose the subtle  
Lusitanian legacy — the conquest

and so I know I will leave tomorrow. Life  
charges you, I am a sailor of other days and also  
of April.

Poetry will not withdraw to an island.

It was good to know about you  
my dearest island, to love  
inside your soul.  
To know  
about you.

■ ■ ■

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<sup>12</sup>Barcellos, João de, *Um Luso na Ilha de Sampa*, São Paulo: Edicon, 1989.

Gente, desbravando a selva da ilha  
 envergo a roupa do jesuíta e, como na madrugada  
 d'Abril,  
 aprendo no novo uma vida.

Mas o barco ainda  
 está aguardando, é preciso não perder a sutil  
 herança lusa — a conquista

por isso eu sei que partirei amanhã. A vida  
 cobra, sou marujo doutros tempos e também  
 d'Abril.

A poesia não pára numa ilha.

Foi bom saber de ti  
 minha querida ilha, amar  
 em tua alma.  
 Saber  
 de ti.

Poetry and identity cannot be harboured in an island forever: may that island be spatial, historical, ethnic or literary. Poetry and identity may fear that unknown island; explore it, dominate it or be lost in it. But language will not stop weaving the believable fictions that will help us to navigate between the continents.

The island is that space "in between" which the immigrant, in his singular experience, lives in a much deeper way than we all do. To Barcellos, the island is Sampa, where the jesuit is one with the immigrant, where an historical past of colonialism and conquest are one with a present of freedom born in the April Revolution of 1974 (which meant freedom also for other Portuguese colonies); the island where loneliness is in the crowd, where language fuses transforming São Paulo into Sampa, or the Portuguese from Portugal with the Portuguese from Brazil.

The island is, ultimately, language itself: the frontier space where the identity of the poet is built — the place where all identities are built. The island is just another fiction, just another part of reality. That is why the ship is

still there "awaiting": unlimited possibility of departure and future voyages.  
The unlimited possibility in language to start new Discoveries of the forever  
mysterious worlds of the Human.

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