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Amílcar Cabral

## FROM AMÍLCAR CABRAL TO THE *BAIRRO DA JAMAICA*

*Bruno Sena Martins*

As the 45th anniversary of the assassination of Amílcar Cabral (January 20, 1973) drew near, I decided to plunge into the lengthy collection Amílcar Cabral's *Letters to Maria Helena - The Other Face of the Man* (2016). The book compiles letters that the independence leader sent between 1946 and 1960 to Maria Helena: first his friend, then girlfriend, then wife. As I sat on the sofa to dedicate myself to this diligently preserved collection of letters, I could not help but feel, as is often the case when I read



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correspondence, that accessing others' words can be an undeserved privilege. These letters were not addressed to me. There was a sense of impropriety in my reading them, because it was 2019 and these letters were intended for a woman who received them several decades ago, and because I was able to compress 16 years of two lives into only a few days. Also, I was peering through the intimate curtains a love built of determination, longing, lyricism and friendship, but equally threatened by racism, patriarchy and the anguish of an uncertain future. This uncertain future resulted largely, as we know, from the Cabral's sense of purpose, which made it as difficult for him to live in the relative comfort of the metropolis as it was for him to be separated from Helena. Staying in Europe would be to:

... abandon all my aspirations (they are the aspirations of millions of individuals), and abandon Africa. (...) You know as well as I do what forces call me to Africa, forces that I will not resist, because I would betray myself, betray my own life (letter, dated 20th August 1948).

From the myriad possibilities for political, social and cultural analysis that the letters offer us – notwithstanding the significant absence of Helena's voice, which we can only imagine – I would like to dwell on a letter dated 28th August 1950. There, Cabral writes of how he has been affected by a clipping from the newspaper *Primeiro de Janeiro*, that reports on racial problems in Brazil. It discusses the anti-racist struggle of the black American ballerina Katherine Dunham, who, much to the relief of its white clients, had been barred from staying in a São Paulo hotel, as well as the analogous experiences of the boxer Joe Louis. Cabral's perspective on racism all over the world itself reflects a plural sensibility that was both anchored in the fight against colonialism in Africa (where he was born, lived and fought), and that at the same time embraced a transnational solidarity. Cabral also sought to build a sense of fraternity across the black diaspora dispersed across many continents. In the letter of 28th August, Cabral rails against the racism he sees as rampant throughout the world. He translates passages from the anthropologist Alfred Métraux, published in an article in UNESCO's (which he describes as "a UN body") *Le Courier* newspaper. Cabral draws attention to the eminent anthropologist's argument for the obvious scientific vacuity of race as a demarcation of human groups.

I find this short letter is interesting in terms of how it puts us in dialogue with the role of the UN today and the recently decreed *International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024*. Certainly, the UN and the international human rights regime will never be able to reverse its "birth defect": its failure to respond to colonialism, the most important political issue of the twentieth century. The deliberate



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omission in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of reference to the self-determination of colonized peoples at a time when half the world was under colonial rule is highly significant. So too is the indifference of human rights discourses, until very late in the day, to most anti-colonial struggles. Nevertheless, it is instructive to see how the institutional and political space of the UN has created openings and interstitial possibilities which led, for example, to Cabral citing anti-racist texts from UNESCO in 1950, thirteen years before the armed struggle began in Guinea Bissau.

Portugal is part of the *International Decade for People of African Descent*, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on 23rd December 2013 with the theme “People of African descent: recognition, justice and development.” This initiative comes in the context of several conferences, resolutions, declarations and conventions that have reiterated that all human beings are born equal in dignity and rights and have the potential to contribute constructively to the development of the well-being of societies. Proclaiming this ‘decade’ can be understood as a renewed effort in this direction, in the context of a previous lack of international cooperation in eliminating forms of racism, xenophobia and discrimination, and promoting the respect for, protection of and human rights of all peoples of African descent. It is still too early to know to what extent the discursive and institutional space fostered by the *International Decade for People of African Descent*, will help and increase the visibility of the struggles of black diasporas.

In any case, at a time when many of the issues anti-colonial struggles fought for remain relevant and pressing, both in African countries and on other continents, the histories of Cabral and of anti-colonialism more broadly serve as a crucial reminder not to betray those predecessors, and that there are many latitudes of racist indignity. Finally, they remind us that the corridors of those institutions, alongside the Conakry pilot school, the forests of Guinea-Bissau and Seixal’s disadvantaged neighbourhood *Bairro da Jamaica* comprise shared cartographies of an anti-racist and anti-colonial future.

Cabral, Iva; Souto, Márcia; Elísio, Filinto (orgs.), (2016), *Cartas de Amílcar Cabral a Maria Helena - A Outra Face do Homem*. Lisbon: Rosa de Porcelana.

Translated by [Alexandra Reza](#)



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TO THE *BAIRRO DA JAMAICA*

**Bruno Sena Martins** is a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra and co-coordinator of the PhD program “Human Rights in Contemporary Societies” at the Centre for Social Studies and the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research at the University of Coimbra. He is an associate researcher for the MEMOIRS project - Children of Empire and European Post-Memories (ERC No. 648624).

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