

## **“Ex-Centric” Lusofonias**

### **On Remembered Language and Its Possible Futures in Portuguese-American Culture**

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ABSTRACT: I re-examine the dynamics of literary resonance, not only in the works of two contemporary Portuguese-American authors, Katherine Vaz and Frank X. Gaspar, but also across the sites and common places of lived experience in southeastern Massachusetts, the place from which I reconstitute my own encounter with the Portuguese language and a region that, while it may fall clearly outside the official boundaries of the Portuguese-speaking world, has been as much a home for Portuguese language and lusophone cultures over the past 150 to 200 years as many of the other spaces officialized by governmental institutions, whether as part of Portugal and its empire or as part of more recent authorities, such as the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (in Portuguese, CPLP).

KEYWORDS: literary resonance, Portuguese-speaking world, Portuguese-American authors.

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Eu nunca guardei rebanhos,  
Mas é como os guardasse.  
—Alberto Caeiro, *Poemas*

*I am not a keeper of sheep*, he says. The night  
will be long and soft with stars and the heat and the ticking  
of one heart or another. He leans back in his chair with that uncertain  
charisma, that narrow head. I can tell he is here to stay.  
—Frank X. Gaspar, “I Am Not a Keeper of Sheep” (21)

### **Remembering in Portuguese, from the “Outermost Azores”**

In the poem “I Am Not a Keeper of Sheep,” from his 2004 collection *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, the Portuguese-American poet Frank X. Gaspar ponders the

ineluctable presence in his life and work of one of Portugal's most omnipresent literary phantasms: the national poet of the twentieth century, Fernando Pessoa. In this poem, Pessoa has been around for so long that Gaspar can no longer pinpoint the exact moment of his arrival, cohabitating as he now does alongside the mundane presences of Gaspar's everyday life: the cat at the screen door, his papers and books, an August evening in California. And the particulars of Pessoa's arrival have for some time been overshadowed by the nagging possibility that this guest may never leave. Yes, believe it or not, Pessoa seems to have overstayed his welcome in this remote literary abode on the Pacific Coast. His genius, once seductive, has by now grown oppressive, and however fascinating he and his melancholy, poetic Lisbon may be, he must now, at this late hour, sip his little cup of coffee and puff on his cigarette all the more slowly to prolong his stay.

Gaspar is by no means alone among authors in this regard; in fact, he is in fine company. As many readers of Portuguese literature will recall, in the Portuguese novelist José Saramago's *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*, Pessoa appears as "o corpo apodrecido de um fazedor de versos que deixou a sua parte de loucura no mundo, é essa a grande diferença que há entre os poetas e os doidos, o destino da loucura que os tomou" (the rotting corpse of a maker of verses who left his share of madness in the world, and that is the great difference between poets and madmen: the destiny of that madness that overtakes them; 39).<sup>1</sup> Pessoa is nonetheless revisited by a remnant of his own literary invention after his death, namely, his literary alter ego, or, as he called it, his heteronym, Ricardo Reis.

But how does one measure the destiny of folly? Where does one's madness go when it leaves the mortal body? What is the future repository of our seemingly innocent quirks and idiosyncrasies, especially as expressed in Portuguese language, literature, and culture? If they are in fact left behind as a kind of residual energy in this world, as Saramago suggests, could it mean that "ex-centricity," especially in the unorthodox way I spell it here, is in fact the most durable part of the human spirit?

Admittedly, the word "eccentric" is already a euphemism, standing in politely for terms like crazy, insane, demented, or mad, but in the form of a neologism the term "ex-centric" can also suggest another meaning, referring to that off-center space, mental flight, or exploration of geographical horizons, diasporic cultures, or other presumably marginal spaces, all of them hospitable to poetic imagination and intellectual discourse, however unofficial their assigned

spaces on a map, whether of the Portuguese-speaking world or any other global linguistic community. As Gaspar's contemporary Katherine Vaz writes, "everything audible in history, from an eyelash falling to Ovid's pen leaking, remains circulating in the airwaves" (1994, 101).<sup>2</sup> So how much of this poet's—or anyone else's—lingering madness really does pervade the here and now?

In the words of the Italian novelist Antonio Tabucchi, not even *Requiem* (1991), written in Pessoa's native Portuguese, is enough to shake him. In explaining how this work came to be written, Tabucchi even goes so far as to say, "acima de tudo, este livro é uma homenagem a um país que eu adoptei e que também me adoptou, a uma gente que gostou de mim de quem eu também gostei" (above all, this book is an homage to a country that I adopted and that also adopted me, to people who liked me and whom I liked as well; 7). What, then, is it about this story that demands that it be written in Portuguese, English, or any other language? Is it just that any truly devoted requiem must be articulated by way of that added sense of awareness that is only palpable in the language of another? Through the choice to write in Portuguese, this act of literary admiration at the moment of loss becomes an elegy not only for an obscure (though hardly forgotten) literary companion but for the relationship with language that that relationship brought into being. For all the foreignness that can be captured and conveyed in translation, there may well remain a part of any text that must appear in another language, or even more than one, if it is to convey adequately not only meaning but an irreplaceable sense of cultural identity and difference, perhaps one that even tests the very perceptions of such identity and difference on the fluctuating border between Portuguese and those inevitably recurring worlds in any number of other languages.

Needless to say, the potent lingering effects of this cross-cultural literary relationship upon Tabucchi's work are by no means diminished in subsequent writings, as Pessoa's presence is still perceptible in Tabucchi's subsequent novels, written in Italian, above all the one titled *Sostiene Pereira* (1994), in which Pereira, the editor of a Lisbon literary review, is reduced to writing successive drafts of an eternally insufficient necrology:

Then he was reminded of his column "On This Day" and began to write. "It has been three years now since the great poet Fernando Pessoa passed away. He was culturally English but had decided to write in Portuguese, as he stressed that his homeland was the Portuguese language. He left us beautiful

poems scattered in magazines, and one short poem, *Message*, which is the story of Portugal through the eyes of a great artist who loved his homeland.” He then reread what he had written and found it repugnant, Pereira maintains. So he threw the sheet of paper in the trash and wrote: “Fernando Pessoa left us three years ago. Few had noticed him, almost no one. He lived in Portugal like a foreigner, perhaps because he was a foreigner everywhere. He lived alone, in modest guesthouses or rented rooms. He is remembered by his friends, his companions, and those who loved poetry.” (36)<sup>3</sup>

All of these authors, regardless of national origin or language, appear to face the same challenge of confronting Pessoa’s seemingly inefaceable and hypnotic heteronymics: Gaspar might even wonder, when these voices arrive by way of his own poetic hallucination, how he can be sure that it is actually Pessoa and not the original *guardador de rebanhos* Alberto Caeiro who sits before him, that precursor of literary heteronyms par excellence and putative author of the lines in Portuguese that inspire Gaspar’s poem. Or any of the others: Alexander Search, Álvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, or Bernardo Soares? One thing is for sure, if Gaspar, Vaz, and this faraway “flock” of disparate literary voices are any indication: it would take a major rewriting of the terms of Pessoa’s passing at this late hour to ensure his permanent departure from this or any other literary scene (Martinho).

### **Back to the Ethnic Garden: Diasporic *Saudades* in Vaz and Gaspar**

It is nonetheless in this context of continually recurring cultural references that I wish to reexamine the dynamics of literary resonance, not only in the works of two contemporary Portuguese-American authors, Katherine Vaz and Frank X. Gaspar, but also across the sites and common places of lived experience in southeastern Massachusetts, the place from which I reconstitute my own encounter with the Portuguese language, a region that, while it may fall clearly outside the official boundaries of the Portuguese-speaking world, has been as much a home for Portuguese language and lusophone cultures over the past 150 to 200 years as many of the other spaces officialized by governmental institutions over the years, whether as a part of Portugal and its empire or as a part of more recent authorities, such as the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (in Portuguese, CPLP).

Moreover, the initial interventions of a nonnative author like Tabucchi raise



an equally important question: why give primary importance in one's life to a language and culture that is presumably "not one's own"? And to what extent is it possible to "migrate" not only into a metropolitan Portuguese or other officially Portuguese-speaking culture, but also into any number of diasporic, immigrant, and/or bilingual communities, like those of southeastern Massachusetts?

This is by no means the first time and place in which these two authors have been discussed in tandem with writers from the Portuguese literary canon, as would be expected after even a superficial reading of each: their two best-known novels, Vaz's *Saudade* (1994) and Gaspar's *Leaving Pico* (1999), lend themselves to comparative study on the basis of thematic content alone, as each traces the connections of immigrants in the United States to the islands of the Azores and their popular and literary traditions. For instance, the Portuguese literary critic Reinaldo Silva's 2005 article "The Ethnic Garden in Portuguese-American Writing" points out the many common cultural elements for those unfamiliar with the everyday life in the Portuguese-American community, and highlights the representation of "ancestral culture" as emblemized in the "ethnic garden," one that is re-created on the basis of personal experience evoked in Vaz's and Gaspar's novels and poems: planting potatoes and kale, growing hydrangeas, lilacs, or blackberries, and raising chickens in the backyard.

Most with an emotional connection to such gardens would probably welcome an in-depth discussion of their cultural significance, especially in a collection such as this on the topic of Lusofonia and this region's possible place within it. On the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, for example, Azorean gardens can still be found, especially off Vineyard Avenue in the town of Oak Bluffs. Even in cases where domestic agriculture has been erased by gentrification, its memory is still immortalized in place-names such as Chicken Alley, given to a stretch of Lagoon Pond Road near the post office in Vineyard Haven. A recent article in the *Vineyard Gazette* on a prize-winning rooster, soon to be evicted from his coop in a recently built residential neighborhood by the Tisbury zoning board, illustrates the current tensions between rural necessities and suburban aspirations:

Mayflower Lane homeowners complained at the zoning board hearing last week that chickens were not appropriate for their neighborhood. They expressed concern that the [coop in question] would affect their property val-

ues, and said they were worried that fowl would attract rodents and other pests. The complaints reflect the changing character of a town that has a street known as Chicken Alley, where lifelong Vineyard Haven resident and current Mayflower Lane homeowner Eugene De Costa spent much of his life.

"I lived there 20 years, and everyone had chickens," Mr. De Costa told the zoning board last week. "But fowl bring rats. And I didn't build up there [on Mayflower Lane] to have rats." (*Vineyard Gazette*, 2 February 2007)

This local example, while perhaps not literary in its strictest sense, nonetheless illustrates the Portuguese ethnic character of Chicken Alley as represented in the memories of Mr. De Costa. Nonetheless, the Rhode Island Red in question here is a far cry from that of the emblematic "Galo de Barcelos" or any other proud symbol of Portuguese ethnic identity, for that matter—just the crowing of another unwelcome neighbor, and the newspaper stories show that such feathered neighbors continue to be unwelcome in certain corners of this island. As for the row of wooden two-story houses nicknamed Chicken Alley: although this place remains an important point of reference in oral accounts of Portuguese-American life on Martha's Vineyard, it is recalled here by one of its former residents with little or none of that emblematically Portuguese sentiment called *saudade*, at least not in the nostalgic and culturally exclusive sense in which it has too often been understood.

This raises the question: is the concept of *saudade* as important to Portuguese-American culture as it is to Portuguese culture? Is it, as Vaz maintains, truly "an untranslatable word" (186)? I imagine that this depends on what language you are attempting to translate it into (certainly not always English), and what you consider the range of acceptable equivalence. After all, one could just as easily make a similar case for the incommensurability of other words in Portuguese, words like *pelourinho*, *azulejo*, *porto*, *galo*, and *pão*, for the cultural specificity and symbolism they evoke.<sup>4</sup>

If the example of Chicken Alley seems to open up a series of anecdotal digressions, they may illustrate that, with or without translation, we are often left only with the startling realization that perhaps nothing is truly transmissible: that the meaning of all lived experience is bound to be lost, not only in translation between languages but in the attempt to express it in any language. I return to Vaz by way of an example from her novel *Saudade*: "Her father often took her to visit hydrangeas; she thought it was so that she would lose herself in

some quality that purple had. (Now that she could speak, she wanted to scream, What did they mean to you, Papai? What did you mean for them to mean to me?) Hydrangeas more than anything else remind her of home. They are her father (94)." As this short garden passage illustrates, people may share and inherit cultural commonplaces, but they also transform, distort, or forget them, and the meaning of the simplest of things may well escape them. In this context of continual motion, forgetting, and new beginnings, what we might call *saudade* seems to have either an uncertain future or a future that can longer decide on a name for itself.

One more brief look at Chicken Alley before we allow Mr. De Costa to get on with his life: in this discussion of the limits of *saudade*, it seems all the more ironic that the name of De Costa's current place of residence—Mayflower Lane—might suggest a much more ominous definition for Portuguese-American culture than any sentiment for lost chickens ever could, for the vessel after which De Costa's lane is named still holds within it an entirely different story, one of a violent rerouting of cultural historiography itself, in which earlier arrivals are blown off course in the official story, so that it can culminate in an adoption of Yankee identity, iconography, attitudes, and values (perhaps of culture but, more important, of property). No fear: there are other vessels on the horizon in the works of Gaspar, and they will be salvageable as seaworthy competitors in a discussion of culture that transcends documented historical facts. Then again, this too is simply another way to say *saudade*, that is, the wish to reclaim an imaginary, heroic past as a promise for the present and future. Any attempt to answer seems insufficient, or perhaps the Portuguese poet Florbela Espanca, in her "Sóror saudade," was indeed able to give a voice to this interminable cycle of ambivalence when she wrote: "quem dera que fosse sempre assim: / Quanto menos quisesse recordar / mais a saudade andasse presa a mim" (That is how I wish it could always be / that the less I wanted to recall / the more my longing took hold of me; 246).

So perhaps it is best to set aside this discussion of *saudade* for a moment, or leave it to others for the time being (Lourenço 1978, Botelho 1990) in order to ask: is there another level of Portuguese (and more specifically, Azorean) consciousness in the works of Gaspar and Vaz outside "the ethnic garden," and other inherited cultural practices, of parents and grandparents and quickly receding childhoods? Is there a Portugal that emanates not only from the home but also from the cross-identifications of personal experience as readers and

writers? Silva does allude to these other elements in his article by way of a list of literary readings or influences, yet we are left without a close reading of the texts that explores these intertextual references, whether with Portuguese or other cultures. I would submit that it is this literary experience that allows for a vision of Portuguese-American culture not fenced in by the dictates of cultural tradition but open to a number of other complex cultural references and divergent, contradictory, and, yes, “ex-centric” interpretations of a common history.

As both Vaz and Gaspar invoke the land- and seascapes of their ancestral Azores as a point of departure for other discoveries farther west, this common trajectory becomes a conduit for the transatlantic passage of a number of other Portuguese literary tropes and attendant ideological “messages.” From the myths of lost explorers and the prophecies of forgotten Portuguese kings to their eventual reworking by way of Pessoa’s poetry, let us explore how Portuguese-American literature thus combines literary myth and ethnic memory in a potent New World vision for reconfiguring the present terms of ethnic identity and of imagining one’s “place in the world,” both in the Americas and in the greater Portuguese-speaking diaspora, one that stretches across the world to this day.

A reading of Katherine Vaz’s work reveals numerous references to Portuguese culture that extend far beyond the boundaries of everyday Portuguese-American experience, and she enriches her cultural landscape with a number of cultural references that might be considered obscure to many Portuguese-Americans today, most notably in her frequent return to Portuguese literature, in which she is similar to other authors in this context. This is by no means at the center of her literary imaginary: in her 1994 novel *Saudade*, the main character, Clara, lives in a world of fantasy stretching between the Azores and northern California, one that makes the reappearance of this literary connectivity between Portuguese tradition and U.S. lived experience conceivable. This world is experienced not only in and between Portuguese and English but also by way of an entire range of languages beyond them, languages that come to be equally essential in the narrative: languages of conch shells and telepathy, sugar and love (19–21), color and music (53). Questions of bilingualism are thus set aside in favor of other spontaneous and personal extralinguistic modes of expression, and it is primarily through these attempts to communicate sensory states beyond the reach and reason of spoken language that the foundations of reality are articulated and eventually transformed.



That said, a network of literary references does inform the novel, but more often in forms comic and transient than intentionally erudite: one character, Calíopia, even names her one-eyed puppy Luís, “after Luís Vaz de Camões, the epic poet who lost an eye during military service” (66). Those inclined toward more reverent invocations of this foundational Portuguese literary figure needn’t worry; as important to the Portuguese as Shakespeare is to the English or Cervantes to the Spanish, the poetic giant Vaz de Camões (or, in this case, Vaz’s Camões) reappears in a more recognizable form later in the novel, when Clara re-creates that part of the fifth book of Camões’s *Os Lusíadas* in the form of a painted piano recital, in which the mythical giant Adamastor’s love for Tétis is expressed through a mixture of color and music so complete that they are rendered indistinguishable (231). This is by no means the traditionally lamented “ditadura de Camões,” in which the poet’s style and vocabulary leave their indelible mark on both the Portuguese language and its literatures, but rather a reinterpretation in which language itself is once again placed off center, the registers of solipsism and migration eclipsing those of tyranny and tradition.

It is through the character Viriato das Chagas, however, that much of Portuguese literary tradition eventually finds a durable conduit into the novel’s fictional world—above all, the aforementioned spectral presence and self-styled “Super-Camões,” Fernando Pessoa. Though Viriato might evoke for some readers the second poem or “castle” of Pessoa’s *Mensagem*, emblem of a foundational Iberian identity characterized by his resistance to the Roman invasion led by Scipio (Pessoa 1952, 26), for the purposes of this novel he is simply a “man of letters on the Island of São Miguel [who] frequented the library of Universidade dos Açores in Ponta Delgada” (Vaz 1994, 100), invents heteronyms for Clara’s infant son and the town’s residents, and reads Pessoa’s *Oda marítima* over his teenage daughter’s annoyance and indifference (219–20). When Clara eventually tears a page from the poem and puts it in her mouth, Viriato is actually pleased: “That was right, just right, thought Viriato. Pessoa had written the mournful heart that Viriato could not claim for himself, because it belonged to them all” (221).

The resonant point here is that there are many ways to consume and digest literature, whether Pessoa’s or others,’ a sentiment that also underscores the ex-centric dynamics of literary circulation, by which we need not read or listen in order to understand. To put it another way, one could easily read through a pocket edition of Pessoa’s poem *Ode marítima* on the forty-five-minute boat ride

between Woods Hole and Vineyard Haven, but one could also read, that is, live and contemplate, this short everyday ocean voyage, continually recurrent over the course of a lifetime of embarkations, in the spirit of the *Ode marítima* without ever having to actually take the book onboard: “Ah, quem sabe, quem sabe, se não parti outrora, antes de mim, dum cais: se não deixei, navio ao sol, oblíquo na madrugada, uma outra espécie de porto?” (Ah, who knows, who knows, if I didn’t depart at some other time, before myself, from a dock: if I didn’t leave behind, boat in the sun, oblique at dawn, another kind of port? [9]). Such questions on Pessoa’s *Ode* could occupy us for a lifetime, but even a reading restricted by the space limitations of this essay would still affirm, and in no uncertain terms, that in Pessoa’s poetic voice de Campos’s view of Portuguese maritime tradition is by no means an unqualified glorification of exploration and empire, but rather one that balances the thrill of discovery with the misery, cruelty, and humiliation that accompanied it, one emphasized, by way of Campos’s monologue, perhaps as sincerely penitent as self-sacrificial: “obrigai-me a ajoelhar diante de vos”; “fazei de mim vossas vítimas todas” (Force me to kneel before you; make me into all of your victims), etc., etc. (36–37). In this context, this *chiaroscuro* of maritime experience takes us back further than we ever imagined: past Camões’s own ambivalence, expressed in his classic poem *Os Lusíadas* (10:5, 145), and even the words first uttered by the Roman general Pompey two thousand years ago—“navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse”—that have worked their way back through Portuguese fado music to reappear both in *Saudade* (233) and in Vaz’s subsequent collection, *Fado and Other Stories* (1997, 101–2): “navegar é preciso, viver não é preciso” (to sail is necessary, to live is not).

For most on dry land, however, these words no longer seem to hold, and probably never did. Is it really more necessary to sail than to live? Like Clara’s lover Hélió, an Azorean immigrant who appears as an unconventional spectator at a major-league baseball game, such words seem strangely out of place in the life of the mainland: “By the seventh inning, the pyramid of beer cups was threatening to block his view. His mind wandered to how insular he and his fellow Azoreans remained, how weighted with fantasies and chary of well-organized ambitions, even when they moved into the larger world. He had left his house today hoping to change that, and yet here he was, an island on the bleachers, timidly clutching an empty cup (150).”

Is this encounter with the world of others also a form of *saudade*, that longing for contact with the larger, off-island world, one that nonetheless might

never fulfill one's expectations? One can make an effort to translate the less commonly spoken languages of our own personal experience, and still that is no guarantee that the message will be understood, much less responded to. And yet Hélió cannot escape the gnawing feeling that the island is never the ultimate measure of one's worth, that he must also be understood *here and now*. In a discussion of insularity, it would no longer be enough to reconsider whether Hélió or any other man is truly an island, as not even islands are always islands; all need their lifelines, a working *lingua franca* in spite of inherent differences and variations. And even if it is true that we never really understand each other across these and other bodies of water, perhaps it is not the game in itself that makes communication possible but the practice, the admittedly imperfect effort over separation and distance, between islands, with no winners, no losers, and, like most fictional histories, blissfully inconclusive.

In contrast, Gaspar's 1999 novel *Leaving Pico* is set in Provincetown in the 1950s; its protagonist is a boy named Joaquim Carvalho, nicknamed Josie, who lives with his extended Azorean family. They call themselves "Picos," thus distinguishing themselves from the established continental "Lisbons" as being from another, more marginal Portugal. In the summer they rent their attic out to two men from New York, Lew and Roger. Lew is a history teacher and he brings boxes of books to Joaquim and his grandfather, John Joseph, every summer, mailing more to them each winter: "all stamped with the faint red-ink labels of the New York Public School System. We had atlases, histories, geographies, copies of *Kidnapped*, *Captains Courageous*, *Moby Dick*. On long winter nights, when John Joseph would stay home, he'd read to me and his pals from *Captain Blood* or *Treasure Island*, sometimes stopping in the book and going off into his own twists and explanations" (13).

These materials thus combine with the imagination of Joaquim's grandfather and begin to form a narrative of origin at the heart of Joaquim's search for meaning and identity. There is no Fernando Pessoa here, to say nothing of Camões, only a minor character named Freddy Pessoa, "a skinny man who always wore a Red Sox baseball cap and a mess of brass keys on his belt" (67), who hangs out with a guy nicknamed Manny Buckets. Aside from these colorfully named characters, there are only a grandfather's embellishments upon the English classics of boyhood literary adventure, a powerful canon in its own right, with which not even Camões himself can compete in this case. It is nonetheless interesting that the source of this narrative of origin is collaborative, anchored

in the tales spun not only by male family elders but also by outsiders, the English authors passed on to them by the two confirmed bachelors who share their roof every summer. Gaspar thus presents a compound model of cultural identity, one that departs neither from mere genetic inheritance nor ethnic patrimony, that is, one that is just as dependent upon outsiders as it is upon his own family.

This narrative ultimately explains the discoveries of Joaquim's ancestor, who, his grandfather maintains, sailed from the Azores to Florida and up the coast to Provincetown a year before Columbus, stating: "we are the Princes of America. We descend from the great Carvalho, Navigator, Finder of the New World" (114). One cannot resist the comparison implicit in the parallel between the author's last name and the first name of that often-forgotten explorer of the early sixteenth century, Gaspar de Corte Real, who some maintain visited southeastern Massachusetts in the early 1500s, long before the English Pilgrims, leaving pictographs on rocks in nearby rivers that have been enshrined as a mythical part of local cultural consciousness (da Silva 1974). Regardless of the wealth of historical texts that either question or continue to build a case for the importance of Portuguese sailors in the initial phase of discovery of the New World, what is ultimately more compelling in this context of Portuguese-American cultural identity is the way in which historical narratives and chronicles are reappropriated and retold to formulate a more personal version of a common past, not only to bring a sense of adventure to a young boy and by extension an entire community, but to bring with it a sense of legitimacy, belonging, and meaning.

And yet, even this interconnected, deterritorialized poetic vision of past, present, and future—or perhaps in the rewritten words of Saramago, "*o destino da loucura que (n)os tomou*"—is not the sum total of our identity. We are indeed, at least in part, what we inherit, whether the primary school patriotism set to the tunes of John Philip Sousa or reconstituted by way of a literary canon of national heroes. We are also, nonetheless, what we live over the course of our lives, and what we choose for our futures to make better sense of it all. If the message of all this is in fact that we can invent our meanings as well as inherit them, then perhaps this ex-centric reading of time and space is possible after all.

Gaspar grapples with a similar task of pulling together vast expanses of space and time in his poem, called, appropriately enough, "The Standard Times," after the name of the newspaper delivered by every boy from the Cape and Islands who ever had a paper route. On this routine twilight itinerary, guided not



only by familiar street names but also by the same moon, stars, and planets that accompanied the early navigators on more historically recognized excursions, the protagonist of the poem muses on “the sky in its ordained hieroglyphic, each pulsing star holding something just out of reach, each of my successive footsteps growing lighter and lighter as if I moved away from the earth, as if the wind would ever stop its whining and finally bear me up” (2002, 73). Poetry thus allows personal experience and the elusive order of the cosmos to collide; the mundane moments of remembered, lived experience become not merely facets of the celestial and the eternal but their very essence.

In a web of such complexity, it may seem all the more ironic that the banality of everyday life, whether of abandoned chicken coops or Azorean gardens, can hold any meaning at all. But perhaps I don’t need to make a point of looking for an ex-centric Portugal in my own backyard, for here I am, still in the here and now, only now it is I who am haunted by Gaspar’s words in that poem from *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, titled “The Garden Will Come to You”: “Don’t despair. Don’t lose yourself in all these daily vexations. You’ll see, if you are still, if you are disciplined, that the garden will come to you” (43). And now, as his flowers sprout up around me, along with those of all the other dispersed inhabitants of this resilient English- and Portuguese-speaking archipelago, I recognize that he, too, “is here to stay.”

### **One More Walk in the Park: On the Futures of Ex-Centric Lusofonias**

Como haviam de cuidar, nem lhes havia de vir ao pensamento, que os profetas falavam dos Americanos, se não sabiam que havia América?  
—António Vieira, *História do Futuro* (230)

In the presence of this recurrent question, which reappears in its original Portuguese to posit this present time and place as at least one possible, if not completely foreseeable, future of a certain history, I wish to pose another: where do the discursive ends of prophecy and futurity lie, and what would be the point of uncovering them with any degree of accuracy today? It was with these two questions in mind, one more than three hundred years old, the other presumably my own, that I continued this theoretical inquiry in a most unlikely place: a baseball field and adjacent grove of oak trees on the edge of my hometown of Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard, its green space set within a traditionally Azorean-American neighborhood of small homes and backyard gardens. Older residents

in my town who remember such things remind me that this place, Veira Park, was named after one Tony Vieira, the former owner of the neighborhood market and longtime supporter of the local Little League, but for most people in the town today it is just one more Portuguese surname on the local landscape, even its multiple spellings (Viera, Veira) the result of numerous attempts to make it fit into the norms of linguistic and cultural assimilation in the region.

After all, it would not be the first or the last time that the mythical and the real intersect in Portuguese(-American) literature and culture in places like Veira Park, the baseball field at the center of that Oak Bluffs neighborhood of Azorean gardens. As I continue to reinterpret this corner of my hometown, I cannot help but ask: what if this name, like Vaz's one-eyed dog, Luíz, or Gaspar's Freddy Pessoa, were placed into the more ex-centric context never explicitly mentioned in any of the Portuguese-American works considered here, and what if we were to take this message further out in its ring of ex-centric, concentric circles to other outlying points in this empire of letters?

That is to say, what if Vieira's prophecy, as channeled through Pessoa in the heteronymic guise of Bernardo Soares, concerned not only Portugal but also a more ex-centric dream, one fulfilled by the aspirations and lives of countless everyday Portuguese-American "Tony Veiras"—and not just *padres* but also parents, shop owners, fishermen, and schoolteachers? Are we perhaps not already part of this elusive "history of the future" by simply partaking of the here and now? And isn't that part of Pessoa's message? "*Minha loucura, outros que me a tomem / com o que nela ia. Sem a loucura que é o homem mais que a besta sadia, cadáver adiado que procria?*" (My madness: may others take it up, with everything that went with it. Without madness, what is man but a healthy beast, a procreating postponed cadaver? [42]).

How might we extend our perspective to imagine, especially when transposed into this space by way of a recent translation published here in lusophone New England, an even more complex vision of ourselves through an ex-centric vision of "Portugal and its destiny"? I refer here to an essay by the well-known contemporary Portuguese philosopher Eduardo Lourenço by the same title, "Portugal como destino":

There is nothing more impassioned or sublime in Portuguese culture than António Vieira's discourse. It is the ecstatic but also the symbolically coherent synthesis of five centuries of collective life lived with the deep-rooted and

culturally nurtured conviction that Portugal's very existence was of a miraculous and also prophetic nature. . . . Vieira creates a single prophecy out of the pronouncements of the cobbler Bandarra, an adept of Nostradamus, and hopes for the return of D. Sebastian, who would reestablish his lost kingdom and inaugurate a new empire, the utopian Fifth Empire that (according to Vieira) had been promised to the first King of Portugal and was part of Prince Henry's original, foundational discoveries. This utopian dream was taken over intact by Pessoa in his *Mensagem*. (Lourenço 2002, 119)

(Most readers are no doubt aware that this is in fact another António Vieira, a brilliant seventeenth-century priest and theologian who established himself as a foundational figure in the development of Sebastianism—the belief in the eventual return of a Portuguese empire as a global power—centuries before Pessoa discovered and repopularized him.)

As I continue to cut across and reinterpret this and other well-known corners of my hometown, however, I cannot help but notice that this common name invites at least one localized reinterpretation. After all, there would naturally be more than one António Vieira besides the seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit author and cultural mediator; he may be the best known from a purely historical perspective, but he cannot be said to have made any definitive re-appearance in the present context of contemporary Portuguese-American culture, at least not by way of an extended and localized reading of his work. How, then, might an opening up of this apparent conjuncture of repeated proper names and commonplaces allow us to imagine an even more complex vision of both our own cultural identity and that of others, and perhaps even allow for a more ex-centric interpretation of both the name “Portugal” and Vieira’s hopes for it?

In his reinterpretation of the prophecies of his own time, Vieira establishes himself, in my view, as a contradictory figure in the history of teleology. In his 1659 letter “Esperanças de Portugal,” written in the Amazon and addressed to the Jesuit bishop of Japan, Alexandre da Silva, his reinterpretations of the dreams and visions of a man he deems an “idiota infelice” still form the basis of an entire futurology. While this vision does draw in part, as Lourenço affirms, upon the traditional narrative of Sebastianism—in which the lost king Sebastião is to return from the battlefield of Alcácer Quibir to reign over a Portugal restored to its former glory—by way of Vieira’s stated goal of “conversão e paz

universal em todo o Mundo" (36), the defunct yet eternally awaited D. Sebastião (Portugal's Godot?) would ultimately play no concrete role in its realization.

Far more troubling than Sebastião's absence, however, is the unavoidable fact that, in accordance with prevailing dogma, there is little or no room for anyone who does not conform, both in mind and in spirit, to the terms of its totalizing and singular vision. In his letter to Bishop da Silva, Vieira refers to such events as "a vitória dos Turcos, a redução dos Judeus se seguirá também a extirpação das heresias" (35), perhaps most succinctly expressed in the disturbing vocabulary continually repeated in *História do futuro*: "conversão," "extirpação," "extinção" (30–31). Given the terms of such a future, in which all diversity of belief and culture is miraculously translated and made one, it may seem all the more ironic, if not actually inevitable, that Vieira himself would eventually fall victim to the same inquisitional mechanisms of imprisonment and suppression that his own prophecies of a universalized spiritual and temporal empire attempt to call forth.

But what concerns me most as I traverse this space of reflection that I call Vieira Park is not whether this seventeenth-century prophecy is, as Lourenço maintains, "symbolically coherent" (21), much less whether it is desirable, useful, or just, especially when such considerations would invariably be subject to our own contemporary perspectives. Instead, I prefer to focus on how these claims of being able to predict the future, both systematically and infallibly, are indicative of a much more fundamental human impulse: the attempt to will a particular chosen future narrative into being by way of the recurrent rhetorical instrument of prophecy. As the contemporary Dutch-Indonesian social theorist Jan Nederveen Pieterse concludes in his discussion of transnational imaginaries from the early modern period to the present day: "Prophetic and utopian visions of human integration and unity have often been wide in spirit but not specific in the forms this might take. When they have been specific, they have often turned oppressive . . . failed blueprints of social engineering litter the record of history. The point is not to be anti-utopian but to be loosely utopian, not to give up on emancipatory human integration as a myth of Sisyphus, but to take the forms it takes sufficiently lightly" (38).

Are we perhaps not already part of this elusive "history of the future" by simply affirming our irrefutable presence, in all of its plurality, in the here and now? In much the same way, that baseball diamond and grove of trees on an island off the coast of southeastern Massachusetts becomes something different, a deter-



ritorialized and translated “common place” that marks not only the continuation of migrant and other cultural presences in this most obscured of lusophone Atlantic archipelagoes, but also a connecting point to a much more extensive transnational narrative.

The green baseball diamond at its center is made not only of soil, bases, and mowed grass but is presumably also the site of a game, or, as some say, the most American of games. But where is this game really taking place? Yes, at times it is here at V(i)eira Park, but it is also being played continually across a vast network of other fields spread out over endless expanses of ocean and airspace, each part of a transcontinental ritual of athletic activity, spectatorship, and play-by-play commentary.

By now it should be clear that this space called V(i)eira Park—and the ever-expanding “game” associated with it—were not invoked just to serve the “national pastime” but as the means of simultaneously recontextualizing the memories and renegotiating the loyalties that connect an entire series of cultural identities. Likewise, when we view the field from the edge of this space, we can see that even when we are on what appear to be the sidelines, or even in the trees beyond the outfield, we are invariably at the center of something.

So by reconsidering the semantic density of this and other marginal fields, it may yet become possible to create an opening in the present order of signification and perhaps even make room for other interpretations: not to impose any one of them as the definitive turn toward yet another inevitably totalizing system, but as parts of an incomplete project that not only allows for but actually encourages multiple levels of linguistic and cultural differentiation. Don’t worry: if the earth were actually to open up in V(i)eira Park, it would hardly be considered “the end of the world”; it is, after all, just one tiny point on the map, a virtual nowhere on a larger grid of transoceanic contacts. The opening I refer to here is not necessarily apocalyptic, but it could nonetheless affect the ways in which the ends of our divergent futures might be interpreted. For some, it might call attention to those often suppressed yet still enduring narratives of those emigrants who chose to opt out of the serial projects of Portuguese empire, even if many of them were only to be reassimilated into later and even more ambitious projects of global expansion and hegemony; for others, it might serve as a continuing reminder of the destabilizing potential of this and other flows of transnational migration, a challenge to institutional moves to delegitimize any and all forms of migrant mobility and culture. Of course, there will always

be those for whom it simply “is,” or is what it appears to be at first glance: an out-of-the-way and common place, marked by an obscure sign that few will ever bother to read.

Even so, there will still be those who choose to read this (post-)bilingual sign aloud, and it is in this way that V(i)eira Park may come to signal an opening in present conceptions of time and space, an actual semantic hole in the fabric of globalizing processes, an “outside” in the innermost recesses of what is presumed to be the “inside,” a place deserted and, at the same time, full of localized and semantic complexity. This resistant and plural space called V(i)eira Park is both here and there, everywhere and nowhere, and like the rapidly unfolding future narratives that envelop it, it does not exist if not in that incipient and alternating state of erasure and revelation. It might even qualify as the kind of “non-place of Empire” that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri attempt to map out by way of another set of question marks: “Where is the standpoint from which critique can be possible and effective? In this passage from modernity to postmodernity, is there still a place from which we can launch our critique and construct an alternative? Or, if we are consigned to the non-place of Empire, can we construct a powerful non-place and realize it concretely?” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 208). It is thus in the spirit of this sort of transformational project of critique, one that emerges from the very place that seems culturally subsumed and theoretically deactivated, that I wish to depart from the prophecies, letters, and other writings of António Vieira and move toward the sort of critically active “non-place” that Hardt, Negri, and others actually create and inhabit.

This is necessary for me, especially from where I stand at the moment, not only in a corner of V(i)eira Park but also in a corner of a present-day world ruled by an even more complex and potentially dangerous set of social, political, and economic forces. It might be necessary to examine the possibility of this and other “histories of the future,” to attempt a more contemporary rearticulation of the terms of scholarly prognosis (especially those formulated under the rubric of “futuraity”), present-day critiques of historiography, complete with its “numbered empires,” and other more recent geopolitical projects of exploration, globalization, empire, and hegemony. Central to this discussion is yet another question: how might Vieira’s future, when read more as a recurrent rhetorical strategy than an actually realized prediction, find a relevant place in discussions of diasporic cultures on the “far side” of the lusophone Atlantic and beyond, cultures no less preoccupied with their own transoceanic and future “places in the world”?

In the present discussion of futurity, there are notable examples of scholars and academics who, like Vieira, attempt to reframe ongoing historical processes in such a way as to privilege established institutional narratives under the rubric of globalization. In these more recent versions of futures foretold, some may still recognize the same kind of conclusions that can be drawn from a reading of Vieira: above all, the notion that the only forms of acceptable difference from, and resistance to, established Western cultural norms are those that have been effectively neutralized, assimilated, subjugated, or even eliminated by those norms. By referencing this kind of scholarship, which aims to validate and maintain discursive hierarchies with regard to national identity and security (and their attendant institutional structures of domination and control), I hope to make clear that the point of this investigation is not merely to reiterate, catalogue, and thereby legitimize the established structural and epistemological paradigms in which such theories of futurity have all too often been complicit, but actually to attempt to reorganize them by offering both my own and at least a few other points of resistance.

Many of the points of resistance already in place today involve theoretical explorations and concrete political movements linked to the development of alternative forms of globalization. Many of these theories and movements might be identified by way of emergent sites, most notably the World Social Forum, an event that brings together not only well-known intellectuals but also representatives of social groupings often underrepresented in or excluded from the main streams of global communication and power. As these voices are heard, recognized, translated, and disseminated, we may move toward what the Portuguese social theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has in mind when he and other global scholars and activists elaborate upon the slogan that emerged from Porto Alegre and that projects itself as part of a wide range of potential futures: “um outro mundo é possível.” Sousa and his interlocutors accomplish this not only by stating but also by demonstrating through a broad-based compilation of indigenous and non-Western subaltern voices that indeed “another knowledge is possible” (Santos 2002; Polet et al. 2004; Santos 2007).

There is and no doubt will continue to be disagreement as to the specific terms in which critiques of present-day globalizing hegemonic structures are understood and articulated. The current lack of consensus on the subjects of globalization and empire might actually be necessary to counter ongoing attempts such as that of Vieira to impose a single, totalizing narrative on the di-

versity of human thought and experience; even so, no vision—not even a partially displaced, multiple, or hybrid vision—of a past, present, and future world can ever be said to represent the sum total of our potential existence. We are all, at least in part, a result of the diverse set of narratives that we inherit, whether by way of those linguistic terms that still intervene in the definition of our ethnic and cultural identities, the national ideologies rooted in hometown patriotisms and localized cultural practices, or the necessary questions shaped by subsequent reconfigurations of belief and understanding, combined with our own developing capacities for critical agency. If it turns out in the end that we are indeed a continually developing amalgam of what we experience over the course of our lives and what we imagine ourselves to be, then this multiple set of futures is already at work in the here and now.

A baseball diamond on an island off the coast of Massachusetts can thus also become a kind of *brasão*, or topographical emblem, much like all the others that mark the Portuguese-American cultural presence in these “outermost Azores,” as well as a monument to a far more extensive cultural narrative reaching back over hundreds of years, one part of a much larger “playing field” made not only of soil and mowed grass but also of vast expanses of ocean, cultural cross-references, and the most intimate and fragile memories of ethnicity that continually renew and complicate our sense of identity. And if the message that comes out of this brief rewalking of the bases is that any one of us can in fact still invent, expand upon, and disseminate a measure of our own semantic complexity, then perhaps even further-reaching interventions in future time and space are not just possible but already inseparable from the terms and territories of our lived experience.

#### NOTES

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

2. To Vaz’s recourse to the invisible imagery of airwaves I cannot help but juxtapose my own introduction to the Portuguese language through the radio and television broadcasts that I grew up with. One of my earliest memories of Portuguese being spoken is associated not with any particular person but rather with being in my living room alone, watching on television locally produced Portuguese-language programs broadcast to my island from WTEV in New Bedford, programs with names like *The Portuguese Around Us* and *Passport to Portugal*. Often, the program was not about Portugal proper but about points in its rapidly disappearing overseas empire. I recall one program on Macau, for



example, and how transfixed I was by the images of this tiny, faraway territory where the Portuguese flag waved exactly as it did at the Portuguese-American Club down the street from my house, as well as on any number of Portuguese-American homes in my neighborhood alongside the U.S. Stars and Stripes. As I grew older and actually began to learn the Portuguese language, these television programs were replaced by radio broadcasts of news and music on the New Bedford station WJFD-FM. While actual Portuguese speakers would eventually arrive on my island in the 1990s in the form of a sizable Brazilian immigrant community, my first experiences of Portuguese on this cold and tiny island in the North Atlantic were much like those I imagined taking place in Portugal's faraway Asian colonial outpost: I was perhaps one of the loneliest and most isolated of all Lusophones.

3. "Allora si ricordò della rubrica 'Ricorrenze' e si mise a scrivere. 'Tre anni or sono scompariva il grande poeta Fernando Pessoa. Era di cultura inglese, ma aveva deciso di scrivere in portoghese perché sosteneva che la sua patria era la lingua portoghese. Ci ha lasciato bellissime poesie disperse su riviste e un poemetto, *Messaggio*, che è la storia del Portogallo visto da un grande artista che amava la sua patria.' Rilesse quello che aveva scritto e lo trovò ributtante, sostiene Pereira. Allora gettò il foglio nel cestino e scrisse: 'Fernando Pessoa ci ha lasciato da tre anni. Pochi si sono accorti di lui, quasi nessuno. Ha vissuto in Portogallo come uno straniero, forse perché era straniero dappertutto. Viveva solo, in modeste pensioni o camere d'affitto. Lo ricordano gli amici, i sodali, coloro che amano la poesia.'"

4. A *pelourinho* is a stone column in the public square marked with the emblems of the Portuguese state, to which criminals were once tied and publicly punished. Yes, a pillory of sorts, to use a Yankee term, and yet today it serves primarily as an emblem of Portuguese culture, no longer a place of public humiliation but one where the global reach of the Portuguese cultural presence (if not always Portuguese rule) is both remembered and celebrated (cf. *Dicionário Aurélio*). An *azulejo* is a tile, yet not the red *tijolo* used for roofing but that of the decorative variety used for murals, often identified by the predominance of two colors: blue and white. The *porto* is the port or harbor; for me, those of Oak Bluffs or Vineyard Haven, to others, perhaps those of Lisbon, New Bedford, or Oporto. A *galo* is a rooster, whether the typical emblem from Barcelos or the more common Red variety from Little Compton, Rhode Island, both equally symbolic and part of everyday life. Juxtaposing these two words, *porto-galo*, we hear the name Portugal, though not one bound by history or etymology but another, more poetic and historically "ex-centric" Portugal. And yes, *pão* means bread, but as George Steiner points out in his seminal book on translation *After Babel* (1975), bread is not exactly what we imagine when we hear the French word *pain* or the German word *Bröt*; all are culturally distinct and thus unequivalent to one another by nature. I wonder what Steiner would have thought of the Portuguese *foliar de Pascoa* baked on my island at Easter, in the shape of a fish with a dyed hard-boiled egg

baked into the center for an eye. During the 1970s, my mother, Dorothy Larkosh Roberts, would prepare these loaves in the special education class she taught with her assistant, an Azorean-American woman by the name of Helen de Bettencourt, and they would give them out as gifts to those in the community who had supported them over the course of the year. One year, one school principal's wife from another island town, a recent arrival from off-island and thus unfamiliar with the tradition, had imagined upon receiving her loaf that my mother's pupils had simply forgotten to crack the egg into the dough before they kneaded and baked it! Regardless of her own ethnic origin, my mother participated in and passed on a number of Portuguese-American folkways and traditions, especially in the festivals to which she first brought my brother and me, and in the food that she in turn prepared and shared with others in her community. So regardless of the diverse criteria by which one could evaluate the pertinence of this and other short anecdotes from everyday life within academic-literary discourse, it serves to make all the more clear just how many different meanings and culturally distinct histories a simple word like "bread" can hold.

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