

## JOÃO CABRAL DO NASCIMENTO.

### *Além-Mar: Poemeto épico que fez Joam Cabral do Nascimento para narrar a história tormentosa das caravelas que aportaram à Ilha do senhor Infante na madrugada do século XV.*

Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other. It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. . . . Split identity, kaleidoscope of identities: can we be a saga for ourselves without being considered mad or fake?

—Julia Kristeva, *Stranger to Ourselves*, pp. 13–14

We also view cultural memorization as an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future.

—Mieke Bal, *Acts of Memory*, p. vii

On May 15, 1917, under the title “Perpetuando uma data: A descoberta da Madeira” (Perpetuating a Date: The Discovery of Madeira), the *Diário da Madeira*, a local newspaper, published an article promoting the recent commemorative proposal put forward by João Augusto Pina to the Funchal District General Board (Junta Geral). The initiative was aimed at celebrating the 1420 arrival of the explorer Gonçalves Zarco to Madeira within a context in which the figure was already frequently referenced artistically on the island. From the perspective of João Pina, the historical event thus demanded a notable act of commemoration that should serve “as a lesson to all” that Madeira simply could not remain “in a disgraceful state of forgetfulness regarding this memorable date” (Anonymous 1917, 1). At the national level, this voyage “represent[ed] . . . the audacious beginning of our [the Portuguese] maritime golden era” (Anonymous 1917, 1), and at the archipelago level it provided the founding moment of Madeira as a community and hence deserved to be present within the “spirit of all Madeirans in a very particular fashion” (Anonymous 1917, 1).

In truth, the project proposed by João Pina incorporated a clear literary challenge to the island's intellectual community in calling for the production of "a literary work, of a historical character, but with a popular aspect and primarily designed for the less learned classes . . . in order to turn this work into an abundant repository of information and news that may be of particular interest to all" (Anonymous 1917, 1). On Madeira in May 1917, literature was thus understood as an effective and necessary *place of memory*; a cultural and artistic phenomenon that might significantly contribute toward the reconstruction of the symbolical-identity of the nation, with *nation* here understood in generic terms as a community endowed with a shared consciousness of identity. This is a symbolical-identity (re)construction that, as Maria José Canelo (2001) so appropriately points out, coexists with (and sometimes even preexists) the political-administrative and institutional (re)construction of the same nation.

In referring here to *places of memory*, we clearly draw upon the concept put forward by Pierre Nora (1989), who defines *lieux de mémoire* as places crystallizing the collective memory of the nation. According to this French historian, the process of creating these *lieux de mémoire* seeks very precisely to ensure the (re)connection of a community's present with a past that should not or cannot be forgotten on pain of jeopardizing the sociocultural and even political cohesion and survival of the group in question in the present and into the future. This is a danger that, also according to Nora (1989, 7), has grown more acute in modern societies (above all, those especially exposed to processes of modernization and globalization) and where history and its archives have been substituted for the traditional organic memory of the past.

Indeed, as Paul Ricoeur so well notes (Ricoeur 2006, 10), the creation of *lieux de memoire* does not annul the awareness of the inevitable dangers of cultural amnesia, whether such is determined by the pact of vertiginous modern life and the fluidity of its values or by the conflicts and traumas of a diverse nature that were, in truth, experienced by the European, Portuguese, and Madeiran societies in the 1910s: namely, World War I; internal political conflicts aggravated during the first Portuguese republic; and social and economic-financial crises. And we should certainly not overlook how, in Madeira, the precariousness inherent in international warfare and internal political conflict would bring about the decline of the Port of Funchal, thus worsening the prevalent conditions of poverty, hunger, and disease. This furthermore condemned the island to the anguish of

isolation and abandonment, a situation punctuated by the December 1916 and 1917 German torpedo attacks on Funchal.

These last events, irrespective of the Atlantic isolation and the physical distance between the archipelago and the mainland, where these conflicts were open and ongoing, illustrate how the local reality of Madeira, far from actually corresponding to some image of an *Atlantic Eden* cut off from the rest of the world (an image put forward as an *ufanismo* in romantic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel literature and especially among English-language writers and in tourism marketing campaigns, particularly those run by British companies with economic interests in the island), was never actually cut off from the cross-border social, political, economic, and cultural trends taking place on a more global scale.

However, we note that Mieke Bal (1999), who reconceptualizes the *lieux de mémoire* as acts of memory, highlights that these “acts of memory are performed by individuals in a cultural framework that encourages these acts” either because the subjects engaged in them (for whatever personal or collective reason) feel that these acts of memory “were much needed” (Bal, 1999, xiii) or because “each act of memory [really is] a projection of desire, of political agency, and of erasure” (xiv–xv).

Within this conceptual and contextual framework, we seek to interpret as a place of memory *Além-Mar*, an epic short poem written in 1916 and published in February 1917 by Cabral do Nascimento, a Madeiran intellectual of Luso-British and Jewish origins.

We would here highlight the apparent oddity behind the fact that João Pina, in presenting his commemorative project to the Funchal Council, made no reference to the poem by Nascimento, published a few months earlier and subject to widespread comment in the Madeiran press. We would consider that the explanation for this silence includes the differentiated approaches held by the two thinkers regarding Madeiran identity and its respective relationships, whether with the Portuguese nation-state or with other communities.

The heroic commemorations planned by João Pina verged on positions adopted by other Madeiran intellectuals who (monarchists or republicans) understood Madeira as a *glorious feat* of the Portuguese and as the *Lusitanian daughter* of Zarco. They correspondingly strove to erase from the local collective memory any contribution from other cultures and peoples to the societal formation and

cultural identity of the archipelago. Indeed, they took up a line of identity thinking very close to the ethnically homogenizing exclusive nationalism identified by Sérgio Campos Matos as a dominant trend in the discourse on the nation and much promoted in Portugal throughout the period of the first Portuguese republic (Matos, 2002).

This perspective opened up clear distance with the ancestral Madeiran cultural imaginary that could not break with the strong British presence and influence in Madeira from the eighteenth century onward. We refer here to the story of the British pair—Ana d'Arfet and Roberto Machim—whom legend labeled as the first inhabitants on the island. This imaginary was deeply rooted in the island's cultural memory, circulated through both popular culture and literature.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting contrast with the identity discourse driven by exclusivist nationalism is the story "Portugal and Britain: What Does the Alliance Represent?" published in the *Diário da Madeira* in the immediate aftermath of the German declaration of war on Portugal.<sup>2</sup> This article (among other significant texts in the press) clearly states the need felt in Madeira to highlight the British commitment to defending Portuguese territory whenever it was threatened by any enemy, including during the Napoleonic campaigns when British troops twice occupied the archipelago. Furthermore, in 1916, British involvement was forecast as a likely future outcome given the manifest incapacity and lack of interest of the Portuguese republic in meeting the demands, needs, or intentions of the island communities. Here we should remember that throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Madeira was labeled the "Portuguese Ireland."

Therefore, it should similarly be of little surprise that, running counter to the heroicizing and essentializing tendencies of exclusivist nationalism that dominated the Portuguese and Madeiran identity discourse of the period, the Luso-British Cabral do Nascimento chose to poetically rewrite the history of the settling of the island.

In fact, *Além-Mar* restores the figure of Zarco and the "tormented history of the Caravels who dropped anchor off 'Ilha do Senhor Infante' in the early years of the 15th century" (Nascimento 1917, cover). Nevertheless, the work takes on a tone of *countermemory*, stripping both its lead figure and his history of the heroic air that others attribute to them. Additionally, in dialogue with the aforementioned literary and popular tradition, Cabral do Nascimento granted the British Roberto Machim and Ana d'Arfet the status of the first inhabitants of Madeira and attributed his Zarco with the mission of seeking out a "divine" and



“dreamed after” island where it would be possible to engage in *dialogue with* and learn the history of these first and non-Portuguese inhabitants (Nascimento 1917, 8).

This is precisely the point where Nascimento deconstructs the heroics of Zarco, rewriting the narrative of his voyage of discovery. The island initially dreamed of and sought after by Zarco corresponds to an updated version of Paradise; an island haven for those fleeing the despair and desolation left behind on the “promontory said to be Sagres” (Nascimento 1917, 5), this symbolic place readable as a synecdoche for continental Portugal or contemporary Europe itself. Nevertheless, at the end of the poem, the island spotted by Nascimento’s antihero corresponds instead to (and only to) an island of “sad anguish” (1917, 10), the island of the dead where Portuguese arrivals only briefly encounter the shadows of these British *others*; an island where, in fact, it is no longer viable to reestablish any homogeneous identity unit that is anything but stable or not disturbing.

We thus find that it was against this homogenizing, glorifying, and heroic discourse on identity produced by both the Portuguese state and the dominant sectors of Madeiran intellectuals that Cabral do Nascimento questioned the idea of the modern nation, established in the wake of the expansionist movement out over the Atlantic, as well as reflecting on the identity profiles possible within these modern nations exposed to instability, fluidity, heterogeneity, and conflicts of value that, above all, derived from human mobility between nations and cultures.

More than conceiving of Madeiran cultural identity as a *pure sample* of a supposed homogenous “Portugalidade,” installed on the island, *ab initio*, with the arrival of Zarco, Nascimento understood the construction of the Madeiran nation, both in *Além-mar* and other later texts, as a tensional and transnational process, generating a heterogeneous and fragmentary identity profile, undergoing constant reelaboration.

Madeira, to Nascimento, while remaining Portuguese, simply could not ignore the problematic but unquestionably *inclusive differentiation* (as put forth by Ulrich Beck 2007) in relation to Portugal. This representation of the island would certainly not have struck him as odd, either in terms of his family genealogy or his island and mainland experience. Nascimento was a Portuguese citizen from Madeira with nonexclusively Portuguese lineage and, whether in Lisbon or in Funchal, perceived himself as different/differentiated in relation to the *others* with whom he partially identified and shared a certain sense of identity.

Nevertheless, in the case of this Madeiran intellectual, the nostalgia of the absolute (which, I would argue, underlies this way of conceiving the nation and, to a great extent, would seem to derive from a modern crisis experienced by a fragmentary self that finds itself prevented from any single and absolute center) never took on the “restorative” character that Svetlana Boym attributes to a certain nostalgic experience (Boym 2001, 41). Far from any idyllic Atlantic Paradise, or even an island on which all cultures somehow harmoniously coexist, Madeira is represented deceptively in the work of Nascimento as an illusory island: an apparent Paradise where, in truth, only death and despair are encountered as well as the fragmentary ruin of that perfect whole dreamed. In this representation of an unnamed island (identifiable as Madeira but also, due to the anonymity that it is presented with, with the contemporary world of the poet), Portugal and Great Britain appropriately take on this profile of the disconnected fragments of Madeiran identity, that of the *other-selves*, paradoxically strange and familiar within the cultural identity that Nascimento reconstructs in and of Madeira.

#### NOTES

1. See Frutuoso 1998; Tomás 1635; Melo 1975; Medina e Vasconcelos 1806; Gouveia 1907.
2. March 9, 1916—the date of the German declaration of war on Portugal; March 28, 1916—the publication date of “Portugal and Britain: What Does the Alliance Represent?”

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