

TO DISCOVER NORDESTE AND FIND THE MEDITERRANEAN IN IT: AN INITIATION TO AGOSTINHO DA SILVA¹

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The dialogue translated into English here for the first time is a key text to understanding the various aspects of both the field of classical studies in Latin America and the formation of the Latin American university, especially in Brazil. Not only for the themes these philologists and humanists ponder by the sea, but also because we are at the peak of the spiritual consciousness represented by the creation of the University of Brasília (UnB), finding here glimpses of Agostinho's personality and his poetic creations. We also see possible paths for anyone who is interested in the rewarding journey of uncovering George Agostinho Baptista da Silva (1906-1994), his work, and his oceanic legacy. As taught masterfully by Africanist Alberto da Costa e Silva (1931-2023) through his eloquent expression, in this river called the Atlantic, at a certain point it was possible for an intellectual to physically raise Fernando Pessoa's poetic production and reflect in his own writings something like an extension of Pessoa's work.

Born in the city of Porto, Agostinho da Silva was profoundly affected by the conflicts that struck his hometown in 1927, when the Salazarist dictatorship suppressed a republican uprising with eight days of bombings, followed by arrests and exile. Nurtured by the first University of Arts in Porto and, like everyone of that generation but in distinct ways, directly influenced by Leonardo Coimbra (1883-1936), Agostinho graduated in Classical Philology. At 23, he earned his doctorate with a thesis titled *O sentido histórico das civilizações clássicas*.

¹ This text was translated by the visual artist and curator Nina Coimbra, with editing by Éric Santos, a Master's student in Linguistics at the Federal University of São Carlos (PPGL-UFSCar).

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In the 1930s, he studied at the *Sorbonne* and the *Collège de France*, but it was the *Seara Nova* movement and the presence of António Sérgio⁴ that most profoundly shaped his critical spirit.⁵ From this period comes an intense body of work that, while rooted in years of advanced research and study, aimed to establish popular organizational tools to provide access to various forms of literacy—both in terms of texts and worldviews. An example of this is when around 1927 and 1928, within the context of *Seara*, Agostinho wrote an open letter to scholars which, much like the *Teorética* presented here, expressed his discontent toward the “admirers of the *Aeneid* and the *Art of Poetry*” regarding “the state of Portuguese classical studies.” This critique, marked by “the virulence and explosive wit of his polemic” even then, is vivid in its passionate tone.⁶ Looking today at the prose and critical irony of Matheus-Maria Guadalupe, while holding this letter (Silva, 1928), we can clearly see how biographical and yet strikingly current these words are, still relevant to an important part of classical studies today.

As folhas soltas de s. bento, published in the 1960s directly engages with other booklets and pamphlets that were distributed in Portugal to share cultural information with the impoverished population directly impacted by the horrors of ignorance and the Estado Novo regime. Among the notable publications from this period are the cultural information booklets *Iniciação* and *Antologia*, which provided introductions to great authors and presented a variety of debates on poetry, history, Greek myths, pre-Socratic philosophy, or issues surrounding capitalist society, along with biographies of major authors, regardless of nationality or field of study. Some who were educated through Agostinho da Silva’s writings—an immense open university for their time—are still alive today.

⁴ António Sérgio (1883-1969) was a Portuguese antifascist educator, sociologist, historian, and politician who lived in exile from 1926 to 1933 and was imprisoned three times (1935, 1948, and 1958).

⁵ For an example of analysis on this period, see Pinho, 2020.

⁶ Pinho, 2020: 616.

available at the Agostinho da Silva Chair of Humanistic Studies housed at the Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU):⁸

Agostinho taught at the Fluminense Faculty of Philosophy (the precursor to the Fluminense Federal University), at the University of Recife (future Federal University of Pernambuco), at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, and at the Federal University of Bahia. He worked with Jaime Cortesão at the Rio Branco Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the National Library, and was among the founding professors of the Federal University of Santa Catarina, the Federal University of Goiás, the Federal University of Paraíba, and the University of Brasília, where he established the Brazilian Center for Portuguese Studies. At UFBA, he created and directed the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies, which remains active today. He collaborated with Editora Globo of Porto Alegre, translating classical authors such as Plautus, Terence, and Lucretius. He also worked as a columnist for the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Among many other writings, he produced three novels in Brazil and essays such as *Um Fernando Pessoa* and *Reflexão à Margem da Literatura Portuguesa*. He was a foreign policy advisor to President Jânio Quadros regarding Africa, assisting him, through the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies, in establishing Portuguese language teaching in universities in Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, and Zaire, as well as at Sophia University in Tokyo. He also served as the director of culture for the Department of Education and Culture of the State of Santa Catarina. The philosopher was an invited professor for postgraduate studies at the City University of New York (CUNY) and a lecturer at Harvard University and the University of California. At the invitation of UNESCO, with support from Itamaraty, he gave lectures at universities in Japan, Macau, and Timor.

Despite the complete description above, some episodes should be highlighted in this brief contribution we present. One of them was when, among various intellectuals, a townhouse owned by Finns was rented for collective living – something like a community that Dora Ferreira da Silva often said was a precursor to the hippie movement. In this house, which functioned as a cultural hub for the dissemination of art, creation, thought, and action, Agostinho experienced all that one could in such an environment, engaging in dialogues with Jaime and Judith Cortesão, Vicente and Dora Ferreira da Silva, Murilo Mendes, Oswaldo de Andrade, Djanira, Portinari, Milton Vargas, and other participants in this collective living project. The magazines *Diálogo* and *Cavalo Azul*, for instance, poetic tools used by some members of this São Paulo group and as well-crafted editorially as the pamphlets he once distributed through the streets of Porto, were greatly influenced and enriched by Agostinho da Silva's collaboration.

A crucial figure in the history of the founding of the Federal University of Paraíba, at the turn of 1952 to 1953, what da Silva left in that northeastern

⁸ Text available at em <http://www.catedraagostinho.propp.ufu.br/sobre-agostinho-da-silva>, accessed on october, 28, 2024.

city is a work that would be well-defined today as one of the earliest examples of *university extension*, bringing students into deep connection with the state's countryside to, among other pursuits of the spirit, confront the harshness of drought. Leveraging the influence of Governor José Américo de Sousa, he contributed to the initial framework of the University of Philosophy and, alongside an emerging medical program, intense cultural activity was sparked through these experiences. It was in this moment that a Department of Popular Culture was created for the first time.

After Paraíba, there was the experience of São Paulo's Fourth Centennial. By bringing *Carta de Pero Vaz Caminha* to Brazil under a diplomatic safe-conduct shared with Jaime Cortesão, it became clear that we were still being deprived—even with regard to our primary sources—by the Portuguese monopoly over documents inherited by the metropolis

Very likely feeling stifled by the Germanophilic and Heideggerian environment of certain references in the *grupo de São Paulo*, and compelled to live solely on the fertile ground essential to all creation—freedom—Agostinho da Silva had no intention of getting involved with the disputes at the University of São Paulo (USP) or with the intellectual militia that was the Brazilian Institute of Philosophy (IBF).⁹ What Agostinho da Silva wanted and knew best was to create.

Agostinho then brought along the already renowned Hellenist Eudoro de Sousa and dedicated himself to founding the University of Santa Catarina (UFSC). Although serving as a professor of Portuguese Language and Literature, and introducing *the concept of centers* that would become his hallmark, he organized, along with Eudoro de Sousa, significant portions of the History, Philosophy, and Literature courses at that university.¹⁰ They would later leave amid accusations of communism. Such accusations, though not new in Agostinho's life—he had always been pursued by those in power—certainly represented a profound break for Eudoro de Sousa with the *axis* to which he had been connected through Álvaro Ribeiro and Delfim Santos.¹¹

The importance of henceforth discussing Agostinho da Silva *alongside* Eudoro de Sousa (even though they may well have met in São Paulo) is

⁹ See: Gonçalves, 2016.

¹⁰ See: Carminati, Fasolo, 2019.

¹¹ As seen in Neckel and Küchler (2010: 157), where it is noted that both philologists “were regarded as communists” and, at that time, on the eve of conflicts that would intensify with Jânio Quadros's resignation, represented a leftist “cocoon.”

evident from the conversation presented here, as if the mention of Eudoro in a particular part of the dialogue were not enough.

In 1959, the most exuberant autonomy and creativity would be possible through Rector Edgard Santos, marking a period recognized as a type of *Bahian Renaissance*. Once again, through the University of Philosophy, where Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethânia were students, and within the experiences of a generation in theater that included figures like Glauber Rocha, Agostinho da Silva established the first center for African studies in Latin America at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). This *center*, which through a partnership with UNESCO would come to encompass what was understood as the “Orient,” was renamed the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies (CEAO). It was at this time that Ordep Serra and his brother Olímpio, along with many other Northeasterners who would later go to UnB¹², heard from Agostinho da Silva about Darcy Ribeiro’s new initiative.

To illustrate the impact of the Bahian experience, it was there that for the first time in the history of higher education, the classrooms of a public university were attended by *filhos* and *mães de santo* eager to learn Yoruba and other African languages, while, once again, through archives and documents, the Recôncavo Baiano was studied – and perhaps for the first time understood – as a cultural center with Salvador as its satellite, not the other way around. The dictatorship would later sabotage the dream of establishing a research center in Cachoeira that could revere the importance of Boa Morte.

Then came Brasília, Darcy Ribeiro, and all the *utopia* that went into creating the university of a planned city – only to see this dream, amid its realization, dismantled by the military dictatorship’s boots. *As folhas soltas de s. bento* and other works comprise a collection of texts written precisely in this period, when the dream of UnB was already under attack by “university reforms” engineered by the generals who took over the universities. Two years earlier (1963), Agostinho had traveled to Macau, China, to establish institutional agreements between that new university in Brazil’s Central Plateau and that distant country shaped by the legacy of Portuguese navigation and its vicissitudes.

By emphasizing within Itamaraty the importance of engaging with African countries, particularly Portuguese-speaking ones, it is Agostinho da Silva

¹² The Bastos brothers (Hermenegildo, Rafael, and Fernando), Suetônio Valença, Jair Gramacho, Emanuel Araújo, among others, were some of the names who, coming from the Brazilian Northeast, arrived in Brasília to help Agostinho and Eudoro establish the University of Brasília (UnB).

who onsets the first concrete initiatives made by the Brazilian government to open embassies and, above all, to establish relations through an international policy that endures to this day.

The *normalization* of UnB would deal a final blow to Agostinho da Silva. After April 1, 1964, as he grew increasingly distant from Brazilian universities, any type of work or endeavor like the Brasília experience became unsustainable. In Brasília, the Center for Classical Studies and the Brazilian Center for Portuguese Studies had fostered one of the most intellectually fruitful generations of the 20th century, and Agostinho ultimately returned to the Iberian Peninsula.

Among the heteronyms created through his Pessoa-inspired poetics, it is Matheus-Maria Guadalupe accentuated in this text by his experience at UnB and by the debate and prestige this campus would come to have worldwide. Disguised as Matheus-Maria Guadalupe, Agostinho da Silva would provide a masterful analysis of critical moments in Latin American intellectualism in the post-World War II era through works such as *Lembranças Sul-Americanas de Mateus-Maria Guadalupe*¹³.

Guadalupe, as Agostinho, is a Latinist and medievalist, making it easy for him to connect with the dialogue between the character J.J. and Agostinho himself, who also appears on Bahia's seashore. Guadalupe is multifaceted: taxonomist, strategist, collector, researcher, entomologist, and a passionate editor, always busy and working.

Fruit of Agostinho da Silva's most sensitive, Pessoa-inspired heteronymy, G.B.M. presents the most fitting introduction to Caboclan Theoretics of Classical Philology. Matheus-Maria Guadalupe is a scholar of ancient culture, preoccupied not only with medieval translations but with a range of subjects. A tireless workaholic. Here we have an intellectual whose legacy—beyond the Atlantic extension of Fernando Pessoa's work—is uniquely able to unite the particular and the universal, as in this dialogue revisiting the history of philosophy on the sands of Itapoã, while simultaneously questioning the purpose of all this knowledge, all these studies, journals from Heidelberg and Oxford—the Herculean effort of people who know everything except how to be inventive, who speak many of the most forgotten languages and yet “incapable of saying anything in their own language.”

The provocations and critiques of these three “demons” should be taken seriously. Especially today, when considering ideas that could have been

¹³ SILVA, Agostinho da. *Lembranças sul-americanas de Mateus-Maria Guadalupe*. In: *Estudos e Obras Literárias*. Lisboa: Âncora, 2002.

and never were within our field's history, whether due to our own failings or the disruptions under the authoritarian regime. And when finally the time comes for us to radically reconsider our place within the broader field of classical studies, may we remember with Guadalupe that the gods could never have regarded the German Scholars of the Baltic with more esteem than the dreadlocks of Canoa Quebrada.

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