

# On Returning to Macao, Greater China, and the Making of Contemporary Postcolonial Narratives

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*Vivo aqui como se uma vida de empréstimo, que,  
mais tarde ou mais cedo, vou ter de, ou querer, devolver.*  
[I live here as if it were a borrowed life, one which, sooner  
or later, I will have to, or will want to, give back.]

Paulo José Miranda, *O Mal*, p. 58 (my translation).

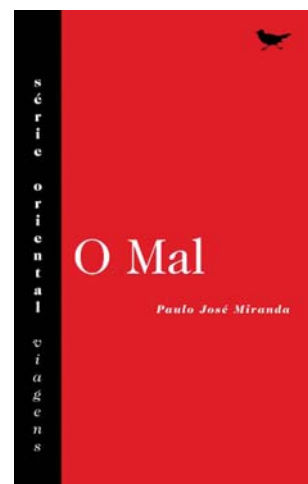
In the already long history of European colonial fiction, perhaps the most durable of travel narratives is undoubtedly that of discovery and exploration, and Portuguese literature is no exception in this regard. I probably do not need to remind most scholars, whether of Portuguese or of world literature, that many of Portugal's main canonical works, from Luiz de Camões' 1572 epic poem *Os Lusíadas* to Fernão Mendes Pinto's 1614 travel narrative entitled *Peregrinação* (Pilgrimage), in spite of their more critical dimensions, can both still be inscribed under this rubric, thus setting the stage for those to come: be it the self-effacing and stylistically modest report of a colonial officer or surveillance agent, or even the hastily scribbled lecture notes of an obscure Portuguese language and literature teacher like myself.

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In this essay, however, I wish to ask not how these canonical works might be preserved or maintained, but rather how these and other remnants of the Portuguese colonial empire might be re-imagined, not only through these kinds of canonical chronicles, in which the exploratory pilgrimage invariably ends in colonial domination, but also through a different kind of expedition: one that serves not to exact favours or benefits from the colonial enclave, but rather that has as its main purpose something like what contemporary Portuguese author Paulo José Miranda suggests in his 2002 travel narrative *O Mal* (Evil): no longer an attempt to win anything, be it concrete or symbolic, but rather to return something borrowed, if not taken by force. In this particular case, I refer to the tiny southern Chinese territory of Macao, one occupied and administered by Portugal for close to 450 years (1457-1999), making this Asian outpost an unavoidable point of reference in Portuguese literature for most of the Modern Age.

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Conceição Gomes point out in their 1998 study



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*Macao: O Pequeníssimo Dragão* [Macao: The Tiny Dragon], the return of Macao marks for Portugal 'the end of Empire, the peaceful and negotiated end to a tumultuous, centuries-long and transcontinental colonial presence, one which in other times and places did not know how to pull out in time, peacefully, not recognising the exhausted nature of a relationship between peoples that had already become obsolete' (Sousa Santos and Gomes, p. 5, my translation). At the same time that the decolonisation of Macao is viewed against the backdrop of much more violent and repressive examples of Portuguese colonial power, the two scholars also recognise that there is something about this ostensibly colonial relationship that is not, and perhaps never was, completely colonial: '...while a colony, Macao is one in a very special way, because of its past, its present and its future.

In spite of Portugal maintaining the effective and uninterrupted possession of Macao since the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, the exercise of sovereignty was less than complete and carried out with the implicit or explicit consent of China' (Sousa Santos and Gomes, p. 7, my translation). Beneath the surface, this colonial relationship is thus much more complex than it may appear at first glance, allowing for the flow of power emanating from, and transiting, a broad range of different territorial foci, not only in Portugal, but also from local economic elites and across the customs border at Portas do Cerco, both in neighbouring Hong Kong, mainland China and beyond.

Even so, the literary history of Portugal's presence in Macao departs almost invariably from the oft-repeated myths related to the Renaissance epic poet Luiz de Camões. One legend that stands out, which never has been definitely proven (and I am sure never will be, for that matter), is that Camões actually wrote the *Lusiads* in a grotto on a Macao hillside while awaiting his return trip to Portugal. This recurrent desire to re-establish the symbolic points of the colony through literary works in the Portuguese language would continue through other canonical authors, most notably the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet and world-traveller Manuel Maria

Barbosa du Bocage. Bocage visited Macao on a world tour of Portugal's other colonial possessions—Goa, Daman, Mozambique, Brazil—although it would be fair to mention that he arrived after deserting from the Portuguese colonial army in Damão, presumably escaping to seek the ultimate poetic inspiration in Camões' hillside grotto.

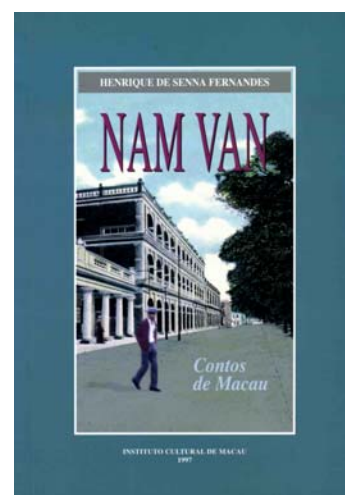
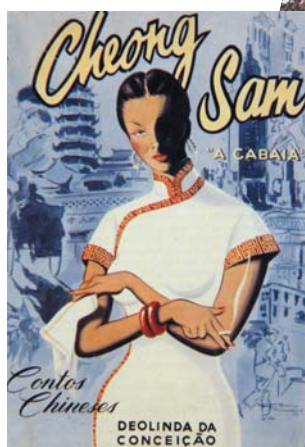
One might say, then, that it is only with the arrival of the *fin-de-siècle* poet Camilo Pessanha that a distinct literary countermodel emerges: a disjointed and decadent view of colonial space that, instead of providing an idealistic canvas on which to paint a

Portuguese vision of the foreign, is consciously lyrical, self-absorbed and tragic in

spite of any change of geographical location.

His collection of poems *Clepsidra* (Hourglass) remains a prism of temporal reference in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese poetry, transforming Pessanha himself into a mythical figure both in Macanese colonial cultural history and by extension in the literary history of Portugal as well.

In the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, one would do well to add to these the works of native Macanese authors in Portuguese, most notably Deolinda da Conceição's collection of short stories (Conceição 1956) and the novels and short stories of Henrique de Senna Fernandes (1993, 1997). Add to these the works of Portuguese authors in Macao, often doubling as teachers or journalists, such as Maria Ondina Braga and Fernanda Dias. This is the brief, but by now canonical, trajectory that one usually refers to when mapping out the contours of late



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colonial Macanese literature. One example can be found in the 2002 collection of short stories from these four authors translated into English by British academic David Brookshaw (Brookshaw 2002). In his introduction, he juxtaposes these four authors, two native Macanese and two Portuguese colonials, and especially against the by-now recurrent backdrop of Camões and Pessanha, it becomes not too difficult to imagine that these are, in fact, the Final Four, their works the culmination of a centuries-long process of Portuguese literary engagement in a tiny territory at the other end of the world.

Even with this valuable introduction to Macanese narrative in hand, there may still be a few unfinished touches to be made to this late colonial literary history: above all, those that attempt to retrace the closure of certain Western literary approaches to the territory while allowing room for an opening towards others. Meanwhile, the sole survivor of this group of authors, Fernanda Dias, continues to travel back and forth between Portugal and Macao to publish new works that exhibit an ever-greater familiarity and dialogue with traditional Chinese literature, philosophy and culture: most recently, her 2011 rereading of the I Ching entitled *O Sol, A Lua e a Via do Fio de Seda* (The Sun the Moon, and the Way of the Silk Thread).

It is precisely with these continually reappearing possibilities for literary projects of postcolonial closure and reopening in mind that I wish to insert yet another recent travel narrative written in Portuguese into this discussion of a Lusophone canon viewed from the margins: the 2002 novel *O Mal* [Evil] by Paulo José Miranda. Moving past the already common theme of a Portuguese teacher in a late colonial context, the novel revolves around the return of the main character to Macao after its handover to the People's Republic of China in 1999, a political transition that has inspired a veritable flood of memoirs and colonial reminiscences from Portuguese authors and colonial administrators. As for the main character and protagonist in *O Mal*, a return to his longstanding fascination with Pessanha's poetry through a rereading of it as part of the work alternates with details of the anonymous narrator's private life; most notably through a series of sexual

relationships with women not only in Macao but also in Portugal and Hong Kong.

As for Pessanha, he arrived in Macao in 1894 after a crushing rejection by his love interest Ana de Castro back in Portugal, and it is here in Macao, 'um país perdido' or 'lost land' as he describes it in *Clepsidra* (Pessanha, p. 27), that he begins his inexorable decline, one that includes alcoholism, opium addiction, and a definitive withdrawal from the Lisbon literary world, one that appears to prefigure the narrator's own cycle of drug use and romantic disillusionment in the novel

*O Mal*. Pessanha's work thus serves here as a means of contextualising and articulating the narrator's ambivalent attitudes towards his own life story, his sexual and sentimental encounters in particular: whether of love and hate, honesty and lying, good and evil, not to mention the transitory, if not always decadent, nature of the cultural, linguistic and political environments that help shape human existence. These brutally frank and thus all-too-welcome reflections on human relationships in particular, as well as the continuing discussion of Portuguese literary and

cultural commonplaces in the east Asian context, are perhaps what qualifies this work as a suitable *coda*, both to the Portuguese handover of Macao to China and the attendant rush of literary, cultural, academic and mass media activity that attempts to memorialise this historical moment (e.g., Abreu, Chong, Pina-Cabral), as well as to the corpus of Luso-Asian colonial narrative in general. What is being sacrificed in this perverse pilgrimage is not only the last remnant of a global colonial empire, but also the illusions of which the personal narratives of the primacy of one's cultural linguistic, and sentimental identity are grounded. With this material possession returned, all that is left is to face the remnants of one's own intersubjective memories, in which no existential residuum, however personal, can be left unquestioned.

## THIS IS NOT A LOVE STORY

Miranda's novel not only revisits the romantic disillusionment of Pessanha, but also traces the narrator's contact with three women, each with a very



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distinct approach to love and sexual pleasure. First, the narrator's former wife Rafaela, a teacher who derives her sense of purpose not only from her work as a secondary school teacher but in her sincere, if at times naïve and even awkward, efforts to please her new husband sexually through a set of seductive practices that nonetheless appear to the narrator to be not only clichéd but downright silly: brushing her freshly showered hair against him, kissing him all over his body, etc. It is for these innocent sexualised acts that she becomes an object of disdain for the narrator over time.

After all, this is not a love story; indeed, the breakdown of the story that is called love, along with its attendant illusions and narratives of self, can be said to coincide to a great extent with the end of the colonial romance. This is reflected both in the poetry of Pessanha and the eventual handover of Macao, each revolving around a gradual departure from a series of official and established myths about the possibility of mutual understanding and appreciation as equally daunting if not more so, between a love all too often unrequited, and with it the end of all other cherished illusions, including the belief in Portugal, its language, and its continually reiterated historical narratives of exploration and discovery. In the context of this ultimately abusive relationship between the narrator and Rafaela, one might do well to remind oneself that the term exploration in Portuguese also means exploitation, and in this context this dual dynamic of exploration/exploitation is one in which sexuality seems to resurface as a unwitting manifestation of the political, that is, between those committed to maintaining the upper hand to reassert a sense of superiority and their all-too-often subjugated partners.

There are two other women who would enter the narrator's life: first there is Maria, who can only experience sexual pleasure with her lover after first cheating on him and then lying about it, and the other Carlota Joaquina, a unrepentant colonialist and openly bisexual accomplice for the narrator, though they never have sex with one another. You see, Carlota Joaquina only experiences sexual pleasure when she pays for it, and acts as a sort of guide to the seamy sexual underworld of nearby Hong Kong. In so doing the symbiotic economic relationship between Macao and its big sister becomes all the more palpable. In his book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas discusses how this city-state's culture

appears precisely at that discursive juncture when there is a perceived danger of disappearance: 'an allegorical reading of space that attends not only to what is there but also to what is no longer or not yet there' (p. 9).

Viewed in this way from across the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong manifests itself as a sort of reality check, underscoring first and foremost how Macao is by no means, and never has been, an isolated cultural enclave, interconnected to other nearby entrepôts of cultural, demographic and monetary exchange through a shared language and symbolic vocabulary. As scholars of Southeast Asian writing in English begin to include Macao in their discussions of Hong Kong literature at the dawn of this new millennium (Patke and Holden, pp. 188-189), it is also becoming all the more clear that these migrating boundaries of what has come to be called Greater China continue to exhibit new forms of cultural and linguistic, if not always ideological, permeability (e.g., Ngai).

One question still remains, however: can these relationships, whether between people or governments, truly change, and can these entities, whether lovers or institutions, wake up to these divergent ways of interpreting realities?

PORTUGUESE PEDAGOGIES,  
POSTCOLONIAL INTERROGATIONS

With this example in mind, one particularly pertinent case stands out: that of the Portuguese teacher/teacher of Portuguese as part of this renewed project of *Lusofonia*. In this novel, pedagogy itself is subject to an unrelenting critique, but above all in the form of those well-worn forms of establishing cultural standards for imparting knowledge, ones that not only implicate so many of those who take part in this dimension of Portuguese cultural politics, but also the narrator himself. After all, he too has returned to Macao as a Portuguese language teacher giving lessons to Chinese students from Shanghai and elsewhere in mainland China. What is perhaps most ironic is that his mainland Chinese students are not interested in learning the language in order to speak with the Portuguese or others from the Portuguese-speaking world, but rather as a means to speak with friends and others in public without being understood by those around them. However much we might think that such a desire for privacy is limited to the banalities

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of one's daily life, it is impossible to ignore the very real persistence of censorship, not only in the PRC but elsewhere, both in the way of limits to access to outside sources of information and other restrictions on free expression.

At the same time, one must also be honest enough with oneself to be able to identify the manifold ways in which European colonialism is also a form of selectively organising cultural information, above all one determined by the choice of language or languages, a process that Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies in the preface to his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* as ones of 'dislodgement from [one's] everyday life that were both metaphorical and physical.' Of course Chakrabarty is also quick to point out the difference in the unequal terms of these displacements between coloniser and colonised:

Did European colonizers ever lose any of their languages through migration? No. Often the native did. Similarly, migrants in settler-colonial or European countries today live in fear of their children suffering this loss (p. xviii).

The best-known example of this late colonial literary-pedagogical figure is not only Pessanha, who taught Portuguese language and literature for years at Macao's Colégio São José to the sons of the Macanese elites, but also the aforementioned Maria Ondina Braga, whose professional and literary trajectory brought her not only to Macao but also to Africa, India and Beijing before returning to Portugal in later life. Many of her teaching experiences became the basis for her literary work, above all the 1991 novel *Nocturno em Macau*, which ends with the tearful departure of the colonial teacher at the boat slip surrounded by her grateful female students, and the words in English, 'We will miss you' (p. 215). Is this not the ultimate colonial fantasy: to depart from one's former pedagogical colony showered with unmitigated adulation and displays of undying gratitude? Then



again, this points at what is perhaps the most basic human defect of how honest any of us can ever be with ourselves, above all, regarding what those we stake our life activity upon (students, colleagues, readers, if not outright critics) actually think of us.

With this in mind, nonetheless, I too must ask: where are the ultimate destinations of this Portuguese postcolonial critique, especially when viewed from other sites in the region on which we continue to congregate: whether a surviving Portuguese creole community in a coastal South or Southeast Asian town; or a mixed Eurasian diaspora community, spread out across not just one, but a network of modern global cities; or even the deserted and decaying ruins of a Portuguese colonial fort, whether on a far-flung island of the Moluccan archipelago or elsewhere.

Other sites may have few immediately visible Portuguese cultural markings: take, for example, the island of Taiwan, one once and still called, whether at its souvenir shops or petrol stations, on its newly reconstructed boulevards or metro stations, time and again (at least in English translation) by the Portuguese name of *Formosa*. To what extent does this repeated Portuguese place name, no longer circulating as an official political designation but as a cultural and economic brand or alternative to its long list of official or unofficial names, only add to the ambiguous and multiple borders of contemporary Taiwanese, and by extension Chinese, political and cultural identity?

And while we are identifying spaces for cultural critique, I would probably do well to recognise explicitly that I too, while not a Portuguese citizen or even of Portuguese ethnic origin, am also implicated here, working as I am as a professor of Portuguese language and culture in the oldest and largest community in its North American migrant diaspora, where I teach Portuguese to the children and grandchildren of Portuguese, Brazilian and Cape Verdean migrants, as well as exchange students from mainland China, and even lecture in Portuguese to students on both sides of the border of the present-day Special Administrative Region called Macao with the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone

The question becomes, then, and perhaps unavoidably: How can we teach 'our own' language or set of languages differently, however obvious or complicated we may imagine that proprietary, colonial or personal relationship to be, perhaps through translating between

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our primary modes of communication and others in a way that critiques and interrupts their imagined limits of power and prestige?

AND, FOR THE TIME BEING:  
NO CONCLUSION?

Against this backdrop of humiliation and degradation of the Portuguese and their colonial counterparts, is it possible for a presumably postcolonial cultural linguistic construct such as *Lusofonia* to reorganise itself, not only at its presumed border zones such as Macao, where it can be imagined brushing up against otherness and creating recurrent translational or bilingual encounters, ones inscribed not only in literary texts, but also on the urban landscape of bilingual signs, symbols and other identity markers that remain part of the everyday lived experience of this city-state (Reis, Chan). As we continue to revisit, transit and interpret these spaces, the task nonetheless is inevitably different, becoming one not only of interrogating but perhaps even of overturning thereby some measure of the residual inequality implicit in a broad spectrum of interpersonal dynamics left over from the colonial encounter: whether political and economic, cultural and linguistic, sexual and romantic.

My ultimate, and perhaps deceptively simple, question is: how do we make sense of this life, after the inseparable alternating and often indistinguishable dyads of love and hate, truth and lies, good and evil? How does one reconcile the cynical stance of no fixed meaning in interpreting the emotions of others? Is life, colonial or otherwise, truly comparable to an intimate act with the promise of romantic contact, yet in fact with no strings attached: as part of a story, complete with a beginning and expiration date, a date of return? That may be an unavoidable part of any adult life story, and yet we still go to the encounter, aware of its irreconcilable contradictions and contingent circumstantial coincidence as actors in a disjointed narrative in which there is only translation in/between (not just between languages, but perhaps more importantly in this instance, between behavioural, moral and ethical positions). Our will to interpret and translate others is enjoined to face these questions head on, as openly and honestly as we can allow, regardless of how we ourselves might come to see it differently at any given moment.

After all, we too will change; we will continue to learn each other's languages, whether 'official' or not, gain increasing exposure even to each other's dialects, pidgins and creoles, perhaps even take on new accents, either imagining culturally distinct approaches to life's intractable existential questions, or shrinking from the attendant ethical decisions that these questions pose. That is, unless we are as brutally honest with ourselves as with those who are honest enough with us to lower their social masks, if only for a moment, so that we might see the more intimate narratives behind the final chapter of colonial transition, whether in Macao or in other corners of Portugal's irrevocably lost empire, or in other surviving empires and hegemonic structures at the start of a new millennium: not only the obvious candidates such as the US, China, India, Brazil or Indonesia, but also those neighbouring states or far-flung territories often relegated to a second, third or fourth tier, as well as those often unofficial cultural, linguistic and micro-ethnic spaces, all in various stages of re-emergence or decline.

On nearby Taiwan (to return to just one of any number in this sea of relevant examples) the list of languages that have left some mark there is a long one. Colonial languages such as Chinese, Japanese, English, Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch can no doubt still be used not only to research and communicate with a set of former imperial metropolises, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to share knowledge among a broad grouping of continually decolonising global spaces, in order to reconfigure the unavoidable communicational power dynamics that will continue to emerge between cultures at the start of an increasingly interconnected 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the same time, Taiwan's twenty-odd indigenous peoples and their surviving Austronesian languages remind us how the island is not merely a political entity of enduring contested status within Greater China alongside the People's Republic proper and its Special Administrative Regions of Macao and Hong Kong, it also remains the genealogical cradle of a broad swath of global cultures, from Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, through the Southeast Asian archipelagos of Indonesia and the Philippines, all the way to the outer reaches of Polynesia, as far as Rapa Nui in the South Pacific.

In this context of any number of overlapping and ever-expanding transcultural constructs, the continually developing process that Gayatri Spivak identified in

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her book *Other Asias* during a visit to Hong Kong as 'the production of a pluralized continentalism' (Spivak 2008) continues to emerge, one only intensified by migrational, informational and economic flows throughout the region. On the southern edge of Greater China, each of these economic and cultural gateways is still developing its potential to respond to the presence of these often-understudied neighbour languages; whether Tagalog, Cebuano or Chabacano, Indonesian or Tetum, Thai, Khmer or Vietnamese—or even those languages on the other edges of Chinese language such as Zhuang, Tibetan or Uygur, Mongolian, Russian or

Korean—each will set into motion its own unique set of intersubjective challenges, not just academically, but socially and politically as well.

Meanwhile, in the here-and-now, literature remains in all of these invariably politicised spaces: not only as a backdrop for capturing the historical details, but also the personal passions, defects and excesses of other people, which all too often have little or nothing to do with setting a standard of upright behaviour for ourselves, and much less with being an exemplary guest, however overextended one's stay may have been. **RC**

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