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A Point of Departure for Luso-American Literature

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Robert Moser, and António Luciano de Andrade Testa. Eds. *Luso-American Literature: Writings by Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 375 pp.

There has been an increasing interest in literary works by Portuguese-speaking authors over the past decade. The publication of *Luso-American Literature: Writings by Portuguese-Speaking Authors in North America* is therefore timely. Edited by Robert Henry Moser and António Luciano de Andrade Testa, this anthology is unique and pertinent. Not only does it contribute to studies of the Lusophone diaspora, but it also adds to the ethnic diversity of American Literature. Moser and Andrade Testa have carefully selected writings from

Portuguese, Brazilian, and Cape Verdean writers that cover a wide range of genres, including poetry, drama, memoir, prose, personal essays and diary entries. In general, all of these works are thematically united by the intricacies of the authors' experiences as immigrants, refugees, and sojourners in the United States and Canada.

It is interesting to note that all of the works are in English despite the fact that some were originally written in Portuguese. Moser and Andrade Testa explain that they translated the works into English in order to reach a wider readership, and to avoid costly expenses related to the publishing of a bilingual edition. Translating an original text often comes with some loss in meaning. Nonetheless, the editors were successful in keeping the idiomatic and cultural transferring of "Portinglês" throughout their selections. This is a key characteristic of the anthology that reflects the subtleties in the processes of assimilation and identity formation.

As a point of departure Moser and Andrade Testa provide a chronology that, dating from 1492 to 2008, recounts the major intersections and points of contact between the Portuguese, Brazilian, Cape Verdean and North American cultures. This is a very helpful feature for anyone seeking to learn more about the historical junctures of these four countries and their people.

Furthermore, the anthology is organized in a chronological order to help contextualize the literary works of the featured authors. The information in the

anthology's 2008 section shows the total number of Portuguese speakers as represented by their ethnic group of origin. According to the 2005-2009 U.S. Census Bureau, there are a total of 2 million Portuguese-speaking people in the United States, of which 1.5 million are of Portuguese decent; 350,000 of Brazilian heritage (although the editors make sure to note that an investigation by the Brazilian Foreign Ministry actually places this figure at 1.5 million); and 90,000 of Cape Verdean ancestry. The statistics provided by the editors might serve as a rationale for the organization of works representing the three major ethnic groups of Portuguese speakers. It is worth noting that the Census data also demonstrates the absence of works by authors of Mozambican and Angolan origin. It can be assumed that this exclusion is in part due to the low statistical numbers in the population of these two groups in the United States. The editors however give voice to the African diaspora by including the literary works of Cape Verdean authors.

The anthology is divided into three parts: Portuguese Voices, Brazilian Voices, and Cape Verdean Voices. The part on Cape Verdean Voices is limited to seven authors and omits sub-themes like those featured in the Portuguese and Brazilian parts. In comparison to those of the Cape Verdean section, the voices of Portuguese and Brazilian origin are more abundant, and each merit sub-themes pertinent to those specific ethnic groups. Twenty-one authors are found in the Portuguese section under "Origins and Destinations", "Saudade", and "Cultural

Clashes”, while the Brazilian section categorizes twenty-five authors under the themes of “Sojourners and Travelers”, “Brazuca and Beyond” and “Reimagining the Hyphen”.

In addition to the thematic organization of the works, Moser and Andrade Testa were mindful when selecting authors from diverse literary periods. Since the works are organized chronologically, the editors have made it easy for readers to identify what period of literary history each author belongs to by providing short biographies heading each work. This also helps situate the authors’ works within specific time frames and helps readers understand the various sentiments experienced throughout the history of Portuguese, Brazilian and Cape Verdean immigration in North America.

Some of the most notable authors in the Portuguese Voices include Charles Peters, John Philip Sousa, Frank X. Gaspar, Katherine Vaz, Amy Sayre-Roberts, and Anthony De Sa. Of the three thematic subdivisions in Portuguese Voices, perhaps the most representative is “Saudade”. The title itself is a metaphor of what could be a major trait in the experience of any person living between two cultures. On the one hand there is a longing for the place of origin owing to the cultural clashes that such absence might give rise to; on the other hand, there is an implicit understanding that one can never go back to the original way of being in the motherland.

Two of the most moving and representative short stories that reflect this sentiment of *saudade* are “Fado”, by Katherine Vaz, and “Feast”, by Amy Sayre-Roberts. In “Fado”, Katherine Vaz intricately depicts the longing for the Azorean homeland of *fados*, by weaving images of the sea, nature, and aromatic fauna with the difficulties of finding words in English that represent exactly what her character intends to say.

This story of longing for a means of expression and ways of knowing is complimented by the story “Feast”, by Amy Sayre-Roberts, a heartbreaking story of loss and revival in which the immigrant experience is described through the perspective of a young girl trying to make sense of her father’s absence during the Vietnam War. It is no coincidence that Moser and Andrade Testa chose to place the two stories in this order; together they exemplify the experience of *saudade* for anyone living in two cultures.

In comparison to the sadness and longing of the voices of Portuguese origin, the Brazilian authors seem to embrace the complexities of their experiences in the United States. Their works are full of rhythmic prose, playful wordplays and optimistic experiences of living in the in-between. Some of the authors that best articulate these themes are Silviano Santiago and Kathleen de Azevedo.

For example, in the short stories “Blot” and “Samba Dreamers”, by Silviano Santiago and Kathleen de Azevedo, respectively, the rhythmic prose

moves the reader along the page as both authors construct a colorful mosaic of experiences that illustrates how an individual's identity is inevitably redefined as he becomes assimilated into a dominant culture. There are other authors, such as Gilberto Freyre, Carlos Eduardo Novaes, Moacyr Scliar, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and Lidia Santos among others, whose works provide great insight into cultural difference and assimilation experienced by the Brazilian immigrant, traveler and sojourner.

The overarching themes of assimilation and the realities of living in the United States seen in the Portuguese and Brazilian sections are also present in the voices of Cape Verdean authors. For example, the sonnet "Exiled", by Eugénio de Paula Tavares, is filled with images of darkness that carefully craft a sense of loss, and reflect the feeling of being in an undesired place.

In contrast to this solemn experience, readers can find an uplifting tale of struggle and hope in the autobiography "A Portuguese Colonial in America", by Belmira Nunes Lopes. Her story gives readers a rare glimpse of the Cape Verdean immigrant's involvement and positioning in American society. It brings to life Belmira's struggles with her identity growing up in the United States, her ethnic and cultural background, and her battles for equality. It is a unique account of a resourceful and adaptable woman. Other notable works include "Uncle Jonas—His American Story", by Teobaldo Virgínio, and "Scoundrel", by Viriato Gonçalves.

In conclusion, Moser and Andrade de Testa succeeded in selecting a rather representative medley of works from a wide range of Portuguese, Brazilian and Cape Verdean authors who portray their experiences living in the United States and Canada. Moreover, through this anthology, Moser and Andrade de Testa challenge the definition of “American Literature” with works that recount experiences that are uniquely national, but at the same time very local and global. This anthology is an excellent resource and starting point for those planning to teach survey courses on Lusophone Literature and Culture, or for anyone looking to expand their knowledge of Portuguese-speaking immigrant literature.