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HOMENAGEM A
IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS

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**GRACEFUL INTERRUPTIONS:
THE WORK AND PERSON
OF IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS**

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Resumo: “Graceful Interruptions” faz uma leitura de passos selecionados da obra intelectual e profissional de Maria Irene Ramalho Santos – na sua qualidade de especialista, colega e em múltiplos contextos disciplinares, institucionais e intelectuais – traçando o percurso das suas produtivas e provocatórias análises e da sua teorização sobre a lírica e a interrupção poética enquanto trajetória de “graciosidade” intelectual – e hospitalidade – na interrupção.

Palavras-chave: Hospitalidade; interrupção; *graciosidade*; poesia; Irene Ramalho Santos.

Abstract: “Graceful Interruptions” reads selected intellectual and professional work by Maria Irene Ramalho Santos – both as a scholar and as a colleague and in multiple disciplinary, institutional, and intellectual settings – tracing her productive and provocative analyses and theorizing of the lyric and of poetic interruption as a trajectory of intellectual “grace” – and hospitality – in interruption.

Keywords: Hospitality; interruption; grace; poetry; Irene Ramalho Santos.

Both Pessoa and Rilke, however, know only too well that ‘interruption’ is what grounds the poetic. . . . Thus, in Pessoa, as in Rilke, we find a poetics of interruption that is the paradoxical expression of a human longing for the *poetic* impossibility of wholeness and beauty. *Poiesis*, that is to say, all human making. . .

(Atlantic Poets 20)

I believe I love poetry best because it allows me to ‘travel’ the most.

(“American Studies as Traveling Culture”)

The first passage above is from the introduction to Irene Ramalho Santos’ *Atlantic Poets: Fernando Pessoa’s Turn in Anglo-American Modernism* as she maps the intellectual ground for her work on “the Atlantic poets.” That is, on the Atlantic poets themselves and on their poetry as the poetic construction of poetic impossibility. Simultaneously Irene Ramalho Santos sagely addresses poetry and the lyric at large – poetry which “does not have to wait for theory for the poem to irrupt” (21) – and the theory which comes after it. And, as interruption grounds the poetic in Ramalho Santos’ subtly stunning insights into the work of Rilke, of Pessoa, and of so much more, so too, and in an equally “quietly stunning” manner, it grounds the scholarly and professional life work of Irene Ramalho Santos herself.¹ For “*poiesis*” is, poetically or figuratively, precisely “all

¹ Unfortunately unable to read her work in Portuguese, I am able to reference only Irene Santos’ work in English. But, fortunate to have worked near and far with

human making.” Much less elegantly articulated than in Irene Santos’ compelling work then, “the paradoxical expression” of poetry is also the material figure – material as words on a page, figural in its articulation of a desire – for a not-yet, perhaps not ever, towards which human longing strains.

The second quote is from Irene Ramalho Santos’ essay, “American Studies as Traveling Culture: An Extravagant Nonnative’s Wanderings in Global Scholarship” in an essay in response to an invitation to take part in a symposium in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Amerika Instituut. There, in an essay solicited to allow for “virtually any kind of response from us, but preferably with an auto-biographical bent,” Irene Santos responds with a reflection of stunning force on her fields, her travels in and across them, and the very “traveling” of the fields themselves. And again, she keenly and gracefully traces the interruptions which are constitutive of the fields, her travels, and their “lineages.”

Each and both of the passages quoted above, then, suggest the “graceful interruptions” of the scholarly, pedagogic, and collegial work of Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos. How exactly?

“Graceful” is a qualitative assignment to – assessment of – that work. But, in addition to our conventional understanding of “graceful,” I would insist on the particular, perhaps idiosyncratic, grammatical story behind that adjectival descriptor. It is something more than simply our conventional understanding of “graceful.” The Christian overtones of “grace” in modern usage notwithstanding, it is its pre-Christian classical Greek origins that make it a most apt descriptor for Irene Santos’ work.

her for over thirty years, I will hope I have been able to be at least a passable student of this powerfully astute, intellectually and personally generous, and quietly steadfast scholar, teacher, and colleague.

Χάρις, conventionally translated as “grace,” is the nominative form derived from the active verb χαίρω (‘I am glad’), in its perhaps more familiar passive form, χαίρομαι, (‘I am gladdened’).² From this derives the ancient greeting between one and another, χαίρε. It is within this sense of “grace” – grace predicated on the interaction of one with another and on what we can consider, not only after Immanuel Levinas or Jacques Derrida or Tahar Ben Jelloun or even Merleau Ponty, but as Irene Santos so deftly illustrates in her work on Pessoa and the other Atlantic and trans-Atlantic poets – as the *interruption* of the one by another that the work of Irene Santos is “graceful.” Or rather, it is itself a “graceful interruption.”

Interruption is clearly one of the key concepts – and professional practices – around which Irene Ramalho Santos’ work turns. Elaborated in her extensive work on Fernando Pessoa and the interruption of the “American”³ poets which his poetry performs but a crucial trope recurring in much of her work, Irene Ramalho Santos’ interruption suggestively presents itself as a radical comparative practice. “. . . Because they *interrupt each other*, [they] provide a useful model for a better understanding of the modern lyric.” (2003: 22). It is the luxuriously, complexly ‘interruptive’ poetry of Pessoa that provides a rich point of departure for Irene Ramalho Santos’ statement here. “Pessoa’s concepts of Atlanticism and Interruption” are the specific referent for her “they” in the redolent insight above. But that interruption occurs both on the level of the poetry itself – as Santos’ magisterial work on poetry and lyric demonstrates so compellingly. And, perhaps even more suggestively, it occurs on the level of her own scholarly work as a whole.

² I recognize the simplistic clumsiness of this grammatical exercise in translation. There are far more ‘graceful’ ways to explain and translate this conjugation. But I insist on the distinction here to make a point.

³ In double quotes to indicate Ramalho Santos’ gently insistent expansion, pushing against a narrower definition of the boundaries of what “America” is.

In insightfully guiding us through a nuanced, theoretically informed reading of her poets and their poetry, Irene Ramalho Santos' work points to the rich intellectual provocation of understanding interruption at work. Her poetic readings of poetry, as her poetic theoretical insights, call us to a "better understanding" – certainly, in the first instance, of the poetic texts from which she always first draws. And then with deft and broad understanding, as her work draws from what she calls "posterior" theory, we see the full and compelling force of interruption as an attribute of "human making" and "human longing". For example, in her astute reminder – "National literatures are national only to the extent that they resituate the nation in the world system and thus reinvent the world system in a particular way" (2003: 5). – we can understand the work of interruption not only in poetry but also in "the world system."

Yet, this unpoetic restatement of Ramalho Santos' lovely readings of and reflection on the insights of poetry does not negate the extent to which we are in the wake of the poets and their poetry.

And in the wake that poetry creates ahead of us, one of the gifts of that poetry, we learn from the work of Irene Ramalho Santos, is precisely the work of interruption – the unexpected turn, the unforeseen encounter, the interruption of what we thought we were doing by something or someone else. Interruptions are the very stuff of creative making, of poetic insight, of poetic understanding. Interruptions are at the heart of the exquisite poems through which her scholarly work guides us. And interruption thus apprehended and comprehended, offers another gift of "better understanding" of, but not only, "modern poetry."

The rich understanding of interruption that underlies Professor Santos' scholarly work is clearly cognizant of "interruption" and its various manifestations in philosophical thought (Levinas or Derrida or Ben Jalloun), in poetic practice, and in the rich dialogue on the web of connections between "interruption" and "hospitality"

– which latter concept surely echoes the etymological sense cited above of “grace/χαίρειν.” In the face of interruption, of the other as interruption, χαίρομαι – “I am gladdened.” To welcome the other thus, to welcome the other as interruption, as challenge, is the possibility and the limitation at the heart of reflection on “hospitality.”

But that is a different, though related, story. Irene Ramalho Santos’ work, cognizant of these lofty debates and theories, engages them differently – through her attention to the figurative and material workings of *poiesis* (creative making). The “materialism” of her work, located in its keen attentiveness to language of poetry itself and to its rich webs of (proleptic and metaleptic) meanings, is simultaneously figurative in its larger vision and implications.

I like to see American Studies scholarship, as I see my favorite poets, as a series of travel encounters or practices of crossing and interaction constantly troubling the localisms of common assumptions about culture, fully aware of centers and margins and, rather than upsetting them, understanding the dynamics of dwelling and traveling. (Ramalho Santos 1999: 42)

Though the focus of this essay is on the state of American Studies outside of the United States, it is a signpost for the entirety of Irene Santos’ work as it gathers the senses here of “crossing” and “troubling” “rather than upsetting” into a richly developed network of propositions about “interruptions.” In a formulation far less graceful and far more strident than that of Irene Santos’ work, we can say something like: the interruptions of movement, of confrontation, of “crossing” and “troubling” that may not *upset* “centers and margins” – though those interruptions certainly *challenge* them – open a space for the very poetic, for poetry itself. It is in this context that Irene Santos’ profession – “I love poetry best because it allows me to ‘travel’ the most” – is most rich and provocative. Interruption, then,

we learn from the work of Irene Ramalho Santos, lets us see meaning being produced, the disquietude that is itself interruption – to ask questions, to puzzle relations, to see others and otherwise.

Whether looking back on over thirty years in the fields of comparative poetics, American Studies, or comparative literature or in tracing and re-tracing the networks of relations between poets and poetry, between seeing and not (Ramalho Santos 2000), between hearing and not, Irene Ramalho Santos' work, both as a scholar and as a colleague in the multiple disciplinary, institutional, and intellectual settings which she inhabits and through which she moves, is itself a productive and provocative trajectory of intellectual interruptions. Each essay that I read and re-read, every chapter of her *Atlantic Poets*, reminds me of that trajectory. They display her keen intellectual eye and ear cast now here, now there, always listening to and watching others, always welcoming – Χαίρε! – interruption – “troubling the localisms of common assumptions” about you and me, about us and them, about human and non-human – and drawing productively from it her own poetic inspiration. I will insist again in closing, with tremendous admiration and respect and fondness, Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos and her works are about and enact grace-ful interruption. They are a gift and a call to the rest of us.

The work of Irene Ramalho Santos, with patient and clear persistence, points us to the ways in which, in recognizing literature in general and poetry in particular as “creative making,” we can better understand interruption and its disquietude as constitutive of that *poiesis*. And we can also understand it as a resistance and perhaps even a challenge to established understanding of *poiesis* and of poetry, of culture and knowledge, of boundaries and borders. Interruption and its disquietude open a space and call out for a response of *poiesis* as much in the poetic as in the political. For it seems to me she concludes her *Atlantic Poets* with just such an

understanding – which she modestly attributes to Pessoa but which, I will insist, we can only apprehend and comprehend as we can because of her own ‘posterous’ work.

By conceiving of his own poetry as an open field of self-interruptive gestures, of imaginative alterity, while situating himself firmly in the “language-his-nation,” Pessoa teaches us how to read, not only poetry, but the increasingly transcultural word in which we live (Ramalho Santos 2003: 277).

So does the work and the person of Irene Ramalho Santos teach us to read and understand comparatively the ‘world in which we live’ – a richly provocative interruption.

Χαίρε, then, Irene Ramalho Santos – astute scholar, wise teacher, and dear practitioner of graceful interruption.

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