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I

HOMENAGEM A
IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS

THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

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WOR(L)DS' WRIT(IN)' WOR(L)DS: POETICS & POLITICS IN THE OPEN FIELD

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Resumo: Este curto ensaio pretende refletir sobre a natureza poética e política da linguagem, entendida a partir da materialidade da sua construção social e histórica, sempre em processo de adequação ou de resistência ao que é. Partindo da poética de energias formulada pela teoria *open field* (autoproclamada herdeira de algum modernismo), procura-se observar como alguns e algumas poetas contemporâneos resistem às diferentes hierarquias de poder no discurso que regula o que entendemos ser a objetividade, o senso-comum, o legível e/ou o compreensível, o real. Expondo a artificialidade da construção, expõem-se as formas de teor colonial com que se naturaliza a subalternização do que é – e de quem é – o "Outro" da/na linguagem.

Palavras-chave: poética; política; gaguejo; rizoma; L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E; emigração; colonialismo; constelações identitárias.

Abstract: This short essay aims at reflecting on both the poetical and the political nature of language, observed in the

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materiality of its social and historical construction, and always in its process of adjustment or resistance to what is. Based on the poetics of energies formulated by the open field theory (self-proclaimed heir to some modernist projects), it tries to envisage the ways in which some contemporary poets resist the different hierarchies of power in the discourse that regulates our understanding of objectivity, common-sense, the legible, the comprehensible, the real. Exposing the artificiality of this linguistic construction, these poets simultaneously expose the colonialist basis of forms naturalizing the subordination of what is – and of who is – the "Other" of/in language.

Keywords: poetics; politics; stuttering; rhizome; L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E; immigration; colonialism; identity constellations.

I would like to start this essay by addressing its title, which, to some extent, means that I will also be addressing the world of my writing before addressing the worlds of other writings. Unavoidably, when one writes, one creates a world *of* language, a world *in* language. But our page becomes a territory where other writings are already settled (the many pages we have read: other worlds *of* language and other worlds *in* language, i.e., other territories). Our world of language and/or our world of writing – the territory of our page – has already been occupied. The problem is, as Wallace Stevens put it, "that we live in a place / That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves", for "There was a myth before the myth began" (1982a: 383).

In this sense, we are all colonized people and we are all immigrants. Arriving to this territory (of language), we must struggle,

adapt and adjust, in order to build our living in a world that we wish to call our own: a world in which we must also find some sense of freedom. We thus find ourselves struggling to build our own territory in the open field of language (I'm being metaphoric, yes, but then, who isn't? For we forget too many times that the word *does not belong to* the thing). In our words and/or worlds (of knowledge; of wisdom; of national, class, gender, and political identifications; of historical and social structures and practices), we discover ourselves, with Freud and Foucault (to name but a few), already *writ in words/worlds*; and, simultaneously, we are *writing the words/worlds of our selves* – amongst the many hierarchies of power in the discourse of other worlds and/or words before us. The first word/the first world, the original language, is no longer possible – a recognition that all poets have experienced (some of them more painfully than others), especially from Romanticism onwards, and mainly with Modernism. We are all derivative, claimed the 20th. century American poet Robert Duncan (1985). The worlds we make – and let us not forget that, etymologically, *poiein* means "to make" – are *made* of other *made* worlds (worlds previously written in our worlds), in a *bricolage* process (Lévi-Strauss): when allowed, we take what feels in key, what we take as useful and productive, and abandon old forms/old metaphors that no longer suit us. Like others before us, we are both subjects and objects in this process of the construction of the real: and what we call *the real* is nothing but *this social construction* of the real — *with* and *in* language. Being transdiscursive (Foucault 1992), my title, my writing, my language, my world and my self are – like everybody else's – "the real".

It is this artificial, non-natural, and social nature of the real that the hegemonic powers in discourse erase. However, it is *writ*-ten in our words and worlds – even if unseen, even if unspoken, this social and poetic nature of the real is deeply imbedded in the open field

of every page or speech-act. Let us not forget that, etymologically, in Greek, the verb "to write" also means "to weave": this social construction of the real is thus *woven* in the world – even if we are not aware of it. It is an objective construction, a part of our territory, even if a phantom: a "phantom objectivity" (Taussig). A part of language and/or of the real that, because socially erased, feels like an amputated limb (*idem*). The artificial construction is not present there now, but we may feel it – its pain is very objective. All of us have experienced it when struggling to invent a territory in language that may better adjust to what we would like our place and our self to be. That is how we build and/or how we write our worlds and/or our selves – in an agonistic process: both as subjects and as objects of the real. Ultimately, I guess what I am trying to argue is that the social construction of this territory, of the world and of our identity, is poetic – both a linguistic and a literary question (literary, again etymologically, taken as forms made with *littera*: made with letters). I want to argue that struggling to invent a territory in language that may better approach what we would like our place and our self to be is the goal and the priority of both any creative scientist and any artist or poet: this is what all of them primarily take as their job or life project. Trying to take hold of a new territory or to adjust and adapt to it, they are like any other colonizer or like any other immigrant: as an inevitable consequence of the actual deterritorialization process of their body and of their body of language, they must (re)build the territory of *the real* anew – if they want to survive and, in the first case, if they want to be gainers and master reality. For the colonizer's power and the immigrant's power are very different, both in economic dimension and nature. Let us say that I prefer poets of an immigrant nature: those who, instead of having things to say, "have nothing to say and are saying it" (Cage), always in search of the new words to open a new field/territory.

The struggle to change the hegemonic forms in language that shape the social construction of the real is therefore objective, and it implies a process of deterritorialization that, being poetic, is also both epistemological and epistemic. As with the immigrant Jew Franz Kafka, a line of escape is needed to avoid the language of the masters (even, and especially, when one is using it) and this leads to nomadism and to the rhizomatic experience of language and of self. This is a search through unknown territories – a search that will always have to deal with the lack of a center, with the lack of a map, with incompleteness. A search that will unavoidably lead to an actual non-(still; yet-to-be)Sense (Deleuze and Guattari), since we are dealing with counter-hegemonic forms of resistance to the accepted hegemonic social construction of the real – in language and through language. Such is the agonistic and/or poetic nature of language.

And, yet, no one listens to poetry. Or should I say, instead, *that is why* no one listens to poetry? Not many people think of poetics and of poetry as "respectable" discourses, capable of alternative forms of knowledge, of new visions of the world that are as "objective" and as "true" (whatever that means) as any other visions and any other knowledges of the world. In the hierarchies of the discourses of knowledge, the power of poetry is next to nothing. Just a few words from the poem-essay by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Bob Perelman:

> "The Marginalization of Poetry" – it almost
> goes without saying. Jack Spicer wrote,
>
> "No one listens to poetry," but
> the question then becomes, who is
>
> Jack Spicer? Poets for whom he
> matters would know, and their poems

would be written in a world
in which that line was heard,

though they'd scarcely refer to it.
Quoting or imitating another poet's line

is not benign, though at times
the practice can look like flattery.

In the regions of academic discourse,
the patterns of production and circulation

are different. There, it – again – goes
without saying that words, names, terms

are repeatable: citation is the prime
index of power. Strikingly original language

is not the point; the degree
to which a phrase or sentence

fits into a multiplicity of contexts
determines how influential it will be

. . .
(3)

The problem is contextual, for poetry is thus out of the social context of power (who is Jack Spicer?) and to quote a poem to affirm some form of knowledge, even in academia, is far from the above mentioned "index of power". The problem is that the patterns of production and circulation of poetic discourse are different from

the ones expected from a discourse of knowledge and/or power. The problem is that a poetic phrase or sentence *seldom fits*. And, in some poets' opinion, *it shouldn't fit*. As L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet and theorist Charles Bernstein says: "Don't get me wrong: I know it's almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs" [and, in this essay, also of scientists, colonizers, immigrants, and poets as being, as Shakespeare would put it, "made of the same substance"]. "Yet", Bernstein continues, "in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes that since our conventions are provisional, the public may choose to reconvene in order to withdraw authority from those conventions that no longer serve our purposes. Poetry is one of the few areas where this right of reconvening is exercised. . . . The political power of poetry is not measured in numbers; it instructs us to count differently" (1992: 225-6).

Interestingly enough Bernstein and Perelman, and a few associated with them in the 1970s, who came to be known as the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School*, were (still are) simultaneously attacked by social and political theorists, journalists in major American newspapers, literary critics, and the poets of what Bernstein usually calls "the official culture". Why? Because of their political agenda. But, poetry being such a marginal and un-important thing, why such a fuss? I ask.

As an avant-garde movement, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poets basically did what the Modernist avant-garde movements were doing at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th. century: they imitated the new social and political movements. They created their own audience through propaganda: through public intervention – with public readings, creating their alternative little presses, and publishing their manifestos.[1] Stylistically very different, the only thing we

[1] Marjorie Perloff claims that "it is the curiously mixed rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*, its preamble itself something of a prose-poem, that paved the way for

can say that is common to all of the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poets is their refusal to create images of the world that we can recognise immediately, since this would mean an acceptance and a legitimation of the order of the world. Like the modernists before them (and Kafka is definitely one of their many influences), they refuse the hegemonic model of representation. But, in the same vein, they also refuse the works chosen by the official culture to represent cultural diversity, since what most of those chosen authors do is to accept the hegemonic model of representation (and the immigrant authors, in the so called American multicultural studies and anthologies, are here included).

Echoing Emerson, Bernstein (1992) claims that poetry is aversion to conformity in the pursuit of forms (1). Therefore, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets aim at malformation in language – at disruption and interruption; against ventriloquism, they aim at stuttering or limping in language (many experiment with the dialogic character of blues or the improvisation of jazz to do that). They abandon mapped territories of language and of the self, *the worlds written in their worlds*, and, trying to escape the language of the masters, they err, nomadically, in the open and unmapped territories of language: in the territories out of *the* order, out of *the* sense – in a quest for other possible senses to re-write the real. They develop a philosophy of nonsense that takes this "open field" as the space of linguistic excess, since, when abandoning the world of order in language, we do not find a lack of language (Lecercle). On the contrary, when facing the excess of chaos and infinite multiplicity, one agonistically opens the field of infinite possibility for *other forms and models of representation* to emerge. These poets' main poetic concern is then the question of form.

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the grafting of the poetic onto the political discourse that we find in Futurist, and later in Dada and Surrealist, manifesto" (82).

They aim at a radical anti-formalist formalism, since new contents cannot fit in the forms we already know, and vice-versa (as post-colonial studies well show). This was also the question raised in the 1960s by Jerome Rothenberg when speaking, for instance, of Native American cosmogonies and the need for what he called an Ethnopoetics that would have to accept the untranslatability of those other worlds into the American hegemonic linguistic model of representation (1989). This is an epistemological question, and it is a question that clearly and simultaneously concerns a politics of language – modernist poets and artists were already dealing with it a century ago. Speaking about the invention of *collage*, Pablo Picasso once said: "different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. We tried to get rid of 'trompe d'oeil' to find a 'trompe d'esprit'. . . . [The] displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring" (qtd. in Gilot & Carlton 70).

In Picasso's time, displacement and strangeness in the forms of representation were demanded almost as a strategy of survival at a period when new geographies were being created by technological and scientific developments and industrialization: by new means of transportation shortening distances and creating a much smaller world, by wars that were also re-drawing the maps of the world, by migration from the country to the great cities and their new social relations and, inevitably, to newly created identities. The real was changing at a pace so different from the common conceptual and linguistic categories that tensions emerged in the dominant model of representation, tensions asking for a new universe of discourse. The chief concern of modern literature could only become the

problematics of language (Barthes). And that was the inauguration of what Marjorie Perloff (1986) calls "the other tradition" in literature: a tradition of experimentalism. The displacement and strangeness that new techniques like *collage* were dealing with had to do with this sense of change; speed was a new phenomenon, and the categories of time and space, as well as their relation, became one of the main concerns of artists and poets. In poetry in English, Ezra Pound was then the main cultivator of *collage*. Gertrude Stein wanted to catch the moment; the present was the only time she believed in, and even when using what we see as repetition she claimed that repetition didn't exist (since neither we nor the sound are ever the same in time and space): she wanted to catch, like the Symbolists, language as the act of perception, language in the coming-into-being. Marinetti said "To a finished house we prefer the framework of a house in construction. . . . The frame of a house in construction symbolizes our burning passion for the coming-into-being of things" (qtd. in Perloff 102). The normal linearity, sequentiality and causality in the order of language were challenged, and most of the time, completely abandoned. In *Un Coup De Dés*, Mallarmé explored a spatial logic by liberating words freely on the page to let meaning emerge from contingency. And meanings did emerge from all of those experiments: different forms with different meanings, thus constructing different objects and different subjects. In these writing worlds of more than a century ago, to escape the language of the masters – to escape the wor(l)ds writ(ten) in our wor(l)ds – was a major revolution which meant to explore the field of excess of sound and of all the possible orders of sound/meaning, orders and voices that are still, *normally and/or normatively*, silenced. These poets and artists were struggling against form to liberate form. Trying to recuperate their original and, for many centuries, their lost social function as bards, these modernist poets wanted, not only to reflect, but mainly to affect

the real – this is the challenge that only a few poets and artists are still trying to respond to nowadays.

They became interested in the new developments of science, and many used scientific terms in their poems, as well as structures that were trying to imitate new physical structures recently discovered by science. In the first decade of the 20th century, fighting the artificiality of convention and looking for an organic poetry, Ezra Pound said the line should not obey the metronome, but, instead, the rhythm of the sentence. In the 1930s, William Carlos Williams, approaching biology, recognised the existence of a metric variable foot which depended on the breath of writing and reading of the poem: on the actual inspiration (no metaphysics included) and expiration of the body. Approaching physics, Williams was also the first to speak of the poem as a field of action. And, already in the 1950s, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, deriving both from Pound and Williams, created the projective or open verse. And I will very briefly concentrate on this tradition because this is the model that I take to deal with language, in general, and particularly with poetry, namely the poetry written both by the so-called avant-garde poets and the immigrant poets. Always implying deterritorialization, this was the model that also led me to what I call "identity configurations" or "identity constellations."

My main point is that for us, scholars dealing with questions of language – with the many epistemological and political questions in the social construction of what we call *the real* (and identities are a part of this social construction) –, perhaps more than for any other kind of scholar, the question remains, primarily, a methodological question. The awareness of chaos and contingency, of fragmentation and decentering, of incompleteness, of indeterminacy and relativity in the world – and in our selves – is not new. Scientists and poets have been dealing with it for more than a century. But the problem remains: how do we include chaos and contingency, fragmentation

and decentering, incompleteness, indeterminacy and relativity in language? And still be able to provide meaning and knowledge within the hegemonic context of what we call "the real"? With what kind of language? These are poetic and political questions, since we still have *to make* a language that, as Charles Olson was asking for verse in 1950, "if it is to go ahead. . . now", it must "be of *essential* use" (15).

So, analysing the relation between language and the real, my methodology must be based on a non-collaborative model of language, against a collaborative communicational model that insists on recognisable images of the world. The reason for this is that I agree with Picasso when he states that "we are all quite aware that our world is becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring". With Picasso and the poets that I have been speaking about, I take an agonistic model of language as my basis, and thus take Olson and Duncan's theory of open field poetics as a methodological tool, an experimental tool that will help me deal with a language out of territory, a language of deterritorialization in a territory of a totalized world and of totalized selves. And, to this extent, my research on immigration functioned as a microcosmic research that became very helpful – to me, at least – to deal with macrocosmic questions.

In open field poetics, the representation of space and time remains the crucial problem: the concern with the representation of the coming-into-being of things. Olson's foundational essay of 1950, titled "Projective Verse" (15-30), making what seems to be an aleatory use of the space of the page, begins with the words "(projectile", "(percussive", "(prospective" – between brackets that never close. After a critique of the "Egotistical Sublime" and/or "the private-soul-at-any-public-wall" of the conventional "I", and of his/her authority in the poem, Olson asks for an exploration of the possibilities of breath "to bring the stance toward reality". He

asks for a language of *drama* in contemporary poetry – a language of movement, change, tension and confrontation – to lead "to new poetics and to new concepts" (15). Using the words of Physics, he then speaks of the "kinetics of the thing", the energy transferred from the thing to the poem, seeing the poem both as an energy-construct and an energy-discharge. In the open field of the page, through the projection of the body of the poet – which is breath, with the "acquisitions of the ear" – the particles of sound, the smallest of which is the syllable, charged with energy, attract and repel. Lines and images result from the formation of these sound-word clusters of energy within the field of composition. Only then the poem becomes an act, coming-into-being, a process – and not a product. "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (17), writes Olson, in capital letters. In this poetics of energies, the poem – this body in act – will always remain incomplete, unfinished, since every reading will re-enact the process of energies in a body that, like any other body, will never repeat itself in space and time (as Stein had argued [174]). We always in-breathe anew. Thus, claims Olson, "verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead" (17). "Which brings us up, immediately", he concludes, "bang, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar, that is, as we have inherited it" (21). To a certain extent, echoing 17th century John Milton, in his disobedience as the first act of obedience to the law of creation, Olson argues that "the LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates, must be. . . obeyed, and. . . the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open" (21). Olson, like many social scientists nowadays (namely the Portuguese Boaventura de Sousa Santos), is thus pleading for a new common sense, clearly within an agonistic model of language. He goes on to say that "breath is man's special qualification as animal", and "Sound is a dimension

he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, . . .) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size" (25) for "the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man" (25). This was the epistemological challenge, as well as the political challenge that Charles Olson was offering in his poetics. "Keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen" (17), he demanded.

In the same vein, Robert Duncan addresses space/silence in the open field of the page, in "Some Notes on Notation", the short introduction to his book *Ground Work. Before the War*:

> In the ground work there is a continuing beat that my body disposition finds and my moving hand directs I follow in reading. Its impulses are not schematic but rise, changing tempo as the body-dance changes. The caesura space becomes not just an articulation of phrasings but a phrase itself of silence. Space between stanzas becomes a stanza-verse of silence: in which the beat continues. (1984 n.p.)

This ground seems not to be visible – and yet the poet shows it is there, and renders it visible. He goes on: "indicated by spaces of 1:2:3; which may be rendered 2:4:6: 9" – "the duration" becoming "flexible. . . in each reading". Between the words there is, the poet says, "sounded-silence" – not an emptiness, but substance. In "A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the poet Paul Celan Sings", this substance is oxymoronically described as:

. . .
the possibility of no thing so
being there.

It is totally untranslatable.
Something is there that is it. Must
  be nothing ultimately no
thing. In the formula derived
  as I go
the something is Nothing I know
obscured in the proposition of No-thingness.
. . .
(*idem* 8)

From this *seemingly* unseen and unheard substance, the whole poem, i.e., the whole movement of the dance (heart and body included) depends. It is so real, so physically and materially felt that, according to the poet, "the hands. . . know more than the. . . brain" (*idem* n.p.). This is the field, the *ground,* that we find in the whole of Robert Duncan's poetry, the foundational excess of sound in all language – eternally uncaptured and unbound by words, "a primary trouble". This restoring music "larger than mankind" appears, according to the poet in the same introduction, as "a deeper rhythm, the coming and going of a life/death tide back of the heart of the breath", a "rhythm whose patterns are set but whose tempos go back to the body they come from". This *ground* is, he claims, "Poetry before Language": the universal and immanent Energy which is "What Is". Duncan names it "What Is" – for instance, when speaking of the Viet Nam horror. "What Is" is the Law we must obey and, in its all-including Wholeness, it must also include error and sin – and the "I". Duncan says:

the Language of What Is and I
  are one (*idem*: 74-5).

This ground, this Law, is our Nature, and yet, as Heraclitus argued, it is that which is most unfamiliar to us. It is therefore a *ground* at the margins of our already discovered and acknowledged continents. And "Margins signify", Duncan writes.

Paradoxically, it is a ground that remains forever ungrounded – that is, untotalized and untotalizable: a ground-in-the-making, a ground in process. Robert Duncan's *Ground Work* is the poet's participation in the process, the poet's participation in this making – which includes the making of his Self: nomadically, rhizomatically, uncentered and permanently deterritorialized, in expansion. This poetry constitutes his *rite of passage* between an old world and a new one, between an old "I" and a new "I" – in a *bricolage* process of transformation, thus arousing new modes of perception and recreating the world anew. At the time of the Viet Nam War, this *ground work* responded to the need for a radical revision of concepts such as centre and territory, such as self and language, such as citizen and city – a radical revision of what America meant. This was certainly the radical revision and political implication that led Duncan to renounce the United States, refusing to publish and be part of the American literary scene for a period of 15 years. Without a territory/without a ground, his groundlessness did neither mean an absence of substance nor an absence of the body of the literal earth. On the contrary, it meant the all-too-immediate presence of the land, the all-too-immediate presence of what America literally was (is): an imperialistic presence in which the absence of a mediating language resulted. Groundlessness meant the all-too-immediate presence of the war (in Viet Nam) and the refusal of any wor(l)d written in his wor(l)d.

Robert Duncan's ground work was the struggle to conquer his language, a struggle that had to accept error as part of a ground/a field/a territory of language that has neither a beginning nor an end: for being in History, one must inevitably be *in the act*. The absence

of language is then revealed, simultaneously, as a "Christ of Poetry" and as an excess. The excess that Robert Duncan finds at the margins of words, in the "sounded-silence" and the "deeper rhythms" back of the beat of the heart and the breath: all the possibilities of sound and articulation: "There is a field of random energies from which we come, or in such myriad disorganization "field"/ rises as a dream/ the real. This projection of many dreamers" (*idem*: 144).

In "Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*" and going back to Pound and Joyce but also to Dewey and Emerson, Duncan describes his aesthetics based on energies in process:

> Metrics, as it coheres, is actual – the sense of language in terms of weights and durations (by which we cohere in moving). This is a dance in whose measured steps time emerges from the dance of the body. The ear is intimate to muscular equilibrium. . . But, if the muscular realization of language is the latest mode of poetry, the beginning point was muscular too, localized in the discharge of energy expressed in the gaining, first, breath, and then, tongue. The gift of spirit and of tongues. (1985 70, 72)

This muscular equilibrium at the root of all movement (of creative movement) – the movement of breath and of language – leads necessarily to experimentalism. Experimentalism then becoming an organic need: the need to exercise that muscular energy which is "the gift of spirit and of tongues" (and the biblical echoes are obvious).

In this aesthetics based on energies, the closed causal and sequential syntactical orders do not dominate but they will not be excluded either. In 1971, Duncan argued: "I'm not going to take the closed form versus the open form because I want both, and I'll make open forms that have closed forms in them and closed forms that are open . . . we work to contain our feeling in our extending our feeling into time and space". In Duncan's project for a *grand collage*,

a *collage* that would include all the discourses of all the different knowledges – without hierarchies – causality and sequentiality are articulated with proliferation and contingency so as to allow for a form open to free association – always depending on the energies that are available at a given moment. To contain in the body of the poem is then, simultaneously, to extend into time and space. The linguist Benjamin Whorf, one of Duncan's many influences, once wrote:

> There comes a point where extension in detail ceases to be knowable and is lost in the vast distance, and where the subjective, creeping behind the scenes as it were, merges into the objective, so that at this inconceivable distance from the observer – of all observers – there is an all-encircling end and beginning of things where it might be said that existence itself swallows up the objective and the subjective. The borderland of this realm is as much subjective as objective. It is the abysm of antiquity, the time and place told about in the myths, which is known only subjectively or mentally. (57)

Duncan's poetics is then based in an aesthetics of complexity made both of reflected and of broken rays/myths/words, deviating and proliferous, whose beginnings and ends cannot be knowable – because, in the borderland which is the realm of the poem, in the borderland which is the realm of the self and of the poet, "extension in detail ceases to be knowable". This is *The Ground*, the decentered, rhizomatic territory – the unterritorialized territory – of the "sounded-silence" whose presence Robert Duncan tries to notate. In *The New American Poetry*, Duncan argued:

> There is a wholeness of what we are that we will never know; we are always, as the line or the phrase or the word is, *the*

> *moment* of that wholeness – an event; but it, the wholeness of what we are, goes back to an obscurity and extends to and into an obscurity. The obscurity is part of the work of the form, if it be whole. (Allen 436)

In open field poetics what is at stake in the use of language and in its renewal of the world is not a question of essences, but of responsibility. A responsibility demanded by a paradigmatic transition that Modernism and all the fields of knowledge inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th. century. We must be, as the last poem of Duncan's *Ground Work. Before the War* reminds us:

> sent out from what we were to another place
> now in the constant exchange
>
> renderd true
>
> (1984: 175)

For, as Wallace Stevens was asking in "Owl's Clover": "Suppose the future fails. . . . What man of folk-lore shall rebuild the world/ What lesser man shall measure sun and moon,/ What super-animal dictate our fates?" (1982b: 63).

In search of a future there are people who were/are actually "sent out from what they were to another place" living "in the constant exchange" of words and worlds: I am speaking of immigrants. And in 1988, I discovered that there was a group of poets writing in Portuguese in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. They were publishing only in the immigrant community's local newspapers, little magazines and small presses, and nobody had ever heard of them, neither in Portugal nor in the United States. For the first time in my life I was in need of using methodologies

that weren't very common in literary studies, namely participant observation. I spent three Summers living in the community, with a Portuguese family in New Bedford (a little town in Massachusetts where more than 60% of the population is either Portuguese or of Portuguese descent). I interviewed poets and leaders of the community, and tried to understand how and why a population that was almost illiterate could be reading and writing poetry – until one day one of those immigrant poets (no study beyond 3rd grade) told me he didn't even know what a poem was but, after having arrived in the USA as an immigrant, he felt that he had "to tell his [my] self anew" – not in English, but in Portuguese. So, *to tell his self anew*, he started writing "a bunch of words" – and then one of his colleagues at the factory saw them and told him, to his surprise, that "the bunch of words were poems". How can I better illustrate the importance of language in the social construction of the real and/or of identities? Deterritorialized, both geographically and culturally, facing different jobs, different social relations, different hierarchies of power in the family[2]; facing different hierarchies of power in social classes (usually, the first job is in the factory – no matter what type of social background you bring from Portugal); facing different hierarchies of power in the discourses about the nations involved (Portugal and the USA), discourses about their histories (which is the centre? which is the periphery?), discourses about their geographies (is it the size of the country that matters? or the size of the world population speaking Portuguese?) – facing all of this, how can immigrants not feel the need to tell their selves anew? And I'm not referring to the learning of English as their new language. I met people who had spent 40

[2] For instance, women are usually the first to learn English and their position in the family power structure substantially changes because they are the ones dealing with banks, insurances, hospitals, etc.

years in New Bedford without speaking the language, since 60% of the population could speak Portuguese. And they wrote/write in Portuguese. They needed other forms/other representations of the real – because this was another "real", one they could not recognize. They entered the borderland, the substance within the field of silence, the excess yet-to-be-spoken – the open field of language – to find other possibilities of articulation in Portuguese: to find other meanings, other orders of language, other identities. Changed by this process of deterritorialization, they became aware of the many "I"s in the process. They found a new poetics in their dislocation and in their "in-between-ness", shaping a multitude of new (ideological, identitary, linguistic) territories at struggle. They needed other forms to re-shape their invention of a new tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger), their re-imagined communities (Anderson), their linguistic artifacts (Balibar and Wallerstein) – because historical in their nature, words like nation, culture, community, identity, language emerged in a process of continuous historical recomposition, of deconstruction and reconstruction. This reconstruction was happening inbetween many ambiguities and ambivalences to create their own territory of language – still struggling in the context of different hierarchies of power in discourse, in the process, in the act: Wor(l)ds' Writ(In)' Wor(l)ds.

In the discourse and field of the poem, we will find neither "a Portuguese identity", nor an "American identity", nor "a Luso-American identity" – because they are all of them, and more. Instead, we find mobile identity configurations. There is a new language awareness and, playing with the new possibilities, the exploration of new spaces and new structures. Survival strategies are entangled, simultaneously and paradoxically, with cultural resistance on the one hand, and with the need for assimilation on the other. The different identity configurations differ with the different contexts where discourse is produced, thus leading to the switching of voices

and identifications, both in the poems and in the interviews: from Portuguese to American to Luso-American.

Beyond the politeness of irony, they choose excess, *pathos,* comedy and/or nonsense – these are some of the characteristics of this poetry. Just one example by poet José Brites, "Observações Dum Party/ASSIMilação" ("Party Observation/ASSIMILIKEation"):

Party Observation/ASSIMILIKEation

They come
polyester themselves
cocacole bottles to their mouths
learn by heart the televisioned English in *espectáculos*
some other A*merde*-icanizations
the reduced space can take
and *bingo*
a Portugal of the fifteen hundreds
in a circus of the nineteen hundreds
in an America of two thousand. . . (39).

(*my translation*).

The structural syncretism of different times and different spaces must be dealt with, and the conventional order of grammar is not enough to contain the nomadic experience of the poet. Interestingly enough, nouns become verbs, accentuating the process of language in the act. Yet, in other poems, Brites can use the elegiac mode and speak of "saudade", in the most conventional Portuguese tradition. In his daily life, one could say he is an American, speaking English at home, with his Irish wife, and at work, teaching at a secondary school. His identities are permanently created and recreated in language: always there, never entirely there. Instead of identity

configurations, one could use the expression identity constellations, since constellations only exist when seen from the earth, and their place and position varies, depending on where you see them from. And furthermore, considering the speed of light, it is very possible that most of those stars did already die, being no longer there, in the open field of our expanding universe. The little points of light are words, and the future will show us new constellations – in the open field of our expanding language. Fernando Lemos, a Portuguese artist and poet living in Brazil, seems to be speaking about this from his position of observer of constellations – in his identity too:

Places
where I
feel as if I
go to deliver
a message and I
lie
(72).

(*my translation*).

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