

Ana Luísa Amaral, Ana Paula Ferreira  
and Marinela Freitas (eds)

# *New Portuguese Letters to the World*

International Reception



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*This is my Letter to the World*

— EMILY DICKINSON

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ANA LUÍSA AMARAL, ANA PAULA FERREIRA AND  
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## Introduction: *New Portuguese Letters* to the World

Like the terrible difference between us at first, and then later, the fragile dawn of love that this book, this thing, came to be.

— MARIA ISABEL BARRENO, MARIA TERESA HORTA and  
MARIA VELHO DA COSTA, *New Portuguese Letters*

Can art be political and still be timeless?

— ADRIENNE RICH, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*

'All art is political in terms of who was allowed to make it, what brought it into being, why and how it entered the canon, and why we are still discussing it' (Rich 1986: 95). This is how the North American poet, essayist and activist Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), answers the question that she herself raises in the essay 'Toward a more feminist criticism', quoted above in the second epigraph. The text is included in an important collection of essays notably titled *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, published in 1986. It was originally delivered as the opening lecture of the Feminist Studies Literature Symposium, held at the University of Minnesota in 1981. It can thus be assumed that the majority of those who heard it were college students. Rich discusses the relationship between the Academy and a politically motivated literary criticism, and she points out that the very idea of institution associated with the Academy threatens the success of a feminism inclined to action. The essay ends with the conviction that feminist criticism should affirm itself as a political force, being part of a network of communications to ensure the survival of the feminist movement. To that end, the poet emphasizes the need, above all, to resist the temptation to be 'pleasant' and become 'dangerous' instead (Id. 99).



The issues raised by Rich's essay are useful to approach *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* or *New Portuguese Letters*, a book written ten years earlier by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa and published in 1972, still during the fascist regime of Marcello Caetano.<sup>1</sup> The authors state: 'We grant access to ourselves only to the man who approaches us gently, or comes to us in such burning fury that we hold out our hands to him, though continuing to keep our distance. And we grant him this access to us only if he is not afraid of consorting with us: for doing so is very dangerous, and he is running a great risk, since he may find himself deeply involved despite himself' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 75). Not to fear what is allowed, that is, what is set and belongs to the order of what is established, meant taking on the (dangerous) adventure that Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo would call 'an experience of common creation' (2010b: xxxiv). '[I]t would have been enough for the choir to have remained "decisively anonymous" for *New Portuguese Letters* to set forth one of the fundamental theses of contemporary feminism: the "sorority" between women as a new social formation, the energy of their solidarity as a collective force' (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, is *New Portuguese Letters* only a feminist book? Or is *New Portuguese Letters* only a book against the regime? And what kind of symbolic weight does the book carry? 'It is obvious', adds Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, 'that *New Portuguese Letters* would not have had its well-known echo if it had not reached a symbolic meaning where women of all continents and social classes recognise each other. On a second reading, the body, being the preferred place of denouncement of women's oppression, exceeds itself in what it represents. It functions as a metaphor for all forms of oppression that are hidden and not yet surmounted' (2010a: xxxix).

The very act of writing boldly about the body and desire in its multiple dimensions, calling woman 'man's last colony' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 235), can inscribe the body within that discursive space where claims

1 The English translation by Helen R. Lane and Faith Gillespie, *New Portuguese Letters*, was published in London by Gollancz (hardcover) and Paladin (paperback) in 1975. Quotations of the text refer to the paperback edition.

for the recognition of the social, juridical, economic and cultural rights of women are made. But is *New Portuguese Letters* a book solely about identities – sexual but, also, social, cultural and national identities?

Such questions continue to be valid to approach a work that, above anything else, intended to be a work of art. Still, its dimension of deep resistance makes it one of those works that bring about (re)visions of history and of criticism. Both are responsible for recovering a literature which was written by women, one that was alternately invisible, silenced, and lacking in readings acknowledging and privileging the topic of sexuality. For this reason, it is still possible (and quite productive) to think about the *New Portuguese Letters* bearing in mind the connections that might be made between, on the one hand, the idea of political (social, cultural, ideological) resistance and, on the other hand, the (literary, linguistic, formal) construction of a 'poetics of resistance.' This is 'to make poetry and to make politics', as Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo would succinctly put it (2010b: xlv).

*New Portuguese Letters* present a set of strategies or processes of linguistic and ideological rupture – marked by excess, violence, opacity, detours and fractures – that contribute to the construction of a 'poetics of resistance' against the discourses that legitimise repression. Salazar's 'Estado Novo' [New State]<sup>2</sup> imposed political, social, sexual and linguistic repression on the Portuguese society in general and on women (and women writers) in particular. To put it differently, Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa crafted 'with several hands and several voices' (Seixo 2001: 185) alternative or counter-hegemonic forms of enunciating the world and the 'I' that is in fact a 'we' – who dares articulate itself as such through language. Its point of departure may be the hegemonic

2 'Estado Novo' [New State] is the name given to the period of dictatorship in Portugal under António de Oliveira Salazar's rule that lasted from 1933 to 1974. The New State regime was characterized by fierce nationalism and strong Catholicism, well summed up in the motto "God, Motherland and Family". Following the ideals of Mussolini's fascist regime, it represented a regression regarding the Republican government that had overthrown a monarchy that had lasted for almost 800 years. Civil rights were either abolished or threatened.



centre, as one of the voices evokes in the statement, 'My place, one I did not deliberately choose, mind you, is the centre' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 277). Despite the 'temporary asphyxia' (Ibid.), it radiates to different margins that end up being translated not as *the* centre or, even, *a* centre, but as other centres that are remote and variable.

*New Portuguese Letters* can be understood in the context of a 'disciplinary society', as Michel Foucault describes it, since the book was written during the New State's regime and had to grapple with the machinery of censorship that policed all literature since the mid-1930s. However, the notion of art proposed by the text acts as an interruption in that dominant order, whether enacted through discipline or through control. As a literary and political object, *New Portuguese Letters* resist 'the inconsistency of the world', as Eugénia Vilela aptly puts it (2010: 201). They resist the very 'resistance of the world' (Id. 201), *from the feminine and through the feminine*. By means of that resistance, space is opened for rupture and irruption. And for freedom.

\* \* \*

Continuing concern with those themes and issues is what led to the international research project, *New Portuguese Letters 40 Years Later*. If at the time of the book's writing they were significant, they are ever more pressing in today's world due to a global crisis that has been widening the gap of inequities and increasing violence, which is both symbolic as well as real. The project was conducted within the purview of the Institute for Comparative Literature Margarida Losa, at the University of Porto, with the support of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).<sup>3</sup> One

3 This international research project followed a previous national one, also coordinated by Ana Luísa Amaral within the purview of the Institute for Comparative Literature Margarida Losa and sponsored by the Foundation for Science and Technology. That project led to the publication by editorial Dom Quixote, in 2010, of the first annotated edition of the *New Portuguese Letters*. This edition follows the first edition of the book, published in 1972, removes errors and corrects typos, and recovers the pre-preface and the preface written by Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo for an edition published by Moraes Editora, in 1980. The 2010 edition also includes an introduction and an index (obviously needed but lacking in preceding editions). Perhaps, most



of its objectives was the production of two books: one in Portuguese, published by Editorial Dom Quixote, with the title, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas entre Portugal e o Mundo* [*New Portuguese Letters between Portugal and the World*]; and one in English, now published by Peter Lang, and whose title is based on the famous verse by Emily Dickinson, 'This is my letter to the world'; hence, *New Portuguese Letters to the World*.

The texts collected herein are the product of the Portuguese research group and of the various international ones (totalling more than fifty researchers), who studied the impact of *New Portuguese Letters* in numerous countries across different continents (cf. <[www.novascartasnovas.com](http://www.novascartasnovas.com)>). The choice of coordinator for each group was not arbitrary: researchers of international renown were invited, specialists in Portuguese literature, in feminist studies and in comparative literature, possessing thorough knowledge of the object of study.<sup>4</sup> *New Letters to the World* aims, thus, to reflect upon the national and international reception of the book, shedding light on its repercussion on the Academy, the work of other authors (writers, playwrights, actors, translators, etc.), and on society in general.

Aimed at the academic community but also relevant to a broader public, the scholarly work produced throughout the three years of the project shows just how fruitful the legacy of *New Portuguese Letters* has been.<sup>5</sup> Soon after it reached bookstores forty-two years ago, coincidentally in the month of April,<sup>6</sup> the government's censorship seized the book by official Order issued on 21 May 1972. This initiated a lengthy legal battle,

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importantly, it includes a critical apparatus not in footnote but in endnote form. The latter refers to the pages of the book, thus maintaining the text unbroken. They shed light on allusions, quotations and intertextual dialogues with Portuguese literature and culture as well as with those of other countries.

4 The international research teams were organised by local coordinators, thus assuring autonomy as well as democratic functioning.

5 For more information about the initiatives associated with the research project, see the web site referenced above: <[www.novascartasnovas.com](http://www.novascartasnovas.com)>.

6 The military coup that would bring down the Portuguese New State took place only two years later, on 25 April 1974. The national and international scandal that ensued from the government's legal prosecution of the authors is among the events that arguably helped bring about the fall of the regime.

as has often been noted, with notable international repercussions. Forty-two years have passed and today, just as yesterday, *New Portuguese Letters* can continue to be read as a revolutionary text, as a gesture of radical innovation and aesthetic insubordination, as an act of resistance that invites readers to also resist.

\* \* \*

'All I know is that there are too many mysteries surrounding books and those who read them and those who write them; one must be humble... Often, nearly always, a book is a far bigger thing than what we are' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975b: 323; cf. Rosa 1968: 160). These words, from the great Brazilian writer, João Guimarães Rosa, were precisely those chosen by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa to end the Authors' Afterword of the English and North American editions of *New Portuguese Letters*, published in 1975. That Afterword appears in the Spanish edition, published in 1976, and in the German edition, published that same year. In that brief text, the three authors remind the reader that the content of the book cannot be separated from the way in which it was written: 'WHAT IS in the book cannot be disassociated from HOW it came to be' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975b: 321). And the authors go on to explain:

The book is the *written record* of a much broader, common, lived experience of creating a sisterhood through conflict, shared fun and sorrow, complicity and competition – an interplay not only of modes of writing but of modes of being, some of them conscious and some far less so, all of them shifting in the process, and all three of us still facing, even today, the question of *how*. (Ibid.)

In spite of the historical, political and social context of fascist oppression in which the book was written (which will be discussed in the first part of the chapter on the reception of *New Portuguese Letters* in Portugal), the authors admitted they 'were doing something disturbing and exciting' (Id. 323). This sounded even truer in 1975 than when originally written. They also remind us that the reactions to the book went beyond their fears as well as their expectations. Books are many times greater than those who write them or read them – and they are greater than their own time. In the case of



*New Portuguese Letters*, their complexity as a literary object of uncommon originality and timeliness in both aesthetic and political terms assure their continuing status as a key work in contemporary literature and culture.

The present collection is composed of introductions that summarise the studies produced throughout three years by research groups in Portugal, Germany, Brazil, Spain, United States of America, France, Italy, Angola and Mozambique,<sup>7</sup> the UK, Ireland, and Sweden. It should be noted that the group from Germany went beyond studying the impact of *New Portuguese Letters* in that country, extending the purview of research to countries where German is the official language, as is the case with Austria, or one of the official languages, as is the case with Switzerland. Likewise, the group from Sweden studied the impact of the book in other parts of Scandinavia, namely Denmark, Finland, and Norway.

Certain topics reappear in the introductions of all the research groups, for example, the fascist dictatorship, the lawsuit brought against the authors and the period following the 25 April revolution of 1974. The common interest with those particular events is explained by the fact that the first translations of the work (loose or partial ones) were done while the legal process was underway; and translations of the book proper were published right after the Revolution. The first translation appeared in France, in 1974, followed by the Brazilian edition in the same year. In 1975 the Spanish, English and North American and the Swedish translations were published. The German translation appeared the following year and the Italian translation in 1977. The political impact associated with *New Portuguese Letters* was emblematised by the official declaration that the book was the first international feminist cause issued by the National Organization of Women (NOW) in June of 1973 in a conference held in Boston. This was likely decisive for its dissemination outside national borders and for the vast international attention that it received. For this reason, aside from the events mentioned above, the two other leading themes around which the work of the various research teams was organised are feminism and human

7 Both African countries were formerly colonised by Portugal and their official language is Portuguese.



rights. Finally, the research teams were also concerned with showing how the book, apart from its social fabric and shared sisterhood, was, in effect, being created as a 'literary novelty', 'like the sun: it's for us and for others', as one of the voices predicts, thus 'shining down on' literature itself (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 16).

\* \* \*

It remains to be stated that any selection is always incomplete. Other geographical areas could have been covered and more material could have been added. In spite of our efforts, it was, however, not possible within the bounds of the research project to include countries other than those here represented, where we presently know the book was read or had some impact. Two dossiers were found in the Historical-Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with letters and other materials from consulates and embassies of Portugal in foreign countries. These documents prove that *New Portuguese Letters* reached the five continents and, at least, twenty-seven countries. Although revealing, some of this material suggests, nevertheless, a mere residual presence of the book in countries such as South Africa, Egypt, the Philippines, and Pakistan. In these cases we could only find brief references in the English press, normally repeating news already published elsewhere. But there were other countries where the book had greater visibility, as seen from the documentation of the Portuguese diplomatic corps in the 1970s. This is the case, for example, in Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and in Latin America, namely in Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela. Curiously, in Japan, a translation of *New Portuguese Letters* was published in 1976 by the same editorial, Jinbun Shoin, that had published in 1949 a translation of the *Portuguese Letters*, by Mariana Alcoforado.

We expect that the present volume will give rise to new research, uncovering new data and filling gaps, so as to grant the remarkable book that was, and continues to be, *New Portuguese Letters*, its well-deserved place in Portuguese literature and in world literature. Such a place has been partially achieved by virtue of the voices speaking alongside the book, challenging regimes, bothering rulers, destabilising hierarchies, 'flouting the law, order, uses and customs' (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 77).

Those voices, in addition, are revolutionising the very idea of writing and literature in the disproportionate display of female desire turned language; or, still (or precisely due to) the recognition, almost at the end of the book, that – as one of the voices claims – ‘we are all impeccable writers, alas, and our hearts are in the right places.... [L]et this contorted dialectic of ours unfold between us and the others, and not only between-our-selves or between-ourselves’ (Id. 303).

‘We have already decided that this is to be a serious undertaking’ (Barreno, Horta and Costa 1975a: 39), states one of the voices right at the beginning of the book, to which another will reply, shortly thereafter, picking up the line launched earlier: ‘I have already spoken of the seriousness of our undertaking, a fight for life, which in our time and our place is not considered legitimate, even in self-defence’ (Id. 51). *New Portuguese Letters* are made of anger, danger, of struggle and challenge, but also of ‘the fragile dawn of love’ (Id. 307).

And, yet, what will always remain to be said ‘is the universality of the work’ (Pintasilgo 2010b: xxxi). True works, true art, being poetic in the purest and most dangerous sense, as is this book, will always be political because they belong to the world and to the place they had in their own time. But they will also last forever, beyond their own time. They are much greater than we are.

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