

Postcolonial African Consciousness and the Poetry of Agostinho Neto

Irene Marques  
*University of Toronto*

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**Irene Marques,**

**"Postcolonial African Consciousness and the Poetry of Agostinho Neto"**

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Postcolonial African Consciousness and the Poetry of Agostinho Neto," Irene Marques introduces the magic words of a great poet with the question: can poetry carry enough sorrow, enough strength, enough fire, enough love, enough wisdom, enough care, and enough horror to penetrate the hearts and the souls of the oppressed and the oppressors so that both will desperately want to escape their sinister labels? For Marques, this question represents an old quandary and one that many of us wish could be answered with a simple yes. Marques analyses Neto's poetry in the context of *littérature engagé*: if only the cries, putrid smells, and bloodshed were allowed to penetrate the thick wall of the utilitarian human mind, if only emotion had a little more room to breathe freely and then, perhaps, could poetry perform fresh, new, and potent miracles. Marques argues that Agostinho Neto was not only the first president of independent Angola, he was also a great poet who put his art at the service of Angola's anti-colonial revolution and struggle for cultural and political independence. Neto was a man whose artistic life is connected deeply to and inseparable from his socio-political environment. Through an analysis of various poems taken from Neto's volume *Sacred Hope*, Marques attempts to answer questions such as how exactly is Neto's poetry interconnected with the socio-political condition of his country, his people, and himself, what are some of the most successful poetic strategies used by Neto to fight the Portuguese colonial power, can one say that his poetry is the very arena where a new African consciousness is being created/recreated, and is Neto's poetic enterprise sufficient for the "real" revolution?

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**Irene Marques**

### **Postcolonial African Consciousness and the Poetry of Agostinho Neto**

Can the magic words of a great poet carry enough sorrow, enough strength, enough fire, enough love, enough wisdom, enough care, and enough horror to penetrate the hearts and the souls of the oppressed and the oppressors so that both will desperately want to escape their sinister labels? This is a very old question and one that many of us wish could be answered with a magic and simple "yes." But.... Yes, there is always that stubborn "but" blowing away the perfection, beauty, and justice of the poetic phrase and poetic intention. Agostinho Neto was not only the first president of independent Angola. He was also a great poet who put his art at the service of Angola's anti-colonial revolution and struggle for cultural and political independence and a man whose artistic life was deeply connected to and inseparable from his socio-political environment. Through an analysis of various poems taken from Neto's collection of poetry *Sagrada Esperança*, translated as *Sacred Hope* by Marga Holness, in this paper I attempt to give some answers to the following questions: How exactly is Neto's poetry interconnected with the socio-political condition of his country, his people and himself? Can one say that his poetry is the very arena where a new African consciousness is being created/recreated and where old European myths are being unmasked? What are some of the most successful poetic strategies used by Neto to fight the Portuguese colonial power? Is Neto's poetic enterprise sufficient for the "real" revolution? Are his words able to move mountains or just hills?

It is no news that the Portuguese, similar to many other European colonizers, claimed that their presence in Africa was justified in the name of civilization and that it was in fact the concretization of their Christian duty which required them to spread the sacred Word of God. Furthermore and contrary to other European colonizers, who have been said to have practiced a more open politics of apartheid, the Portuguese have been classified as less racist and less imperialistic in their dealings with Africans. For example, during the mid-twentieth century, the Brazilian sociologist/anthropologist Gilberto Freyre affirmed that "The Portuguese are a less imperialistic European people, a people who has had blood, cultural and life ties with *povos mestiços* (miscegenated people) and with non-Europeans [the Moors] since very ancient times" (my translation; qtd. in Bragança and Wallerstein 231). However, in my opinion the notion that the Portuguese possess an innate predisposition to mix easily with other races -- known as "luso-tropicalism" -- might perhaps have its own merits, but it might be better understood as simple pseudoscience, a currency of thought so much in vogue during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and so often used to justify European colonial enterprises (on African postcoloniality, see, e.g., Asante-Darko <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss1/2/>>).

What this theory does not do, however, is to account for the horrific and long-lasting oppression and exploitation of Africans by Portuguese for more than four hundred years. In fact, it can be easily argued that such a theory might serve to support conveniently the Portuguese colonial enterprise by making it seem that both African and Portuguese not only had a peaceful and equal relationship in which the categories of oppressed and oppressor were blurred, but also that the presence of the latter in Africa was not contested by the former, since apparently they had so much in common. But as Mário de Andrade has astutely put it, "such 'sociological theory' presupposes the accepting of the *participation* of all the elements of the colonial population [colonizers and colonized] in the social, economic, cultural, and political life. However, the politics of assimilation, such as understood and practiced by the Portuguese colonial administration, is paralyzing for it eliminates from participation the black indigenous and the assimilated people, and, to a certain extent, the mulattos. On what then to base a *luso-tropical* civilization?" (my translation; qtd. in Bragança and Wallerstein 230).

Moreover, it is important to note that the number of *assimilados* (assimilated persons) was in fact very low in the Portuguese colonies and even those who were lucky (or unlucky!) enough to achieve such status still faced various types of systemic discrimination and their socio-political influence was limited at most levels. It seems fair to say, then, that the politics of assimilation was not born out of a

Portuguese innate tendency to accept and mix with the Other, nor was it unintentional. Rather, it was a necessary political strategy on the part of the colonialist, a way to facilitate and permit his installment in the new colony. The *assimilado* functioned as the go-between -- a figure by no means exclusive to Portuguese colonies but common in all European colonies in general. Because the *assimilado* had access to both cultures, he was in the best position to facilitate the dialogue between Africans and Portuguese. In addition, the most intense institutionalization of a politics of assimilation was reserved for members of the new generation for they were the ones who could most easily be acculturated, as they were still in the process of consciousness formation. As Mário Santos notes, "the transplantation of colonial cultural values to the cited group [youth] was an intentional act on the part of the colonialist: by making African youths assimilate the colonial philosophy and way of life completely, the colonialist was in fact creating the *a priori* guaranteeing condition for his posterior success" (my translation; 399).

The themes dominating Neto's poetry are quite indicative of the fact that the veracity and practice of luso-tropicalism, the idea that the Portuguese went to Africa to civilize and christianize Africans, and the notion that the assimilation project was a widespread one, were more myth than reality. The poems included in *Sacred Hope* illustrate well the oppression, apartheid, (un)civilization, and (un)Christianity brought to Africa by the Portuguese. The poem which in its English translation is called "Western civilization" ("Civilização ocidental"), constitutes a good example of that so-called civilization and Christianity brought to Angola (and other parts of Africa) by the Portuguese colonizers. The title of the poem might lead some readers to believe that what is to come is an apology for Western civilization and culture and for its good deeds in Africa. It could be suggested that such readers have fallen into what can be described as the "Eurocentric trap" -- that is, they went into the reading of the poem with the preconceived idea that Western colonizers did indeed go to Africa to civilize Africans. These readers will only be disappointed and even confused for what is to be painted in the poem is not civilization but rather (un)civilization. The poem's title is in fact highly ironic: it is used by the poet to make the reader reflect about the true nature of Western civilization, see its many (un)civilized sites and make him/her question the motives behind the colonial enterprise. For example, in this poem, the houses of Angolans are described as "Tins fixed to stakes / driven in the earth" whose "intimate landscape" is "complet[ed] by rugs" (18). And these "houses" are full of "cracks" through which the sun enters just to awake its "inhabitant," who is tired from "twelve hours of slave / labour" (18). The poet then proceeds to describe the endless hard work performed by the Angolan: "Breaking stones / carrying stones / breaking stones / carrying stones" (19). The repetition "carrying stones / breaking stones," used three times in this stanza, is very successful in transmitting the intensity and never-ending hard work performed by the worker. The worker becomes a slave precisely because he never stops working; he works continuously without even being interrupted by harsh weather conditions; he works "in the sun" and "in the rain" (19). The poem ends by explaining and illustrating when, how and under what circumstances this slave worker dies: "Old age comes early / A reed mat on dark nights / enough for him to die / thankfully / and of hunger" (19). For even though the worker works very hard all his life, he ends up without the most basic necessities: no proper bed, no food and no light, and thus is grateful to die. Death represents freedom from a life of slave work; it represents the end of his physical and psychological oppression and immeasurable pain.

This poem is indeed a good illustration of the (un)civilization, the (un)Christianity brought to Africans by the Portuguese: hunger, cold, physical and mental exhaustion, and alienation. To put it metaphorically, if the "lights" of the "civilized" did not reach the Angolans (as colonialists have claimed to be the case) before the arrival of the colonialist, they surely were not "bright" enough to "illuminate" the life of most Angolans after. The questions I would like to ask in relation to this poem are: will the reader feel enough revolt and disgust against Western civilization that he/she will want to work towards the independence of Angola? Will the sites of Western (un)civilization displayed in this poem be sufficient for the oppressor to see the true nature of the colonial enterprise and convince

him/her to refuse to be part of such sordid business? Or will this poem just sound like the unfounded lament of an Angolan who is jealous of the so-called "higher successes" and "intelligences" of his colonial master?

The poem translated as "Saturday in the *musseques*" ("Sábado nos musseques") is another poem which displays crudely the dark colors of Western civilization, including the accentuated apartheid system that characterized Portuguese colonization. This poem, one of the longest of Neto's poems, gives a very graphic description of the poverty and violence that pervade the ghettos where the Africans live, in the suburbs of Luanda. The *musseques* are described as places inhabited by extreme and multifaceted anxieties. What is the nature of all these anxieties? First, the *musseques* are full of anxiety because their inhabitants lack very basic material conditions: they have no electricity; their houses (*cubatas*) are made of old pierced tin-plate, are overcrowded, and lack proper sanitary conditions. In other words, the lack of quality of the things they have in their houses and their general state as well as the absence of certain things (i.e., electricity and bathrooms) function as a direct reflection of the worth of the people living in them. The material poverty of the *musseques* functions as the visible and ever-present reminder of the continuous situation of subjugation and oppression under which the black people are living. That constant presence of physical poverty causes the inhabitants of the *musseques* to live in a general state of anxiety: the meaning of "things" becomes the meaning of "beings" for people cannot be separated from their physical environment. Neto writes: "Anxiety encountered / in the meaning of things / and of beings // in the full moon / lit instead of street lamps / because poverty and moonlight / marry well" (3) and "Anxiety in the skeleton of wooden poles / threateningly inclined / holding up a heavy zinc roof / and in the backyards / sown with excrement and bad smells / in furniture dirty with grease / in tattered sheets / in mattressless beds" (9).

The anxiety that inhabits the *musseques* shows many other pathological faces. For example, there is very high consumption of alcohol amongst the inhabitants of the *musseques*. Alcohol functions as a drug that eases the many pains caused by a permanent state of abject poverty and oppression; it is a drug that makes one forget that which might be too painful to face in a state of sobriety. As Neto explains: "Anxiety / felt in the noises / in the smell of alcoholic drinks / spreading in the air / with cries of pain and joy / mingled in a single orchestration" (3-4). Anxiety is also caused by the many kinds of physical and emotional violence that constantly occur in the *musseques* and by many other distresses and afflictions that poverty and oppression can create. The list of "anxieties" is endless: policemen and soldiers violently attacking innocent passers-by, adults molesting children, fathers allowing the money of the rich child molester to pay for the abuse, women screaming at the poverty of their husbands, prostitution, adultery, domestic violence, dishonesty, financial debts, gambling, women wondering if their sons who are missing will be coming back, or praying and asking the diviner if their daughters will survive the deadly pneumonia they caught in their *cubatas* full of holes, and so on.

There is no doubt that "Saturday in the *musseques*" is a sorrowful and detailed display of the material, psychological and spiritual poverty and alienation that consume the *musseques* in the suburbs of Luanda. It is indeed a very negative poem that paints the many dark sites of the lives of colonized Angolans, the lives of a people who seem to have lost their identity, self-respect and their way. However, the latter part of this poem appears to display another site, one that might be seen as containing a grain of hope, the "sacred" grain that might lead Angolans to take action and finally overcome their mental and physical passivity that resulted from the many centuries of colonial oppression. Although the latter part of the poem also talks about "anxiety," this time the anxiety in question seems to be far less pathological than the anxieties described previously. It is an anxiety that seems positive and necessary, one that will ultimately lead the oppressed inhabitants of the *musseques* to action. Neto writes: "Anxiety / in those who come across passive crowds / waiting for the hour // In men / seethes the desire to make the supreme effort / so that Man / may be reborn in

each man / and hope / no longer becomes / the lamentation of the crowd" (9).

I would argue that in this poem Neto is using what Abiola Irele has called the "stratégie de provocation" (221) in describing some of Aimé Césaire's poetry. In other words, Neto, like Césaire, starts by displaying what Irele refers to as "images pathétiques" that is, he starts by describing, enumerating and pointing out all the negative aspects that characterize the life of the black people under colonialism, as a way to make the colonial subject conscious of his/her total state of abject poverty and subjugation. In other words, the poet is forcing the colonial subject to identify him/herself with the people living in the *musseques*. Furthermore, the poet is also telling his readers that "Life itself / makes new will flower" (9), which is to say that the conditions of their lives are the very reason why they need to take action to change such a deplorable state of affairs. The poet is not only coaching readers to self-consciousness through identification with the inhabitants of the *musseques*; he is also coaching them to action. But the provocation of the poet does not stop there as he then proceeds to point out to the reader that there are certain men in the *musseques* inside whom "seethes the desire to make the supreme effort" (9).

How effective might this verse be? I am suggesting that the poet is here forcing passive readers to compare themselves with courageous Angolans, that is, with the men who seem ready to start the war that will lead to independence. Such a comparison might be able to achieve two things at least. For one, Neto seems to be establishing a network of support. When the poet says that there are men ready to take action, he is in fact giving agency to the Africans that might feel powerless and trapped inside the oppressive colonialist system: he is showing them a way out of that system and encouraging them to be less afraid to fight for independence. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, the poet is forcing passive readers to feel guilty for not joining the action, for not helping other Angolans in the fight against colonialists.

The last stanza of "Saturday in the *musseques*" reads as follows: "Saturday mingled the night / in the *musseques* / with mystic anxiety / and implacably / unfurls heroic flags / in the enslaved souls" (10). The anxiety present in this stanza is referred to as "mystic anxiety." If all the anxieties described previously were inevitably associated with negativity and oppression (in other words, the mere displaying of the "images pathétiques"), the "mystic anxiety" of the end might be seen as what I choose to call an "image héroïque" following Irele's lead. It is an "image héroïque" because it has a highly prophetic and optimistic tone, and it suggests that a change for the better is coming. The *musseques* are now full of a "mystic anxiety," that is, a positive anxiety that will lead to the "unfurl[ment of] heroic flags in the enslaved souls." The verb "unfurl" (*desfraldar*) is an interesting one: it can be used to describe the unfurling/displaying of the national flag, suggesting thus that the victory of independence will indeed take place in the near future. Moreover, this verb is also often used to refer to the toilet-trained child who no longer needs diapers. This last connotation of the verb adds another and very important dimension to the entire poem: the "enslaved souls," that is, the black oppressed people, are now starting to become active adults in the sense that they are refusing to passively take the abuse of the colonizer and are ready to fight with arms if necessary.

The poem translated as "A succession of shadows" ("Desfile de sombras") is another poem in which the superposition of the "images pathétiques" and the "images héroïques" seems to be again at work. Similar to "Saturday in the *musseques*," this poem is devoted mostly to displaying the (un)achievements, frustrations, spiritual emptiness, and miseries that characterize the present lives of Africans, that is, the "images pathétiques": "I remember untrodden paths / I hear distant voices / of men who have not sung / I remember happy days that I did not live // there exist for me lives that never were // ... I am a day in a dark night / I am an expression of yearning // Yearning? / -- for what! for whom? // I have never seen the sun / what must I remember?" (22). But after having painted the desolate present state of affairs of Africans, the poet then moves to evoke the pre-colonial past: "Yet / he was already a gentleman / he was a sage / before the laws of Kepler / he was fearless / before combustion engines / This same man / this misery? // It is for his days of glory / that I yearn / I yearn



yes!" (22). These latter lines are undoubtedly the "images héroïques" for they describe the past times when Africans had a culture of their own, dignity and pride in what they were. These past times are the ones mourned and missed by the poet, the days he would like to see rediscovered and reawakened. By comparing present and past, "pathétique" and "héroïque," the poet is instigating oppressed readers to work towards the re-establishment of that glorious past so that they can again exist with dignity. Thus, the comparison seems to be a very effective "stratégie de provocation."

Despite the fact that Neto uses his poetry to fight the colonial cause and to sensitize his people to the need for revolution, he is not sufficiently naïve to think that poetry alone is enough to change the state of affairs. In the poem called "Haste" Neto speaks of the impatience he feels with the fact that things are not changing at the rate he would like to see them change. He is very aware of the fact that poetic words, reasonable talk, and the biblical "offering of the other cheek" -- in other words, "civilized" diplomacy -- will not be enough to convince the colonialist to return Angola to Angolans and stop the violence against those who are fighting for independence. In fact, Neto suggests openly the use of force and recognizes that words are only "tepid" agents, that is, not powerful enough to penetrate the utilitarian and self-serving minds of the colonizers. The latter understand only the language of "a tooth for a tooth" and "an eye for an eye" (74), that is, they only understand the cruel and bloody language spoken on the battleground: "I am impatient in this historical tepidness / of delays and lentitude / when with haste the just are murdered / when the prisons are bursting with youths / crushed to death against the wall of violence // Let us end this tepidness of words and gestures / and smiles hidden behind book covers / and the resigned biblical gesture / of turning the other cheek / Let us start action vigorous brave\* intelligent / which answers tooth for tooth eye for eye / man for man / come vigorous action / of the people's army for the liberation of men / come whirlwinds to shatter passiveness" (74; \* indicates slight modification of the translation).

The rest of this poem is a harsh, bloody, and violent description of what is needed for Angolans to achieve the independence of their country. Through the use of extremely violent poetic images, the poet makes a very direct appeal to all Angolans by openly saying that their union and their physical force are indispensable if they are to regain their country in a full sense. In other words, the poet clearly says that only the sacrifice of the armed struggle will allow Angolans to restore their access to all the vast material wealth of their country and at the same time permit them to reconnect with their true African culture, a culture that has been overshadowed and almost annihilated by the presence of the colonialists for more than four hundred years.

Many other poems included in *Sacred Hope* are characterized by the same direct and harsh call to action and armed struggle. "Reconquest," "The Path of the Stars," "Bleeding and Germinating," "Confidence," "Green Fields," and "We Will Return" are examples of other poems where the poet presents the need to fight as the ultimate action that will lead to political, economical, and cultural independence. Such direct call to action is often coupled with very strong, positive and colourful images symbolizing the repossession of the land by the Angolans and the regaining of a lost identity and dignity. For example, in "We Will Return" the poet writes: "To the houses, to our crops / To the beaches, to our fields / We will return // To our lands / Red coffee / White with cotton / Green with maize fields / We will return / To our mines of diamonds / Gold, copper, oil / We must return // ... To our traditions / To the rhythms and bonfires / We must return" (76).

It could be suggested, again, that Neto is trying to manipulate the oppressed reader in this poem. By pointing out the many advantages that Angolans would gain if independence were to be achieved, the poet is indeed encouraging them to make the "supreme effort" referred to in "Saturday in the *musseques*," that is, he is encouraging them to join and fight in the armed struggle. Since Neto uses what seem to be very successful poetic strategies and since he in fact uses poetry to say that poetry alone is not enough to achieve independence unless coupled with action, one could suggest that his poetry might indeed be able to move mountains, that is, it might convince Angolans to join the armed struggle, so that the ultimate goal can be achieved: the independence of Angola. But in order for

poetry to be totally effective, two things at least need to take place. First, poetry has to be so powerful that all its readers (oppressed and oppressors) will be moved by its beauty, wisdom and justice and will then be willing to take action in order to change the state of affairs. Such assumption is undoubtedly a beautiful one, but also one that suffers from exacerbated optimism and one which Neto himself did not have, as previously illustrated through the poem "Haste." Secondly, if poetry alone were to move the Angolan "mountains" it would have to reach a great number of Angolans, an impossible goal since most of them do not speak and/or read Portuguese, and thus would be unable to access Neto's poetic message and consequently be moved by it. But Neto was acutely aware of that problem and did take certain measures to minimize it.

Neto was more than a poet who put art at the service of his country. He was directly involved in Angola's armed struggle and a very active member of the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) from its very beginning (see, e.g., Bragança and Wallerstein; Davidson). This movement was founded in 1956 in order to fight against Portuguese colonial power and was engaged in military fights from 1961 to 1975. The MPLA took power in 1975, the year Angola gained independence from Portugal, and has remained in power ever since. Agostinho Neto was elected its president in 1962, remaining so until he died in 1979, which makes him the first president of independent Angola. During his time as president of the MPLA, Neto was very aware of the importance of educating all Angolans about the need and benefits of joining a common anti-colonial war and about the importance of putting tribal/ethnic differences aside. To that end, he, along with his party members, not only would use several African languages to inform the various African ethnic groups about the nature and objectives of the guerrilla war, but also give some public speeches, away from the watchful eye of the PIDE (*Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado*) of course. Since the Portuguese would often spread negative rumors and misleading information about the MPLA's objectives amongst African populations in order to handicap its success, it was essential to inform Africans about the true nature of the guerrilla war. Yet as we very well know, despite the MPLA's strong efforts to minimise ethnic rivalries during the fight for colonial independence, civil war in Angola has lasted for about 27 years, ending only in February of 2002 with the assassination of UNITA's rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and the signing of a subsequent peace accord between UNITA and MPLA. One would need to write another essay -- and one on the politics of international economy -- in order to properly address the reasons why the civil war managed to last so long in Angola, without forgetting to explore the role of the USA and South Africa in the process. I will of course leave that to the scholar who has no fear of unmasking international political/human disgraces.

If Neto's use of the Portuguese colonial language proved to be inconvenient in many ways, it might also have had some benefits. It could be suggested, for example, that it made Neto's poetry more easily accessible not only to Portuguese-speaking countries, but also to other countries (through translation) and thus in some ways facilitated the spread of Neto's political plea worldwide, which in turn might have contributed to international diplomatic pressure to end colonialism in Angola. It can also be suggested that the use of the colonial language allowed Neto to "write back" to the colonizer (to borrow from the title chosen by Ashcroft's et al., *The Empire Writes Back*). That is, it allowed Neto to speak directly to the colonizer and appeal to his/her sense of justice; it allowed him to state his people's right to independence as well as the legitimacy of African culture and its existence long before the arrival of colonizers. There is no doubt that Neto's use of Portuguese created a technical barrier between him and his people and was a constant reminder of his alienation from that people and from his African roots. In the poem translated as "Friend *Mussunda*" ("*Mussunda* amigo"), Neto speaks of that alienation with tremendous sorrow and anguish: "To you friend *Mussunda* / to you I owe my life / And I write poems you cannot follow / do you understand my anguish?" (35; *mussunda* means Angolan nationalist). And yet, that same language which *Mussunda* cannot understand gave Neto the power to communicate with colonial authorities, which might in some ways have helped his political project. To put it metaphorically, Neto was the *assimilado* who used the guns the colonial



master had "innocently" given him to annihilate that same master. As it is often said in Portuguese common parlance, *saiu-lhe as contas ao contrário*. In other words, the colonialist might have thought that his politics of assimilation intensely geared to the young Africans was the *a priori* guarantee of his colonial success, only to find out at the end that that was also the first *a priori* guarantee for his ultimate failure: it was both the solution and the problem.

I shall end my brief study of Neto's poetry with an attempt to give a final answer to the question raised in this paper: beautiful words might move hills but can they move mountains? To say, as Alter Auden puts it, that poetry "makes nothing happen" (555) might indeed be too pessimistic and inaccurate and yet we can certainly and safely say that Neto's poetry was far from making everything happen. Neto's poetry might have indeed been able to move some important hills, but without the help of the armed struggle as well as other complementary action, those hills would probably never move mountains. If only the cries, putrid smells, bloodshed and lack of light in the oppressed person's eyes were allowed to penetrate the thick wall of the colonialist's utilitarian human mind, if only emotion had a little more room to breathe freely, then perhaps could poetry perform fresh, new and potent miracles.

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Author's profile: Irene Marques is working towards her Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation, *Four Writers Being Political on Their Own Ways: Feminist, Class, and Cultural Identity Discourses across Continents*, is a study of novels by Couto, Lispector, Saramago, and Coetzee, whose texts Marques is analyzing with a blend of Marxist, postcolonial, and feminist theories of culture and literature. Marques's interests in research include twentieth-century Luso-Brazilian literatures, Lusophone African colonial and post-colonial literatures, feminist/feminine literatures, and Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial theories. She has presented papers on Neto, Couto, and Saramago at conferences at Boston College, the University of Alexandria, and the University of Wales. Marques has published poetry in *Canadian Woman Studies / Les Cahiers de la femme* (2002) and *A Room of One's Own: Canada's Feminist Literary Magazine* (forthcoming in 2004). Marques is also working in various social work & services fields with abused women, immigrants and refugees, senior citizens, and people suffering from addiction and mental health problems. E-mail: <[irene\\_marques@camh.net](mailto:irene_marques@camh.net)>.