

*Writing from and on the border.
Christiana de Caldas Brito's narratives**

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to offer some insights into the literary work of Christiana de Caldas Brito, one of the most popular migrant writers in Italy who chose, more than ten years ago, to employ Italian as the language of her writing, after her migration in the Eighties from Brazil. Christiana de Caldas Brito published for adults two collections of short stories: *Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra e le altre, Qui e là* and a novel *Cinquecento temporali*. For children she published *La storia di Adelaide e Marco*. I'm going to focus on *Qui e là* tales through the concept of border that characterizes her narratives and it's evident also from the title of this collection, which stresses the idea of crossing and double belonging.

Keywords: De Caldas Brito; Italian migration literature.

Resumo: O objetivo do presente trabalho é oferecer algumas leituras sobre a obra de Christiana de Caldas Brito, uma das mais conhecidas escritoras migrantes presentes na Itália, que escolheu, há aproximadamente dez anos, utilizar a língua italiana como instrumento para a composição de seus textos, depois de sua emigração do Brasil, nos anos Oitenta. Christiana de Caldas Brito publicou, para adultos, duas coletâneas de contos: *Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra e le altre, Qui e là* e um romance *Cinquecento temporali*. Para crianças, ela publicou *La storia di Adelaide e Marco*. Concentrar-me-ei em seus contos de *Qui e là* a partir do conceito de fronteira que caracteriza a sua narrativa e que aparece evidente também no título da coletânea, o qual evidencia a ideia de um atravessamento e de um duplo pertencimento.

Palavras-chave: De Caldas Brito; Literatura da migração em língua italiana.

The aim of this paper is to offer some insights into the literary work of Christiana de Caldas Brito. She is one of the most popular migrant writers in Italy who chose, more than ten years ago, to employ Italian as the language of her writing. She migrated to Italy in the Eighties when she got married to an Italian man. She says, about this, that her migration experience has been quite unusual and even lucky, because the main reason of her leaving wasn't the need for a job, like the greatest part of migrants nowadays. Christiana de Caldas Brito was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1939, she attended a drama school in San Paolo and afterwards she graduated in Psychology. In Italy she worked as a psychologist, although since the second half of the Nineties she has become more and more well-known because of her literary work. Many schools, universities and organizations have been inviting her to read and present her writing. She won some literary awards and one of her stories was turned into a play for the stage. Christiana de Caldas Brito published for adults two collections of short stories: *Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra e le altre*, *Qui e là* (Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra and the Others, Here and There) and a novel *Cinquecento temporali* (Five Hundreds Storms). For children she published *La storia di Adelaide e Marco* (Adelaide and Marco's story).

The concept of living on border and speaking from there belongs to her narratives. It is evident from the title of her second collection *Qui e là*, that the idea of margin and double belonging is one of her subjects. However, before starting the analysis of some tales, I would like to pose a question I have drawn from Paola Zaccaria's work, *La lingua che ospita*, in which she asks the potential reader, as well as herself as a critic and intellectual, the following:

è (im)possibile parlare per l'altro/a? O, per accostarci ancor più alle interrogazioni che nascono incessantemente, in modo spiraliforme, quando si affronta la complessità, e la letteratura della complessità, è (im)possibile leggere, interpretare testi di soggetti che parlano da uno spazio culturale, linguistico e immaginativo che ha configurazioni differenti dalle nostre senza inglobarli nei nostri orizzonti, spianarli con i corpi contundenti di teorie e critiche interpretative di tutto rispetto ma comunque nate dentro lo spazio culturale linguistico immaginativo eurocentrico? (ZACCARIA, 2004, p. 25).

I have quoted her question since the subject of the location, i.e. the topic of the space from which someone is speaking, is central in the geographical, cultural, social and racial sense. The theme gains a deeper meaning if we consider a specific case: a person like me, who belongs to the center, seeks to analyze the works of people (women) who historically have been excluded from the center (even though they migrated to it later). So, when we approach literature written by people from the so-called margins of the world, we should be aware of what Zaccaria argues: that our education, our viewpoint, our interpretation all run the risk of being (and, very often, are) eurocentric. Moreover, I would add, we should be conscious that “speaking for others” – as is enacted in every theoretical approach to a literary work – turns the other into an object and not a subject, thus erasing the chance for him/her to speak. The same matter is also examined by Linda Alcoff in *The Problem of Speaking for Others*.

Moreover, we should pay attention to the concept of margin, as such concept is relative and even not well accepted by those who are defined as marginal. The emphasis on the idea of border can hold some contradictions, as Diane Brydon stresses in *Commonwealth or Common Poverty? The New Literature in English and the New Discourse on Marginality*:

now that the marginal is being revalued as the new source of authority in discourse, it is tempting to accept the imperial definition of the colonized as marginal. But this would be a mistake. As a colleague of mine exclaimed in response to a friend's lament over her marginality as a woman: “Women aren't marginal. They're bloody well right down the centre of the page!” The same is true for the post-colonial literatures. From our perspective, we are central. We are where we must begin and we are not marginal to ourselves, however much others may marginalize us economically and politically (BRYDON, 1989, p. 4-5).

I believe that the argument can be useful even though it comes from the postcolonial field, since it offers fundamental advice on the concept of margin and its relativity.

Through these premises I have tried to unveil the pitfalls that a reading of the work of a migrant woman writer might conceal.

The idea of border, which crosses *Qui e là* can be examined through theoretical keys such as deterritorialization and ex-centricism, which, in my

opinion, emphasize the “border- perspective”. Burns and Polezzi have investigated the idea of border, focusing on the adjective “borderline”. I quote their definition since it might be helpful:

“borderline” signifies also that which lies “between”, right on the border, neither wholly on one side nor the other; a word and a position which are ambiguous, denoting not only a geographical or physical position, but also an existential, linguistic, cultural condition. Connected with the experience of the border and of border-crossing is its narration. The writings of migration are often themselves written “on the border”; hybrids of genre as well as of linguistic and cultural composition (BURNS; POLEZZI, 2003, p. 231).

Mixing together languages, sounds and cultures is what many migrant writers do in their artistic works; this feature is often followed with what Ruberto defines “sense of nonbelonging” in the article *Immigrant Speak: Italian Literature from the Border*. This sense is due, in my opinion, to the origin of the authors and the topics with which they deal. It might be seen as an aspect of the deterritorialization and ex-centricism processes, in the sense that those features originate from the feeling of nonbelonging (or double-belonging) which these authors have in common.

However, the choice of these two theoretical lenses does not imply a sort of ethnic reading: actually, I do not consider the “foreign-ness” of de Caldas Brito as the main source of her artistic work. I do not claim that the migration experience has not influenced her literature, but I believe that it’s too reductive to look at it *only* from that perspective. The idea of border which emerges from her book is certainly due to her personal experiences, which combine her life both inside and outside Italy. Such experiences make de Caldas Brito's belonging complex and articulated, but her literary work comes also from her undeniable artistic vein. So, every label that categorizes her work (such as migrant, ethnic, nomadic) is not actually wrong and might be accepted, but those categories are not clear enough. I prefer to think of her books as expressions of an emerging Italian literature able to speak of different topics beyond the migration subject, as Ruberto also points out in her essay.

The idea of margin or border, in this sense, works perfectly as a way to go through *Qui e là* because it doesn't ignore the migration experience of the writer but, in fact, exceeds it.

For instance, in de Caldas Brito's stories we find tales where the immigration is central (*Io, polpastrello 5423* against the Italian Immigration law, or *Cara Jandira* – published in Portuguese too). However, the main parts of the stories concerns a huge variety of subjects which share the idea of border. Let's examine some of the characters of *Qui e là*: the first story, called *Sati*, takes place in Italy and the two protagonists are Sati and her boss, Mr Adalberto Gioia. Sati is his secretary and comes from Burma: Mr Gioia doesn't know much more than that about her. Nevertheless, he becomes progressively aware that the presence of this mysterious woman makes him feel better, improves his business and, particularly, does away with his feeling of sadness and dissatisfaction. When he figures out that the foreign woman is the reason for this change, she unexpectedly disappears. Indeed, the female character stands on the border between a real and a fantastic sphere, it's impossible to declare where she belongs, and when Mr Gioia decides to investigate, he doesn't discover anything. He calls the Burmese school which Sati attended and finds the answer, which also ends the story as follows:

“voglio sapere cos'è successo alla mia segretaria”. In uno scarso inglese, l'uomo spiegò al dottor Gioia che ultimamente era stato molto occupato, ma in breve tempo sperava di risolvere il problema. Presto avrebbe trovato una segretaria per lui, l'avrebbe trovata sicuramente, ne era certo, si scusava del ritardo (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p. 13).

We acknowledge that Sati never existed in that school and the mystery around the female figure strengthens.

In *Siamo felici così*, a woman visits her friend who is in a nursing home, where she discovers that all of the women living there are being subjected to horrible experiments. The atmosphere is blurred and the reader can't understand whether what the narrator tells the police is real or not:

Scostai le tende per vederlo dalla finestra. Lentamente – non mi era mai successo di avere una gamba ingessata – mi avvicinai alla porta e la aprii. Lui stese la mano destra in avanti: “Buon giorno, signorina.” Vedendo le mie fasciature, si ritirò indietro, come a scusarsi. Prima di posare la cartella, guardò il

quadro sopra il tavolo, l'unico ritratto di mia madre giovane. Sembrava che stesse per domandare qualcosa, ma disse soltanto: "Sono qui per dirle che abbiamo fatto un sopralluogo." "E allora?" "La sua amica," consultò il foglio che aveva tolto dalla cartella, "la signorina Rossana Castelli, sta molto bene." Misi le mani sul petto. Siamo felici, siamo felici, siamo felici così. "Si sente male, signorina?" "Sono ancora un po' scossa, maresciallo." Lui si raschiò la gola: "Ho parlato di persona con la signorina Castelli. È lì per libera scelta. Sono entrato in contatto anche con le altre donne. Stanno tutte bene." Siamo felici così, siamo felici così, siamo felici. "La mia denuncia non è servita, maresciallo?" "Signorina," lui abbassò gli occhi "lei è ancora sotto stress, si faccia visitare dal suo medico." In un attimo capii. Credevo che stessi male io. In parole più accettabili, avevo bisogno di riposo (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p.15).

Also in this case, the margin between fantasy and reality, the lie and the truth, is really weak, as is the nature of the inhabitants of that house.

The idea of border becomes evident in many different ways, not only the magic versus real setting, as the following short stories show: in fact, being on the border can be either a material or a precarious condition of life which many people experience nowadays, particularly in migration. The first example is described in *L'equilibrista*, the story of an anonymous immigrant man in Italy.

The protagonist of the tale symbolizes the quintessence of the life in between. We don't know where he comes from, but we assume he is male and not Italian: he works washing the windows of cars at traffic lights and he says that it is hard for Italian speakers to pronounce his name. He describes himself with the following words:

prima devo parlarvi del filo sul quale mi mantengo in bilico. Sì, perchè sono anche un equilibrista: evito ricordi, allontano distrazioni e non cedo alla stanchezza. Ma spesso mi prende la paura di cadere. Sotto, lo so bene, non c'è rete. La mia vita? Ore e ore scandite dal verde-giallo-rosso, con un secchio d'acqua e una spugna, in un incrocio. Tutto qui. Rosso. Un minuto e mezzo. Senza l'aiuto di parole, il mio corpo si piega sulle macchine e, da solo, dice: "Posso lavare il suo vetro?" Alcuni accettano. Un passo avanti sul filo. Subito dopo vengono quelli che con una sgommata partono in fretta, come

offesi. O quelli che guardano avanti e fanno finta di non sentirmi. Girano la faccia dall'altra parte. Rischio di perdere l'equilibrio (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p. 95).

Depending on the reactions of the drivers, he can keep or lose the balance of his life, which is permanently precarious. His sense of life and belonging vanishes while he's doing his job, except for one occasion, when a driver asks him what his name is, offering the opportunity to speak and declare his identity. He is unable to answer immediately because he is "disabituato ad avere un nome" (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p. 97) and when that car has gone, he repeats loudly his name many times: "un semaforo rosso che ti fa lavorare, va bene. Ma è tutto diverso se hai un nome. Dal rancore alla speranza. Il sottile passaggio" (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p. 98).

Another character who shares the condition of marginality is Maroggia, the protagonist of the homonymous story. She is a strange woman who speaks a language that nobody understands, who spends the nights in the rain on the beach and becomes part of the sea she loves:

Maroggia non tornò a casa. Continuò seduta vicino al mare. Nella marealta i suoi occhi si sciolsero in verdacqua, i suoi seni si mutarono in due morbide meduse. Per nuotare dentro al mare di Maroggia, i pesci entrarono dalle sue orbite vuote, le cozze dalle sue orecchie. Le ossa di Maroggia furono le ultime a maresfarsi. I pescatori scesero dalle barche: "Guardate Maroggia..." "Maroggia è diventata..." Solo per scaramanzia continuarono a salutare quel mucchio di maralgheconchiglioggia seduto sulla spiaggia: "Salve, Maroggia, come va?" (CALDAS BRITO, 2004, p. 152).

All of the characters I have described are ex-centric and deterritorialized, according to the definitions some scholars have given: they don't have a unique belonging, they speak a language that other people cannot understand, they live in between many different linguistic and cultural identities. Their living on margins breaks the common sense of belonging and makes them strange, unintelligible to other people. In this sense they seem to be ex-centric and deterritorialized. About the definition of the first term, Theo L. D'haen states:

speaking from the margin, from a place "other" than "the" or "a" center [...] In literary-critical terms, this ex-centricity can in

the first instance be described as a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central to the line of technical experimentation starting with realism and running via naturalism and modernism to [...] postmodernism” (D’HAEN, 1995, p. 194-195).

I also draw on Linda Hutcheon’s definition of ex-centric:

to be ex-centric, on the border or margin, inside yet outside is to have a different perspective, one that Virginia Woolf once called “alien and critical,” one that is “always altering focus,” since it has no centering force (HUTCHEON, 1988, p. 67).

Lastly, Teresa de Lauretis looks at the ex-centric subject in a way that could work for the characters in de Caldas Brito’s stories:

eccentrico rispetto al campo sociale, ai dispositivi istituzionali, al simbolico, allo stesso linguaggio, è un soggetto che contemporaneamente risponde e resiste ai discorsi che lo interpellano, e al medesimo tempo soggiace e sfugge alle proprie determinazioni sociali. Un soggetto capace di disaffiliarsi dalle sue stesse appartenenze e conoscenze acquisite, dunque disidentificato dalle formazioni culturali dominanti ma anche critico e autodislocato rispetto a quelle minoritarie con pretese egemoniche (DE LAURETIS, 1999, p. 8).

A different perspective is embodied by all of these characters, who make complex by their existence the idea of unique belonging and mostly of the center. Even if they live in the center (l’equilibrista, Sati, Maroggia) they are not part of it, they are marginal within it. The concept of center is discussed by Graziella Parati in her essay *Looking through Non-Western eyes. Immigrant Women’s Autobiographical Narratives in Italian*:

the “center” is not to be found in any specific and self-contained cultural context. It is in the transnational hybrid space in-between that the concepts of nations, cultures and traditions are redefined (PARATI, 1997, p. 125).

The monolithic idea of culture, nation and language is questioned in this literature. “Hybrid” is another useful term to address the experiences

narrated in the texts, as well as their protagonists, a term which emphasizes the deconstructing processes and the idea, mentioned above, of deterritorialization.

Again, according to Parati,

the physical movement to other countries becomes an act of translation of one's background into a new cultural context, and, in the case of literature, such movement between cultures becomes new hybrid texts (PARATI, 1997, p. 131).

If we look at Sati, Maroggia and l'equilibrista, we could consider them to be hybrid. We know that Sati comes from Burma, but her sudden appearance and disappearance make her a very ambiguous, half real, half fantastic person. L'equilibrista, without a name, lives literary at the margins of the society which excludes him, pretending that he doesn't exist. Lastly, Maroggia combines in herself the woman and the sea, as the many hybrid words of the story show. The author puts into action a deterritorialization strategy: language seems not to belong to a specific place, it's Italian, certainly, but it's blurred, mixed up and enriched by neologisms (for example, "marealta", "verdacqua", "maresfarsi", "maralgheconchiglioggia") which make it quite odd so that other Italians in the story don't catch on. De Caldas Brito often plays with words, combining them in different ways and also using different sounds and languages (in particular Portuguese). When she combines Italian and Portuguese she writes in "Portuliano". She says about this:

alcuni dei miei personaggi sono isolati anche linguisticamente. Parlano in "portuliano", un miscuglio di portoghese e italiano. Il risultato è una "sgrammaticazione" della lingua italiana che riflette la loro mente lusofonica. Come se nella loro anima il passato echeggiasse attraverso la lingua portoghese (CALDAS BRITO, 1998, p. 118).

What she calls "sgrammaticazione" I would call deterritorialization. I draw this term from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, even though they take it from Kafka who wrote in German outside Germany:

the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise. The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature [...] The impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a “paper language” or an artificial language [...] In short, Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor use (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1986, p. 16-17).

On the contrary, in these short stories, the deterritorialization of the Italian language occurs in an opposite way: it is not modified where it is spoken outside of the country, but, rather, inside it, i.e., Italian is subjected to transformations not outside of Italy, but within the country.

The borderline point of view becomes a source of strength in de Caldas Brito's characters. However, it also becomes a threat to those who cannot put the characters in particular categories or frameworks.

I argue it can be a source of strength since being on and writing from the border means becoming empowered, as argued by Sidonie Smith and Gisela Brinker-Gabler in the introduction of *Writing New Identities. Gender, Nation and Immigration in Contemporary Europe*:

in the practices of everyday life, immigrant women confront and grapple with their status as an “other” within the imagined community as well as their multicultural identifications. They struggle with the very real material circumstances of their differential treatment and experiences as migrant and immigrant women as well as the differential impacts of racial, ethnic, and class differences. In the process of doing so, some immigrant women take up writing as a means of constituting and changing themselves as subjects (BRINKER-GABLER; SMITH, 1997, p. 16).

Monica Farnetti follows up this argument, referring to the concept of ex-centricism:

ed è in gioco altresì un'eccentricità che, acquisita in origine per forza di cose, le scrittrici (e nondimeno le loro lettrici) hanno rovesciato in occasione di *empowerment* e di autodescrizione: riservandosi la libertà dei propri atti di riconoscimento e insieme di riconoscenza, la mobilità delle proprie identificazioni e l'assunzione di modelli non "canonici" ma semmai "canonizzanti" (FARNETTI, 2003, p. 281-282).

According to Farnetti too, these works break the apparently fixed borders of the literary canon:

pur senza stimarsi indegne del canone, vanno a collocarsi al di fuori di esso, spesso programmaticamente, talvolta volentieri, e ci interessano pertanto come campioni di eccentricità: un'eccentricità, però, non semplicemente rappresentata o messa a tema ma teoricamente assunta come postura, capace di ripensare a fondo la fragile topologia della periferia e del centro (FARNETTI, 2003, p. 280).

The condition of being a migrant writer can be also paradoxical: they don't belong to the canon but they have the power to modify the language and the history of Italian literature as well. Sonia Sabelli points out with respect to such point:

gli autori migranti che scrivono in lingua italiana esprimono spesso due istanze apparentemente contraddittorie: la rivendicazione della propria alterità e differenza, in cui risiede il potenziale innovativo delle loro opere, si accompagna sempre all'ispirazione inversa ad essere considerati alla stessa altezza degli scrittori "stanziali." Si tratta di un duplice movimento, teso in entrambi i casi al riconoscimento della loro capacità di azione consapevole e di trasformazione della nostra lingua e della nostra storia letteraria, nonostante la loro estraneità rispetto al canone dominante (SABELLI, 2007, p. 177).

All the experiences collected here fit into the semantic area of the border: it might represent a way to speak loudly and to be more widely heard

for those who have historically been marginalized; they may now find the occasion to speak while standing both inside and outside. The notion of border keeps indeed a double meaning: it could be the cause of a painful state, in the physical and psychological sense, but it might also become a perspective from which the marginalized subject develops a critical point of view on the reality around him/her, helping to improve it and make it more conscious about the condition of many invisible people.

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Notas

* Artigo submetido à avaliação em 22 de abril de 2011 e aprovado para publicação em 26 de maio de 2011.