

# Russell Hamilton: A Pioneering Scholar of the Cultures and Literatures of Portuguese- Speaking Africa

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At several moments of my academic life, especially as a faculty member at PUC Minas (Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil), where I have taught African literatures in Portuguese since 1995, I experienced the great pleasure of interacting with Russell Hamilton. Before meeting him, I had read some of his works, particularly the two volumes of *Literatura Africana—Literatura Necessária*, published in the 1980s. These volumes were very important, since they offered me a scholarly basis for teaching a number of courses in the graduate program in Literatures at PUC Minas while also providing a useful, although selective, view of the several African Literatures written in Portuguese.

In 2003, Russell accepted my invitation to speak at the Second International Symposium on African Studies and offered a lecture and a workshop on African literatures in Portuguese. I remember a very interesting episode that preceded the event: driving back from the airport in Belo Horizonte, where I had welcomed him and his wife, Chérie, I heard a comment from an American professor who taught at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). According to this colleague, there was nothing interesting to see in the city of Belo Horizonte. Since Russell was also an American professor, I expected him to find the city rather boring.

I asked Russell and his wife if they were willing to visit the less boring parts of the city and its surroundings. I also explained that Belo Horizonte must

be discovered, because unlike, for example, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, it does not offer itself to foreign eyes at first glance, despite having received its name because of its gorgeous skyline. The city's "beautiful horizon" needed to be contemplated from certain vantage points, because many of the sites were not there anymore: they had been destroyed by the extraction of minerals, mainly iron. We charted a roadmap that began with a trip to Sabará—a historic city, next to Belo Horizonte. This city still holds architectural treasures of the Gold Cycle period in Minas Gerais, among which is the Chapel of Our Lady of Ó. The reticent American professor enjoyed visiting some of the baroque relics that the city preserves, such as the beautiful little church, founded in 1717, with a style that mixes Baroque and Chinese influences.

On another day, I took Russell and Chérie to one of many of Belo Horizonte's lookouts so they could enjoy a wide view of the city, and particularly the mountains that border the southern edge. I shared with them a few passages of our city's history, as well as aspects that define it as a garden city. During the three-day symposium, Russell and Chérie went about exploring some of the city's "beautiful horizons," although many of them had already been destroyed by the greed of real estate developers. At the end of our event, the kind Chérie offered a dinner at my house to the guests of the Second Symposium of African Studies, with treats from various parts of Africa mixed with sweets from Minas Gerais. This courtesy is today remembered with nostalgia by Brazilians and foreigners alike, who were present at the dinner. At the end of the event, Russell shared with me his conclusion that the best part of the city were its inhabitants, always agreeable and cheerful.

At the Third Meeting of Professors of African Literatures, held in Rio de Janeiro, at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, in 2007, I witnessed and was inspired by Russell's declaration of love for the city. I arrived at the hotel where we were staying, and I approached him as he was transfixed by the view of the sea from Copacabana. Deeply moved, he said: "I had forgotten that Rio de Janeiro is this wonder now before me!" I was delighted by this phrase. Whenever I am in Copacabana, I remember those words, spoken with real emotion, by someone who truly loved Brazil.

In 2008, I was fortunate to have Russell write to preface to my book, *Literaturas africanas de língua portuguesa: percursos da memória e outros trânsitos*. He read this work through a postcolonial theoretical lens, which

he considered ideal to analyze African political, social, cultural, and linguistic realities. Russell became aware of possible connections to questions posed by Kwame Anthony Appiah in “Is the Post of Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?” an essay published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1991.

Summarizing the thought of Appiah, Russell points out in this preface the fundamental difference between the meanings of *post* in postmodernism and *post* in post-colonialism, explaining that while the postmodernist “carries the past in the back, but fixing his eyes on the future, the post-colonialist faces the past as he walks back to the future. . . . The colonial past is always present, giving shape to neo-colonialism, which constitutes a political and socio-economic threat to the relatively new nation-states of Africa.”

It is important to consider Russell’s analysis of my book’s title, which highlights the meanings implied by the terms “pathways” and “transit,” (re)signified by the term “memory.” This focus on itineraries and historical paths effectively allows us to review the colonial past while emphasizing social and cultural aspects of what preceded it. Similarly, commenting on the title of one of the book chapters, containing the words “strategies of a transgressive aesthetics,” he points out that the adjective “transgressive,” beyond meaning “that which transcends the acceptable or settled,” refers to transformations produced by words and gestures of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. Strategies that the enslaved and their heirs used to change gradually the harshness of the values and norms imposed by slavery and colonization in colonized areas.

Russell’s long preface highlights issues regarding traditions and cultural legacies in colonized areas left by enslaved Africans and addressed by writers from Haiti, Martinique, and other Caribbean countries, as well as by Lusophone African writers. He underlines a concrete political intention in some of my book’s chapters, as well as the modern and the dynamic aspects of topics in literatures constituted by transgression, creolization, and hybridism, as opposed to following the forms and norms imposed by the colonial system. The process identified in the book chapters, he states, are akin to dynamics that Homi Bhabha perceived as a kind of infiltration of the Other’s denied knowledge, itself responsible for a profound crisis in colonial speech.

In November 2010, I had the chance to see once again Russell and Chérie during the Fourth Meeting of Professors of African Literatures, in Ouro Preto. In the cloudy and mysterious scenery of this historic mining town, we were

privileged to attend Russell's talk on the Cabo Verdean diaspora. He emphasized in his lecture, published later in the book *África: dinâmicas culturais e literárias* (2012), organized by Zilda Maria Cury and me, that Cabo Verde is known especially by its large diaspora living overseas (including the United States). There are approximately 500,000 migrants and descendants, a similar number to those who live on the West African archipelago. He also reports that, in Portugal, there are at least 80,000 Cabo Verdeans residents, as well as a significant number living in other European countries, especially France and the Netherlands. In addition, he points out that many Cabo Verdeans have chosen to live in other African countries, particularly in Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, and in Senegal. And, as far as South American countries, there are also Cabo Verdeans living in Argentina and Brazil.

In the same essay, Russell discusses the factors that have made Cabo Verde “the first and most comprehensive Creole society in the Portuguese empire and, indeed, in any area of the entire colonial world” (227). His source is Robert Harms's *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (2002), which discusses the formation of a significant middle class on some Cabo Verdean islands in the nineteenth century; and the creation in 1860, in Praia, of the first high school, followed by a second one in the city of Mindelo in 1917. For Russell, these institutions contributed to the emergence of intellectual elites in several islands, especially in Santiago and São Vicente and, since the 1930s, many members of these elites were university students in Portugal and other European countries. He also points out the fact that many Cabo Verdean elites contributed to the recognition of the nation's social, political, and cultural diaspora. Also, we learned that since the beginning of emigration, members of the diaspora have made significant contributions to Cabo Verde's economy—many migrants and their descendants in Europe, the Americas and Africa annually remittances to their relatives still living in Cabo Verde. Russell's article concludes with a discussion of Kwame Kondé's *Escritos Sobre Teatro* (2010).<sup>1</sup> This study became an important source for Brazilian researchers following Russell's reference to it.

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<sup>1</sup> The book brings together more than thirty essays by Kondé—the *nom de guerre* and artistic pseudonym of Francisco Fragoso—written between 1976 and 2005. A medical surgeon living in Portugal for several years, Fragoso is a key figure in Cabo Verdean theater. Founder and artistic director of the group “Korda Kaoberdi,” and more recently, Lisbon's “Tchon di Kaoberdi,” he is

When we consider how often Brazilian scholars cite Russell's seminal texts, we see how well his work has been validated and how it remains important for the broadening and deepening of the study of African Literatures in Portuguese. The Volcano Prize, granted to him by the President of Cabo Verde in 2007, enshrines the importance of his published research, which continually found echo in his oral presentations before researchers and students of African Literatures in Portuguese. For the legacy of his studies and the reflections that he left us, we are grateful to Professor Russell Hamilton; but we are especially grateful for the friendly and sincere way in which he explained to us his views on the African issues that he studied so passionately.

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also the author of dramatic texts and essays on the history of theater in the archipelago. The book focuses on the history of "Korda Kaoberdi" (1975-1982) and includes two texts staged by the group: "Anansegoro" (1978) and "Morte-vida-poeta" (1982). It also contains "Kantigas Tabanka-Batuku pa Teatru," which includes the play "Rei di Tabanka" (1980).