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Introduction to Cape Verdean Selections

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Cabo Verde

*A selection of artwork and literature
from Cape Verde*

collected by Carla Martin

Introduction to Cape Verdean Selections

Carla Martin

CAPE VERDE, HOME to the first permanent European settlement in the tropics, is a place characterized by centuries of cultural contact caused by European and North African settlement and the forced migration of West African slaves. The country long played a role as a waystation between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, though it was rarely a final destination. In academia's near obsession over origins, Cape Verde has been referred to, problematically, as the site of the first Creole culture and language. Yet the country remains relatively unknown in the scholarly canon, especially in Anglophone circles.

The official language of Cape Verde, a Portuguese colony until achieving independence in 1975, remains Portuguese, the language of government, business, education, and most media. Cape Verdean Creole (CVC), on the other hand, is the mother tongue and vernacular of the country's entire population. CVC has always been an immensely important means of communication in Cape Verde where, previously, literacy was denied to much of the population, and in the Cape Verdean Diaspora, which is vast and far-flung and has limited access to the Portuguese language. The urban educated elite has nevertheless produced a rich written literature in Portuguese, an interesting counterpoint to the abundant CVC oral tradition on the islands, and, as education has spread to the population following independence, the volume of written work has ballooned. Writing in Cape Verdean Creole has also increased steadily since its beginnings in the late 1800s, with the post-independence development of a new, government-ratified orthographic system, linguistic studies, and educational opportunities (most prevalent in the Diaspora), and, more informally, with the popularity of internet communications in the language. Cape Verdean music, which has reached international audiences through world music networks, is another important site of active CVC language development.

When perusing scholarly work on Cape Verdean literature, one tends to encounter two sets of three, somewhat oversimplified but nevertheless pragmatic for introductory purposes. The first set of three distinguishes the major literary periods or generations as defined by scholars: the early writing, clas-



Amílcar Cabral.
Charcoal on
canvas. ©2005
Domingos Luisa

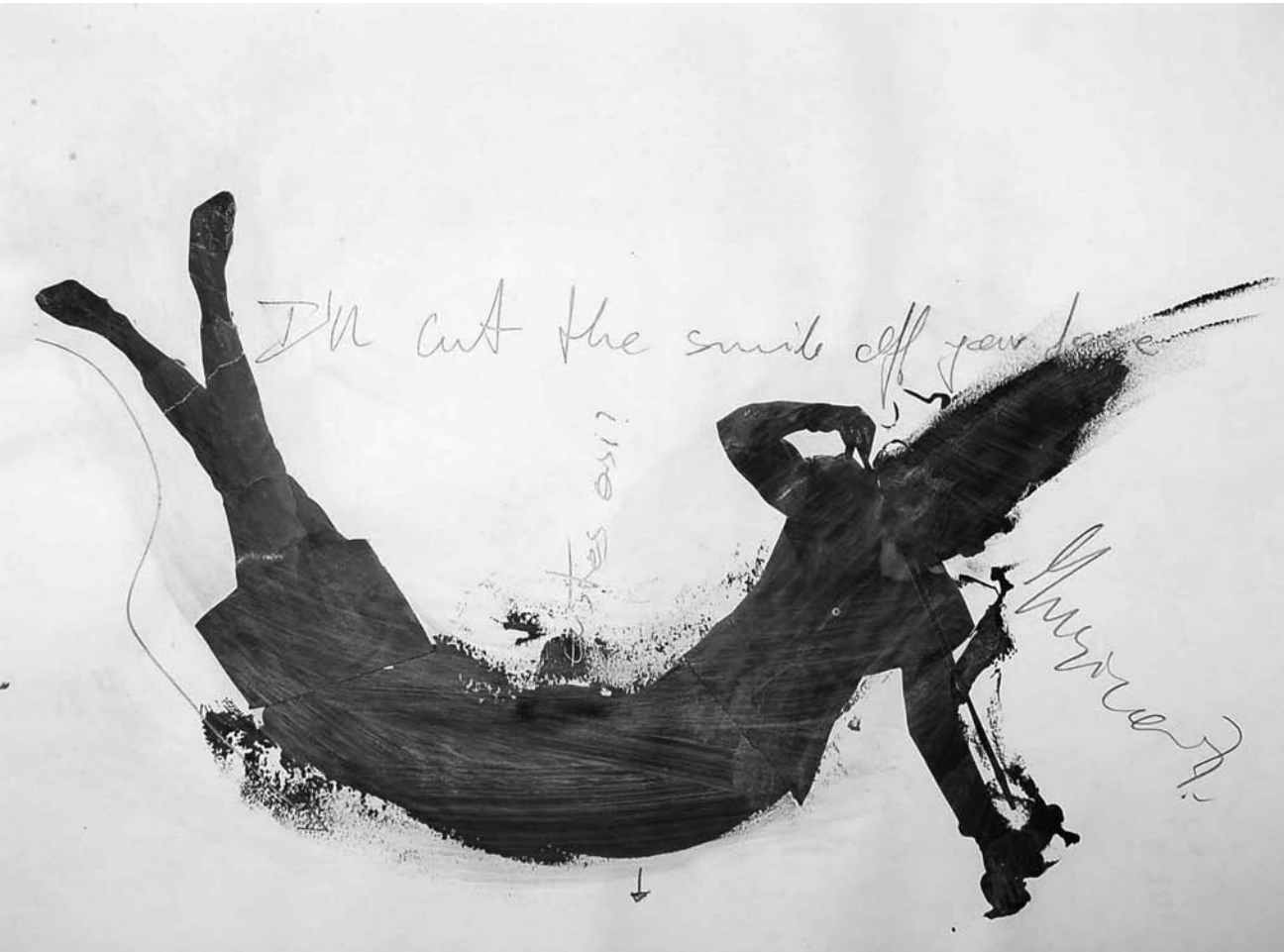
sical-romantic, or pre-*Claridoso* period (the early colonial period through the 1930s, also called the “generation of ambiguity,” caught between imitating classical Portuguese work and developing a unique voice critical of the Portuguese empire); the *Claridoso* period (the 1930s through the early 1960s, where writers for the literary review *Claridade* composed part of a movement for definition and celebration of Cape Verdean culture and identity or *caboverdianidade*); and the post-*Claridoso* period (the 1960s through the present, with a wide variety of expression). The second set of three addresses the language question, suggesting three types of work that occasionally overlap: Cape Verdean literature in Portuguese, Cape Verdean literature in CVC, and Cape Verdean oral literature in CVC. Written genres tend toward poetry, short stories, novels, scholarly essays, and books, and oral genres are quite varied, including riddles, songs, performance poetry, and fables.

Cape Verde has long had a craft heritage; perhaps best known are the intricately woven *panu di téra*, long strips of dyed indigo cotton cloth that were once used as trade currency but are now an important adornment to the national costume. Since independence, formalized fine arts have also become popular, and a number of painters, sculptors, and photographers have made great strides in developing their careers. All masters of their crafts, some are self-taught and others were trained while on scholarship in nations that partnered with Cape Verde after independence. Their work has so far received little scholarly attention, mostly confined to on-island criticism and the occasional international exhibition sponsored by connoisseurs.

It is my hope that the pieces included here will entice readers to further exploration of the rich, varied bodies of work found in Cape Verde. That said, this cluster does not aim to offer a comprehensive introduction to

contemporary Cape Verdean art and literature, but rather to present a sampling, a starting point. The included works were all produced in the post-*Claridoso* period and are primarily from artists and authors who spend significant portions of their time in Cape Verde, rather than those based in the Diaspora. This work, of course, does not exist in a vacuum, and exists in dialogue with work from the Diaspora and beyond.

These authors and artists struggle on a daily basis with the practicalities of working in a developing country with limited resources. Publishing, distribution, access to training and materials, financial stability, and institutional support cannot be taken for granted. Despite these obstacles, Cape Verde houses an ever more vibrant literary and artistic community. In the thirty-five years since independence, government-run and independent institutions have devoted tremendous energy toward publishing hundreds of books. There are also regular exhibitions of artistic work on the islands. Attention to this community comes at an opportune moment in its development and, as I hope will become clear through the literary and artistic work itself and the three scholarly portraits that are offered in complement, will contribute to discussions on myriad topics of importance to *Transition's* readers.🌐



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