

# São Paulo

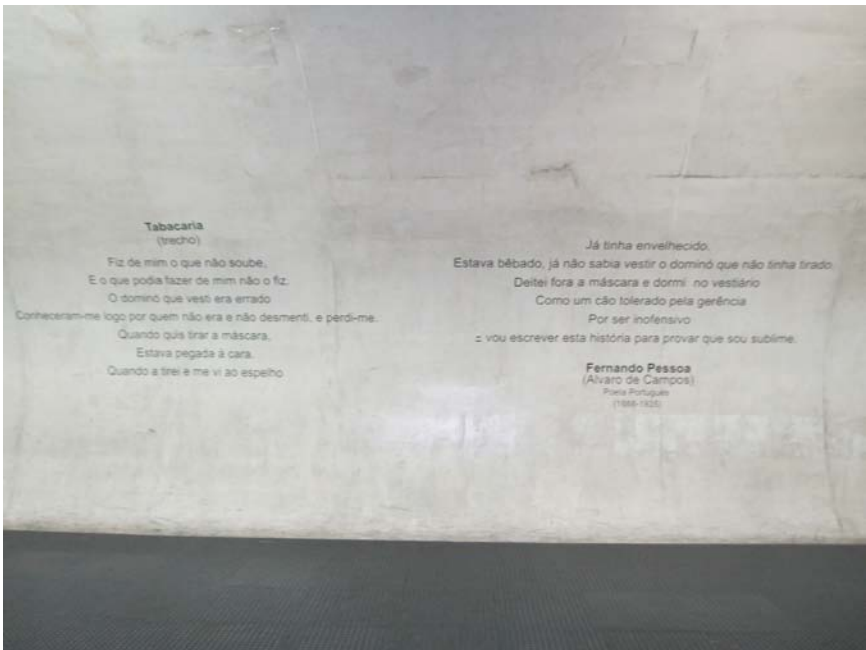
JESSICA BECKER

I knew that the connection between poetry and São Paulo was lurking right beneath the surface, peeking out from behind so many verses I had read, but when I first arrived in the enormous city, I wondered where in this vast jungle of concrete and skyscrapers I might find the poetic. My research on Brazilian Concrete and contemporary poetry began as an urban wandering, with Caetano Veloso's verses from "Sampa," his song to the city, playing on repeat in my mind: "quando eu cheguei por aqui / eu nada entendi / da dura poesia concreta de tuas esquinas."



A few days after my arrival, in a small room at a library in the Vila Madalena neighborhood, I found myself awaiting a performance with the intriguing title, "Homero – Ritmo e Poesia," the first of many free literary events I was able to attend in São Paulo. Not knowing quite what to expect from the name, my curiosity was piqued while looking around at the strange mix of people in the crowd – young students, older academics, middle-aged

couples – and by a brief introductory film that introduced the event as a collaborative effort between a professor of Classics at the University of São Paulo and the Hip Hop duo Max BO and DJ Babão. Together, this unlikely team had adapted several scenes from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, in Portuguese translation, adding beats and rhymes and creating an oral poetic performance that bridged centuries of verse through, as they emphasized at the end, universal and timeless themes such as violence, challenges, and love. Their experimental performance was my first and most moving glimpse of the creative potential that is unleashed when poetry, literary history, contemporary reality, and the city collide. By thrusting classic literary references into the midst of contemporary popular culture, these artists set the tone for all of my poetic explorations around São Paulo: I found myself creating new literary connections, questioning the role poetry plays in contemporary society, and seeking out the poetic in the most unexpected places.



Whereas I'm used to finding poetry at bookstores, libraries and readings, in the remainder of my time in São Paulo, I found poetry being offered up around every corner: Fernando Pessoa's poems printed on the walls of the Vila Madalena metro station; a poet distributing copies of his own writings to passers-by outside of the

*Museu de Arte Moderna* on Avenida Paulista; graffiti-poems decorating the walls of São Paulo's bohemian neighborhoods; vending machines selling noteworthy titles like *Clássicos da Twitteratura Brasileira*; writers of the *literatura de cordel* selling personal love stories and critiques of global power dynamics on the street corner for a dollar. I made my way to bookstores, libraries, and poetry readings as well, spending endless hours at the *Casa das Rosas: Espaço Haroldo de Campos*, where I was kept busy with courses on visual poetry, a small library of Brazilian contemporary literature, access to Haroldo de Campos's own personal archive, and abundant poetry readings and performances that, as such events tend to do throughout the world, left me at times fascinated, at times confused, at times inspired.

Throughout my research, I continued to find poetry to be interwoven in the fabric of the everyday and, coming from an academic world where poetry is practiced in small circles and many students find it strangely inaccessible, I was refreshed and inspired to discover the many ways in which poetry can make its way into the life of the city.