Abstract. Alberto Caeiro, the master of Fernando Pessoa's neo-pagan “drama-in-people,” is often described as the poet who problematized the limits of language and poetry by attempting to establish a natural language based on a radical coincidence between word and referent. While the contours of this endeavor, as well as its poetic consequences, have divided some of his most influential critics, the well-established notion is that the problem with language in Caeiro results from the heteronym's alleged ontological perspective on being. In this paper, I will problematize these assumptions by pursuing a lead suggested by Pessoa himself in his so-called “Letter on the Origin of the Heteronyms,” where he states that Caeiro originated as a joke (“partida”) on his friend Mário de Sá-Carneiro, the writer of Parisian cosmopolitan urban life. I suggest that this remark is paradigmatic of the need to consider Caeiro's poetics in the broader material context of cultural modernity; in this particular case, it calls for a rethinking of Caeiro's problem with language in the light of fin-de-siècle discourses on the relation between language, aesthetics, gender, sexuality, and various forms of deviance. I propose to historicize Caeiro's apparent enactment of a natural language by bringing to the discussion Pessoa's early readings on degeneration theory, the work of his pre-heteronym Jean Seul de Mèluret (a radical critic of decadence), and the sexual politics of British aestheticism, as well as the aesthetics of Sá-Carneiro. This historical and cultural contextualization of Caeiro's problem with language will not only shed a new light on his poetics, but will also suggest the relevance of a critical reappraisal of Pessoa's heteronymy in the realms of the ethical and the performative.

Fernando Beleza holds a BA in Modern Languages and Literatures from the University of Coimbra and an MA in Literary, Cultural, and Intermedia Studies from the University of Porto. Currently he is a PhD candidate (ABD) and a Luso-American Foundation Distinguished Doctoral Fellow in Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies and Theory at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. His work focuses on the relationships between masculinity, sexuality, and the aesthetic and cultural politics of Portuguese modernism, with emphasis on the works of Fernando Pessoa and Mário de Sá-Carneiro. He has presented papers at national and international conferences, and published articles on modernism, gender and sexuality in Portuguese literature and culture (19th and 20th centuries), as well as on Lusophone postcolonial studies. His doctoral adviser is Prof. Anna M. Klobucka.

Contact: Victor K. Mendes at vmendes@umassd.edu
Director, MA & PhD in Luso-Afro-Brazilian Studies and Theory