

An imaginary visual journey on the life and time of Fernando Pessoa in Durban

[Uma viagem visual imaginária
sobre a vida e o tempo de Fernando Pessoa em Durban]

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Keywords

Photography, Durban, Fernando Pessoa's early years, Emotions, Hubert D. Jennings.

Abstract

This project is a visual journey through the time of Fernando Pessoa in South Africa and aims at representing it in a visual way. This is not a visual topography of the houses he lived in or the schools he attended, although there are some images directly related to these details. It is the visual emotional journey of a young talented Portuguese boy in an African city rich in complexity, exotic moments, flavours and scenes.

Palavras-chave

Fotografia, Durban, Juventude de Fernando Pessoa, Emoções, Hubert D. Jennings.

Resumo

Este projecto é uma viagem visual através do tempo de Fernando Pessoa na África do Sul e procura representá-la de forma visual. Não é uma topografia visual das casas onde viveu ou das escolas que frequentou, embora existam algumas imagens directamente relacionadas com esses detalhes. É a viagem visual emocional de um jovem talentoso rapaz português numa cidade africana rica na sua complexidade, momentos exóticos, sabores e cenários.

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At the age of seven, the 6th of January 1896, Fernando Pessoa and his mother left Lisbon for Durban, on the South African East coast. With the exception of one year spent in Lisbon, Pessoa lived there from January 1896 to September 1905, as his stepfather, navy officer João Miguel Rosa, had been appointed Portuguese Consul there. At the time Durban and its region were under English rule.

In Durban, the family lived in Berea, a leafy neighbourhood, mainly inhabited by middle- and upper-class people, then in the Portuguese Consulate on West Street and, later on, back in Berea. Young Fernando attended Durban High School, a well-known and prestigious school where many of the notable and rich families' offsprings were studying. He was a brilliant student: he won the Queen Victoria Memorial Prize in 1903. During his time in Durban, he was thoroughly exposed to English culture and literature; both influenced him deeply.

As Hubert D. Jennings mentions in his book *Fernando Pessoa in Durban*:

In 1896, when Fernando Pessoa and his mother arrived, crossing the bar was a hazardous and nerve-racking experience and, normally never attempted by ships with more than 400 tons burthen, once safe within the winding channel on the placid waters of the Bay the scene was of considerable natural beauty. On one side was the sheltering promontory called the Bluff, on the other the spit of sand, bush covered, called the point. The Southwest spread, the vast expanse of the Bay, then an enchanting place full of wild fowl and leaping fish and fringed with mangrove thickets. In a curve of this Bay lay the town of Durban with its 28,000 people, mostly clustered around the Bayside but with villas dotted over the forest-clad reach beyond, called the Berea.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 1)

Even in the eyes of a child, the contrast between Lisbon and this new, fervent and fast pace growing city, must have been vertiginous; again, in Jennings's words:

Durban on the other hand, was a brash new place which only a short time before Fernando Pessoa arrived, had been won from tropical jungle and swamp fringing a shallow lagoon. It became a port simply because nothing better offers itself on that part of the African coast. It took many years of human effort and ingenuity to make it into a harbor where large ships could enter.

(JENNINGS, 1986: 1)

He was leaving behind a truly European environment and the few visual and cultural references he had, as young boy having lost his father three years earlier, were the ones coming from Lisbon and Portugal.

Stefan Helgesson in his essay "Pessoa, Anon, and the Natal Colony", argues that, "In a similar vein, it may be argued that Pessoa would never have become Pessoa without the migrant experience of being Portuguese child in exile, educated in the most excessively British, colonial part of Southern Africa, not just at the peak of the British high-imperial period, but also during the dramatic years of the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902)" (HELGESSION, 2015: 32).

Paraphrasing Antonio Tabucchi in his opening writing of the Italian anthology of Fernando Pessoa *Una Sola Moltitudine*. We know so little of Pessoa's life and biography that:

[...] viene il sospetto che Pessoa sia morto prima del suo certificato di morte, lasciando disposizioni perché 'tutto' continuasse come prima. Oppure viene il sospetto che Pessoa non sia mai esistito, che sia stata l'invenzione di un certo Fernando Pessoa, un suo omonimo *alter ego* in quella ridda mozzafiato di personaggi che con Fernando divisero le modeste pensioni lisbonesi dove egli, per trent'anni, condusse il tran-tran della vita più banale, della più anonima, della più *esemplare* vita di impiegato di concetto.

(PESSOA, 1979: 13)

[...] *there is the suspicion that Pessoa died before his death certificate leaving disposition so that everything would continue as before. Or the suspicion arises that Pessoa never existed, that it was the invention of a certain Ferdinando Pessoa, his namesake alter ego in that breathtaking crowd of characters who, with Fernando, shared the modest Lisbon guesthouses where for thirty years he lived the most banal, the most anonymous, the most exemplary life of a clerk.*¹

The biography of Fernando Pessoa focuses mainly on his life and time in Lisbon, while there is very little information on his time in Durban. Yet often the character and nature of artists and poets, like a puzzle, is enriched with new pieces, previously unknown or overlooked.

Fernando Pessoa arrived in Durban when he was seven years old and spent there almost nine years: he arrived as a child and left as a teenager. The years at the threshold between childhood and adolescence are often the most formative, as they lay down the foundation of the man to be, I am convinced they were indeed pivotal for him, and I am interested to visualize—through my images—the atmosphere, places and that mix of exotic culture coupled with a conservative Victorian colonial approach that unfolded in front of him.

This project is a visual journey through his time in South Africa and aims at representing it in a visual way. I started tracing and recreating his journey through Durban: I wondered how the city would have been experienced by this young boy coming from Lisbon. I opted for a visual approach that could add to his life narrative, evoking the fascination he must have had with a place so different and far from home; I also looked for clues of the impact that the colonial English culture and English poetry could have had on him at a crucial moment for the country, when the Anglo-Boer war was looming, and Churchill gave his first public address outside the town hall. During this turbulent time, another famous figure spent time in Durban, the Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi arrived in Durban, Natal (now kwaZulu-Natal) in 1893 to serve as legal counsel to a merchant Dada Abdulla; he found himself entangled with the many discriminating and segregating rules and laws,

¹ My translation. Pessoa lived in guesthouses less than thirty years.

igniting his political activism, fighting for the rights of the massive Indian community in the country, migrated from the South East Asian country to work in the sugar farms and plantations. At this stage, Pessoa, although very aware of the political and military surroundings, didn't know of the Indian politician presence in Durban, "he will write about Gandhi later in his life-and extols him as a saintly figure, this is evidently in response to international reporting on Gandhi" (HELGESSION, 2015: 41-41).

This is not a visual topography of the houses he lived in or the schools he attended, although there are some images directly related to these details. It is the visual emotional journey of a young talented Portuguese boy in an African city rich in complexity, exotic moments, flavours and scenes: the ocean, the harbour, the narrow streets, the vegetation and the leafy neighbourhood of Berea—where he lived with his family—the Durban racecourse where he used to go with his stepfather and the rest of the family.

This essay wonders, assumes and speculates. Pessoa's poetry and writing have been a source of inspiration: my visual investigations revolve mainly around the sense of isolation and disquiet that affects human beings and their existence, at the same time is a personal journey through the same spices, palms and narrow streets. Again, from Jennings:

Clearly, Fernando Pessoa, in those early years before he left South Africa, was experiencing that first onset of that strange gift of the gods we call 'creative power'. In Jung's word: "It is a primordial experience which passes man's understanding and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing." Like demonic possession, "it arises from timeless depths: it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque."

(JENNINGS, 1986: 98)

Ten years after leaving Durban, he would publish, through one of his heteronyms, Alvaro de Campos, the "Ode Maritima". I can't help but fantasizing that some of the events, places and people described and narrated in the ode, were stored in a remote place of his memories of those years in Africa.

Quoting Bunyan: "True, when there are geographical references in the poems one does tend to imagine Iberian rather than Azanian² equivalents; but the rivers, valleys and flocks which sometimes figure in his works are there for the resonances of the words (I wished to say, 'there as symbols', but that is not right) not for local colour" (BUNYAN, 1987: 69).

I can associate and be reminded of some images: the harbour of Durban: the ferries and the ships, the sailors and the waves, smell and taste of salty water in the air; the sand getting darker with the rain and the breakwater made out of

² *Azania* (Ancient Greek: Ἀζανία) is a name that has been applied to various parts of south eastern tropical Africa.

cobblestones and boulders, the wind; and then the storms, whose lightnings, according to Jennings, young Pessoa was so scared of. I wonder if he ever visited the sugar plantation outside Durban, at the time, true wilderness.

It is undeniable that Durban today is quite different from the Durban at the beginning of the XX century, although, some atmospheres, places, smells are still the same. There is still a physical memory of Pessoa's presence there,

Early in 1986, a bust of Pessoa was erected, somehow appropriately, in the shadow of a parkade in Central Durban. (I say appropriately, for in one of his multitudinous and conflicting roles Pessoa was a futurist, a prophet of the city.) Businessmen and shoppers catch sight of this intent, behatted, inward-looking figure as they go for their tickets from the vending machine.

(BUNYAN, 1987: 68)

In 2015 the bust, statue, mentioned above by David Bunyan was defaced with red paint as part of an indiscriminate protest campaign against former apartheid vestiges and colonial symbols in which Fernando Pessoa as an innocent "bystander", got involved.

Wandering through the city I tried to imagine and feel through the eyes of a young boy, the melancholic gaze of a European, confronted for the first time with such a change of landscape. My journey is hinged on Pessoa's biography and on several places and neighbourhoods he experienced; however, such places and biographical notions that constitute its backbone, are also blank canvas on which I could use photography as abstract painting, or poetry.

The aim is to build up an imaginary visual journey that bring the emotional side of the viewer, through this Conradian "shadow line" or upbringing of one of the most important literary figures of the 20th Century.

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ANNEX



Fig. 1. A side street in Durban city center, close by the former site of the Portuguese Consulate in West Street, September 2020.



Fig. 2. Pigeons fly over a beach on the proximity of Wilson's wharf with Durban Harbor in the background, September 2020.



Fig. 3. The statue of Fernando Pessoa on a street corner on Dorothy Nyembe Street in Durban Central, September 2020.



Fig. 4. A woman sits on a blanket on a Sunday afternoon at Mitchell Park in Durban, December 2019.



Fig. 5. A man stands in front of the sea by the Royal Natal Yacht club, in Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 6. Palms on 122119 street in North Beach, December 2019.



Fig. 7. An Hadedea bird flies by the Bartolomeu Dias statue close to the Maritime Museum in Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 8. Palm trees are seen through the curtains of a window in a hotel in Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 9. Beachgoers walk by the shore in North Beach, Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 10. The Mbokdweni river streams towards the ocean in the south of Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 11. Fields on the road between Durban and Johannesburg, September 2020.



Fig. 12. A man walks by the Bartolomeu Dias statue close to the Maritime Museum in Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 13. Families enjoy a Sunday Afternoons in Mitchell Park in Durban, September 2020.

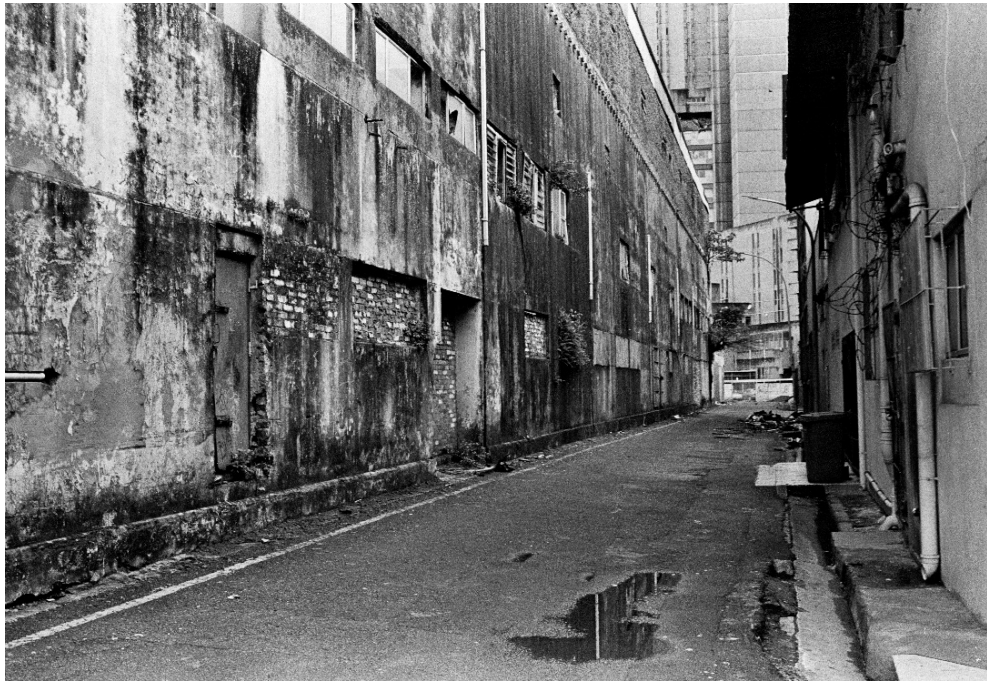


Fig. 14. A side street in Durban city center, September 2020.



Fig. 15. An old car is parked outside a petrol station on Margaret Mncadi boulevard in Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 16. An alley by the Durban Harbor at night, September 2020.



Fig. 17. Two men play on the shore of North Beach, Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 18. A Plastic swan floats in an artificial lake in Durban North, September 2020.



Fig. 19. Trees, Palms and Benches between Durban City Hall and the Durban Post Office.



Fig. 20. A man walks by a block of flat in Berea, Durban, December 2019.



Fig. 21. Statues, trees and plants in front of the Durban City Hall, Durban, September 2020.



Fig. 22. The ocean, Durban, December 2019.

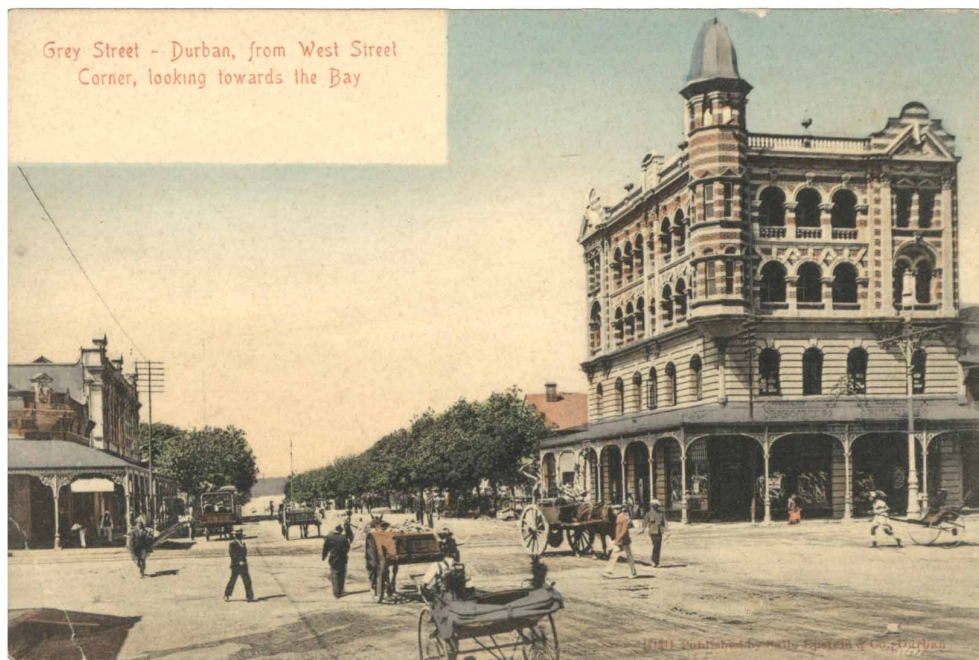
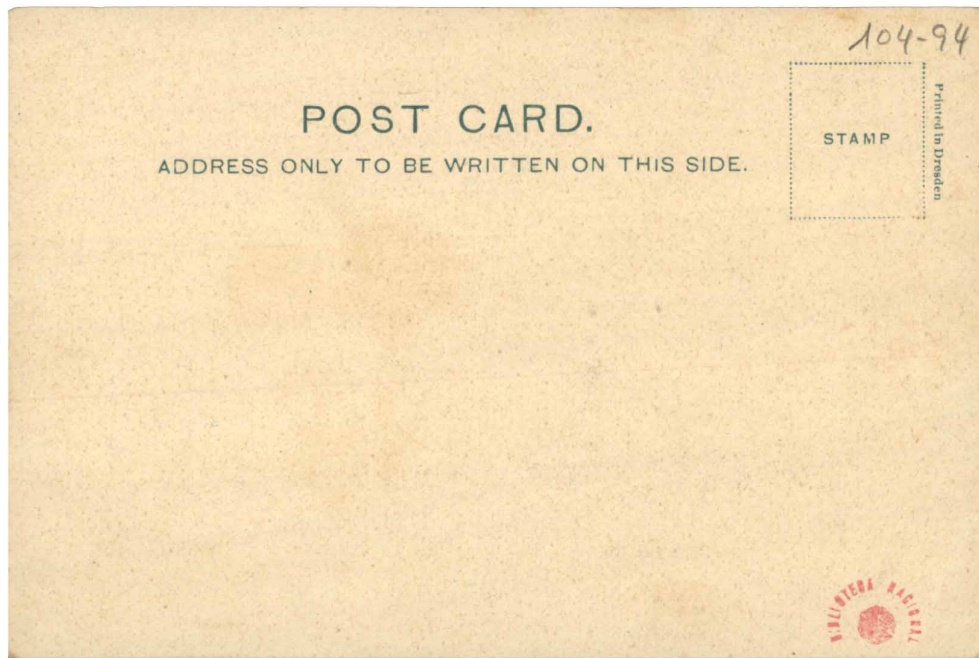
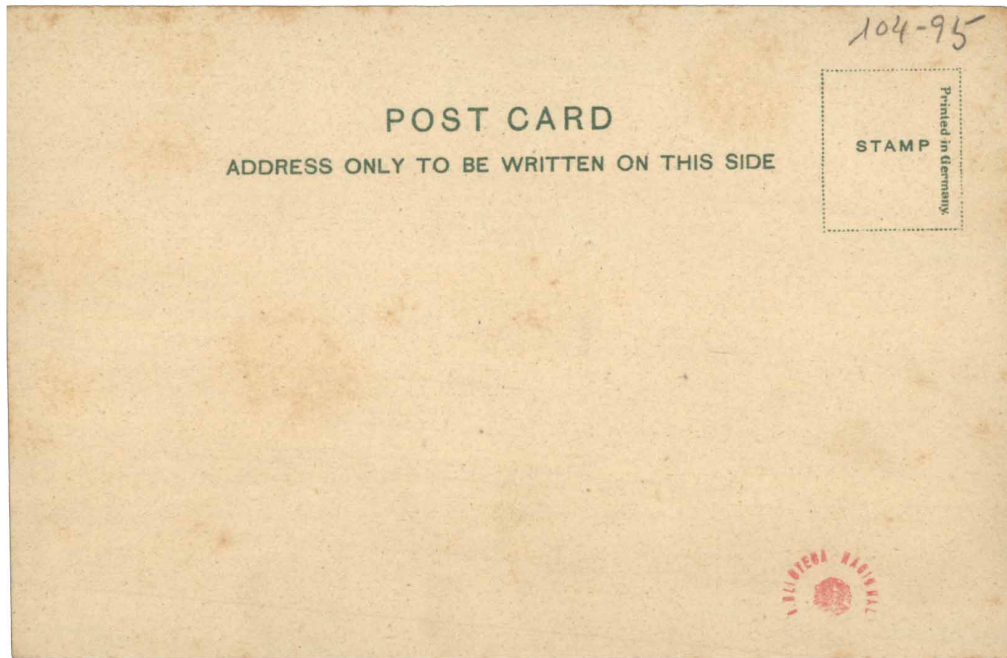


Fig. 23, 24 [this page], 25 and 26 [next page] (BNP/E3, 104-94 e 95).
Durban Views at the beginning of the 1900. Pessoa's memories of the Coastal City.



GIANLUIGI GUERCIA is a photographer based in South Africa. He has been working on the African continent since 2003 on editorial and personal projects. His work has been published and exhibited widely. He was born in Naples in 1974, where he lived until 1999. He moved first to Rome and then to Africa, where for more than a decade he has practiced documentary photography, working mainly for press agencies and international publications. His photographs have been used in books and have been part of exhibitions worldwide. He obtained a Three-Year Master's degree in photography at the Istituto Superiore di Fotografia in Rome and a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Federico II University in Naples. From 2009 onwards he began to detach himself from news photography to pursue his personal narrative on the human condition. From the beginning of 2020 he has dedicated himself to documentary photography. In 2020 two of his projects have been shortlisted for the 9th Contemporary African Photography Prize. Collective Exhibitions and Awards include: 2020 – Vantage Point Sharjah – Sharjah – Sharjah Art Foundation; 2014 – Addis Foto Fest (Addis Ababa/Ethiopia); 2014 – Fotografia come Viaggio Interiore (Rome/Italy); 2009 – Atri Foto Fest (Atri/Italy); 2008 – El Tiempo del Diablo (Villa Lagarina TN/Italy). www.gianluigiguercia.com.

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