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ON THE COLONIAL WAR: MEMORIES AND POST-MEMORIES, TRANSMISSION AND IMAGINATION

Felipe Cammaert

The distance between the writer and the traumatic reality about which they write determines the result of literary attempts to convey the experience of violence. Nevertheless, there are similarities between the artistic representations of memory offered by direct witnesses of events and those re-elaborated by their descendants (those we call post-memories). António Lobo Antunes' books of chronicles, and Paulo Faria's *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016) (*Strange Widely Used War*) demonstrate certain similarities in terms of writing about war in the Portuguese context.



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Although the theme of the colonial war cuts through all Lobo Antunes' fiction, few of his chronicles address this central episode of his writing career. Apart from *Cartas da Guerra* (Letters of War), published by his daughters in 2005, only scattered mentions of the twenty-seven months that Lobo Antunes lived in Angola during its independence struggle appear in the chronicles. There are, however, at least two of those in which the traumatic experience of the colonial war brutally erupts into the writer's consciousness. In *Emília e Uma Noites* (Emilia and One Nights), written in 1995, the reality of war transforms - and even derails - the writing process. At the beginning and end of the story, the memory of Angola appears with such force that it erases any other writing project:

Sorry, I was going to give you a story called Emilia and a few nights, and without knowing why, Angola hit me with all its strength. I do not know how to explain it: it had not happened to me for many years, I thought I was free, I thought I had a certain peace but now I who do everything slowly, particularly choosing words, now I'm moving my hand over the paper so quickly and so angrily, I'm not going to correct a syllable, not even a comma, or even reread it [...] It was 24 years ago, damn it. In 1971. (1)

It is as though the nature of these memories of Angola forces the methodical work of writing to give way to the bursting-out of a past that cannot be described in the same words as the so-called "literary" themes.

We see the same thing even more strongly a few years later in the chronicle entitled *078902630RH +*, from 2006:

And suddenly it returns, like wanting to be sick, the same nausea, the same malaise, the same disgust. [...] I cannot forget. [...] Because the day I forget someone should chuck my medal into the first coffin they find. I'm writing badly because I am writing with my finger on the earth. It's not a chronicle, it's not vomit, maybe they are commonplaces, but it doesn't matter. I was there. I saw. I'm not trying to make art, to bring beautiful things into line. Right now I'm not a writer: I'm an officer of the Portuguese army. (2)

Faced with the traumatic memory of the colonial war, literary making is put on hold by the need to avoid forgetting. For Lobo Antunes, the difficulty making the testimony sometimes means that the writing of a story becomes a site of a confession that cannot be communicated through fiction. These two texts both affirm how complex it is, for someone who lived the traumatic experience directly, to verbalize an indelible memory in its raw state, for all that the writer has a whole range of artistic



resources available to represent real horror metaphorically.

The challenge of this constrained silence seems to remain when the memory of the colonial war is transmitted to its heirs, that is, to the second generation comprised of these witnesses' children, although they themselves do not have "ownership of the experience" (3). The children of war, and especially the specific category of people who "enter in public space into what could be a possible dialogue with a memory that is at once strange and also deeply marked by family life," (4) face the same difficulty in transposing into text the traumatic experience they inherited directly or indirectly from their parents. Similarly disrupted acts of writing attend the post-memory of the colonial war, staged by the descendants of war's direct actors.

Paulo Faria's novel is an attempt to settle scores with a father figure through writing. The narrator, the son of a doctor from the Portuguese Armed Forces, revisits family memories of Africa during an investigation carried out after his father's death. The book alternates between testimonies of his father's fellow soldiers in the colonies (testimonies which structure the story's plot) and the narrator-son's letters (written in the first person) to his absent parent. Beyond the autobiographical dimension of this work, what interests me here is the way in which the son re-elaborates his father's painful and silent legacy into a narrative puzzle that juxtaposes others' voices and opinions with fragments of family memory. The result is a remarkable staging of the post-memory of the colonial war, in which the heir occupies a central place in the *ex post facto* verbalization of an experience that - up to that point - belongs to other people.

In the second letter, Faria's narrator confesses how upset he is about his father's absence, whilst also revealing the complexity of his initiative. "I am eager to know the stories precisely *because* you are no longer here to tell them," we read (page 55). When he writes to his father, the narrator is able to identify the different layers that comprise the piecing together of inherited memory:

In your head, the stories you told, those about Africa and the others, that you repeated so often, had a fixed structure, a perfect architecture that didn't allow reversals or jumps. [...] There were stories from Africa that had something Borgesian about them, sprinkled with magical realism, stories that I don't remember hearing you tell in person, that perhaps I heard second-hand from my mother, that perhaps I myself even invented in my childish reveries. Those stories had a level of detail I do not remember the others, those with an origin certificate, having. (5)



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In these reflections, the narrator of *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* shows considerable lucidity about receiving a testimony that has been mediated and transmitted in his family. He distinguishes clearly between the father's stories, which are clearly defined, and other, more intimate stories, that are therefore subject to a (conscious or unconscious) personal construction. Indeed, this second type of memory is produced by acts of imagination the speaker associates with fiction (in his reference to Latin American literature). In this sense he assigns greater agency to the person intervening and reworking the memory. In post-memory writing, the issue is not only the difficulty of articulating trauma through fiction, but rather of ensuring it is transmitted. This represents a characteristic act of "*mnemonic imagination*", to repurpose Keightley and Pickering's (6) phrase.

In the case of literature, the issue of fictional invention remains present in the temporal gap between the memories of actors in the colonial war (direct witnesses) and those reformulated by the second generation (indirect testimonies). If the representations of the war in Lobo Antunes' chronicles show the difficulties of dealing with traumatic memory, the writing of Paulo Faria reveals an increased awareness of the powerful role of literature in reconstituting and reappropriating someone else's memory. Perhaps post-memory literature will be able to offer new perspectives on colonial trauma. In these new narratives written by descendants, the duty of memory is not fulfilled by direct witnesses but retains the feeling of "writing with a finger on the ground" of which Lobo Antunes spoke.



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- (1) António Lobo Antunes, “Emília e Uma Noites”, *Livro de Crónicas* (1998), Lisbon, Dom Quixote, 2008, ed. *ne varietur*, p. 217 e 219. (Our translation)
- (2) António Lobo Antunes, “078902630RH+”, *Terceiro Livro de Crónicas* (2005), Lisbon, Dom Quixote, 2006, ed. *ne varietur*, p. 112. (Our translation)
- (3) Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, António Sousa Ribeiro, “Os netos que Salazar não teve: guerra colonial e memória de segunda geração”, *Abril. Revista do Núcleo de Estudos de Literatura Portuguesa e Africana da UFF*, Vol. 5, nº 11, November 2013, p. 30.
- (4) *ibid.*, p. 33.
- (5) Paulo Faria, *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum*, Lisbon, Ítaca, 2016, p. 59-60. (Our translation)
- (6) E. Keightley, M. Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination. Remembering as Creative Practice*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
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