



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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*Flor para Alda* | 2020 | Yara Monteiro (courtesy of the artist)  
(excerpt from the poem "Presença Africana" by Alda Lara, handwritten on an anthurium)

## THE SEAMS OF POST-MEMORY AND NEW LITERATURE

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

In present day Europe, we are witnessing the cultural affirmation of Europeans who are heirs of political and population movements, resulting from decolonization and other migratory flows to Europe, associated with the flight deserting from wars, search for economic refuge, political exile, a place for higher education and other factors. Today, the descendants of these movements are European subjects



and political bodies that accept transnational and trans-territorial memories and identities. As a result of their family and public experiences, they question the history that was not told in the European household and the hidden history, and inherit objects from territories and previous lives. Furthermore, they challenge museum narratives, whose collections evoke ghosts of the colonial companies, and revisit official archives and portray these stories in books, films, works of art, consequently inscribing them in the European household. It is certainly not something absolutely new and may have some roots in the political and cultural presence of anti-colonialist movements in Europe, beginning in the 1940s and in the history of European anti-colonialism that is now being written (1). However, it is certainly a revelation of cultural expressions that combine previous migratory and cosmopolitan traits in a contextually new way, resulting in the production of something innovative, in expression, in language, and in the questioning it casts regarding Europe's past and memory studies.

Abdel Raouf Dafri, the French director of the feature film *Qu'un Sang Impur* (2020), which was recently released in France and whose theme is the Algerian War, which, between 1954 and 1962, opposed the French colonial forces to Algerian independentists, explains very well the creative process of the following generations as a questioning that is generated within the family and that is later projected in a public questioning about contemporary Europe.

I am French - a completely Westernized product. I wanted to understand why my parents came to Marseille in 1963, instead of contributing to build an independent Algeria. My parents were both illiterate, my father was a small crook without ideology who adored De Gaulle, his thing was money to feed the family. My mother would tell me: Algeria is our country, France is yours, to continue. The Algerian War, I did not know it. I was born in 1964, the war ended in 1962, I have no legitimacy to talk about feelings. What interested me in this adventure was talking about the history of France (2).

This is how, in cinema, theatre, visual arts, music, literature, European culture is enriched and reflects on its history, myths, and speeches. This is how Portuguese, French, Italian, German, and British literature has been developed by authors who sometimes did not have the language of the country in which they lived, were educated in, wrote and worked in, as their mother tongue. If it is true that in the case of countries that were previously colonized, the language of the former colonizer is not foreign to them, in fact often being the mother tongue, or one of the languages of the home, the same is not true for many of these new producers of European literature coming from other migratory flows. However, their fictional and artistic workspace is located between Europe, in particular the country where they live, and this other space with family roots, where they often go in reality or imagination. It is in this

place where they now look for the other sides of a common history, but whose memories they collect and confront are vastly different.

The creators of the first generation often fixate on the territory left behind, never making fictional or artistic material out of their European homeland, and often live the struggle of “in which language to write” (3). In contrast, these new European writers are French, Portuguese, German, British, Italian, and place their fictional material in this real and fictional transit that puts them at the center of a complex transnational history (4). In other words, while challenging the history of literature in their countries, their work places them at the most delicate and uncertain core of European destiny.

These reflections were prompted by the debut novel by Yara Monteiro, *Essa Dama Bate Bué*, from 2018. Born in 1979 in Huambo, Angola, where she has old family roots, Monteiro expressed in an interview with the newspaper *Público*, when her book was released - “I am a great-great-grandmother of slavery, great-granddaughter of mixed race, granddaughter of independence and daughter of the diaspora” (5). Vitória, the protagonist of *Essa Dama Bate Bué*, lived and grew up in Portugal. She fled an aborted a priori marriage, heading to Angola in search of a face that watched her from a photograph since she was a child. For Vitória, the time had arrived, with her questions derived from this photograph - her mother’s photograph - and stories that were transmitted to her by the women of her family, her beginning was set to be in Angola, the epicentre of the protagonist’s family history.

In Luanda, the family, people, and habits that welcome her are both familiar and distant, that is, she grew up with them but in another territory. It is only in the middle of the narrative that we, through what Vitória would know, gain access to the history of the family linked to the old colony. This history includes the wedding of the assimilated mestizo grandfather with the grandmother in Angola, the birth of his daughters, the house in Huambo (6), a daughter (the mother of Vitória) who defied the Portuguese fidelity of her grandparents in times of liberation and who left for the guerrillas, returning to hand Vitória over to grandparents who were fleeing to Portugal, only to disappear again on the tracks of war and utopia. There remains a name, a photograph, and the feeling of abandonment that runs through Vitória. Everything is wrapped in a silence or fantasy typical of family stories in distant lands and of sepia images. Vitória follows the tracks by chasing the signs that are presenting an incomplete history. A history composed of images and references that intersect with the intertwined history of Portugal and Angola, from which the following generations build a credible genealogy for themselves.

What happens is that family memory does not belong only of those who lived it. Whoever is born next carries the biography of whoever arrived first. I exist in that past, and the memory belongs to me. The Angola I know is the evocation of memories that have not been extinguished by time. It is the utopia of happiness. It is this Angola that my family misses.” (Monteiro, 2018: 81-82) (7)

The Angola that Vitória is going to find is different, but it is one that hints at signs of the hidden life of her ancestors, from which Vitória begins weaving a net. She begins with the inexperience of the newcomers, until she understands the rhythm of things, including the concealments and the unspoken. In short, the presentation protocols that were generated, but never expressed, in a country martyred by colonialism and its inheritances and war. Luanda is the place for the first encounters between parties and funerals, immeasurability, and inequalities. Luanda is the home of Romena Cambissa, who receives Vitória, the place where she will consult historical archives, hear diffused stories, meet Zacarias Vindu general and Georgina, and encounter hints that lead her to Huambo, or the centre of her family’s narrative, and probably where her mother left for the war.

As she wanders around the city, Vitória keeps recovering memories or post-memories. In reality, she only has other people’s images and narratives, which allowed her to identify with Luanda, tracing a post-memorial “autotopography” that allows her to achieve temporary precarious answers, but answers nonetheless, to the demand that had driven it to Angola. Among the ruins of the places that hide the lives of those who were left behind, swallowed by war, nature, and abandonment, emerges the voice of Juliana Tijamba, a former guerrilla and companion of Vitória’s mother; a ghost of a world for a dream postponed by the war. Among the ruins of the places that hide the lives left behind, swallowed by war, nature, and abandonment, emerges the voice of Juliana Tijamba, a former guerrilla and companion of Vitória’s mother; a ghost of a melancholic world due to the postponement of a dream by the war. It is through the caring voice of Mama Ju, Juliana, that Vitória has access to what the war is, what that war was, and to the beginning of herself in the world.

She says that during the first battles, one does not believe in the truculence of war. We live in an utopia, in a dream. This happens until you must kill in order to not to be killed. In war, killing is not enough. It is to slaughter, torture, maim, and rape. (...) Mama Ju’s purpose is not to shock her, but instead to share her truth with Vitoria.” (Monteiro, 2018: 154)

Juliana continues her testimony, explains the causes, unveiling the dream, and narrating the conflict she lived with her assimilated black Portuguese parents. Most importantly, she speaks about the war from the perspective of guerrilla women, who were victims of the machismo of their companions, frequently suffering humiliation and rape. It is from this world that the figure of Vitória's mother emerges - "Comrade Rosa Chitula, "Dynamite herself". That was how she presented herself, with a thick commanding voice" (Monteiro, 2018: 158), said Juliana. However, despite the fame that her name gave her, she was the victim of disrespect and persecution. She was a woman, a woman in the war:

- Not everyone respected your mother. She was a woman; you know how it is? Palanca was one of them. He liked to humiliate her.
- But women also fought - Vitória says, in astonishment at the comment.
  - Even so. They thought we were inferior. (Monteiro, 2018: 160) (8)

We later learn that Rosa Chitula was under threat and, therefore, shot and killed Palanca, who had the ambition to sleep with her. The commander's order was to catch and kill her, however, her colleagues allowed her to escape. Juliana would later find Rosa as a refugee in a village, thin, pregnant, and extremely sick. Despite her condition, Vitória was born and handed over to the grandparents, who fled to Portugal following the civil war in Angola. However, there was still more to know: Juliana had betrayed Vitória's mother after delivering her to the respected and feared general Zacarias Vindu, who Vitória had met during her stay in Luanda, and with whom she had arranged poetry recitals. Vitória now realizes that at the rate of poetic declamations, the powerful and sinister general had tortured her mother.

This is the deciphering work that is left for Vitória, or for the following generations, ever since she began her search for her mother in a land where there is always someone looking for a family member, where there is always a story behind another story. It is these hidden stories of women, equally untold and glorious, that changed Vitória. According to Juliana's narrative, the photograph belonging to Vitória's mother became the historical proof of this woman's existence; an objective element that comes into conflict or complementarity with a subjective object. Vitória had constructed an intimate narrative from this photograph, one that simultaneously comforted and haunted her. What connections could Vitória make between the mythical narrative that she had constructed around that photograph and the narrative of historical representation, and which of Juliana's narrative would that represent? How does one reconcile what could not be united without pain? Henceforth, both narratives fuelled Vitória's imagination and identity, which will bear the marks of that battle.

Vitória is at the intersection of space and time of a divided history, one that spreads its influence until today. The game of playing detective, the staging of the revelation, the evidence she pursues, and the voices that reveal her story imply a choice on Victoria's part. She does not know precisely what to do between the narrative and her referent, that is, between Juliana's words and her mother's photograph, between the truth she had constructed and the truths she was hearing. Consequently, this projected what was for Vitória a *memory-photograph-family* into a *memory-photograph-public history of Portugal and Angola*. The migration of this photograph to the public space therefore adds new meanings to it. These new meanings were not merely imagery, but also the recounted history of that place and the concealed history of those people. It became an evidence. Given the news of his grandfather's death, Vitória decides not to go to Portugal. She decides to cast aside her European ghost, to which the narrative she built from her mother's photograph belongs. Vitória chooses to live a history that, even though interrupted, was reserved for her in that place. The temporal distance in relation to what she had not lived is focused on the materiality of the ruins of Juliana's house or Huambo's house.

As António Sousa Ribeiro discusses in another context, "this is what Jennifer Gonzalez defined as autotopography, that is, a "reconstruction of identity through the logic of the location that becomes intelligible through the logic of post-memory" (9). That is the house that was destined for her, the house that welcomes her abandonment. It is there that Victoria waits for her mother/comrade Rosa to arrive one day at the gate with the ghosts of war, abandonment, uncertainty, and the truths that torment Vitória, and with her, the following generations.

Vitória falls on her knees in front of Juliana and lies on her lap, hugging her legs. Between sobs and tears, she asks why she didn't tell her the truth.

- Which one, my love? Your mother's, mine, your family's, what you wanted to hear, the general's truth ... Which one? - Juliana questions (...) (Monteiro, 2018: 205)

What is the truth regarding all this family history that is a fragment of a wider and more complex public history? Whose truth? And for whom? But, after all, what truth, as Juliana comments when confronted with Vitória's questions? In post-memory, everything occurs in the reception and in the interrogation it generates. As stated by Abdel Raouf Dafri, French director of the film *Qu'un sang impur*, and quoted at the beginning of this text – "I wanted to understand why my parents came to Marseille in 1963 (...) What interested me in this adventure was talking about the history of France."

Yara Monteiro's book belongs to the category of a new European literature. In Portuguese literature, it is a literature that brings other characters, places, and lives to the scene of the text, consequently destabilising the traditional categories of the European nation-state. It therefore denounces it as artificial, in the face of its encounter with the impasses of history (and histories) that built the Portuguese nation far beyond the limits of European territory, and of which we are all heirs. This impasse is the post-memory.

Translated by Margarida Bonifácio

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(1) See Vincenzo Russo, *La Resistenza Continua – il colonialismo portoghese, la lotta di liberazione e gli intellettuali italiani*, Milan: Meltemi, 2020 and Amzat Boukari-Yabara, *Africa Unite! Une histoire du panafricanisme*, Paris: La Découverte, 2017.

(2) « Je suis français - un total produit occidentalisé. Je voulais savoir pourquoi mes parents viennent en 1963 à Marseille au lieu de se construire dans une Algérie indépendante. Ils étaient tous les deux analphabètes, mon père était un truand sans idéologie qui aimait De Gaulle, son truc, c'était l'argent, faire bouffer sa famille. Ma mère me disait : L'Algérie, c'est notre pays, la France c'est le vôtre, à vous de vous y faire. La guerre d'Algérie, je ne l'ai pas connue. Je suis né en 1964, elle s'est terminée en 1962, je n'ai aucune légitimité pour parler de sentiments. Ce qui m'intéressait dans cette aventure, c'était de parler de l'histoire de la France. [France Culture, « La Guerre d'Algérie vient hanter le cinéma français »](#)

(3) Poem by Maria Odete Semedo, "Em que língua escrever", *Entre o Ser e o Amar*, Bissau: Coleção Literária Kebur, INEP, 1996.

(4) Adaptation of the expression of the franco-algerian visual artist Katia Kameli in an interview with project *Memoirs*, in Paris, 19 March 2019. The interview was conducted by António Pinto Ribeiro and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro.

(5) Yara Monteiro interviewed by Joana Gorjão Henriques, [Público](#), 21 March, 2019.

(6) In the colonial era, current Huambo was Nova Lisbon.

(7) The quotes are from the book by Yara Monteiro, *Essa Dama Bate Bué*, Lisbon: Guerra e Paz, 2018.

(8) Regarding the condition of women during wars in Angola see Dya Kasembe and Paulina Chiziane (orgs.) *O Livro da Paz da Mulher Angolana*, Luanda: Nzila, 2008 and Margarida Paredes, *Combater Duas Vezes – mulheres na luta armada em Angola*, Verso da História, 2015.

(9) António Sousa Ribeiro, "Autotopografias – Peter Weiss em Auschwitz", [Memoirs Newsletter](#), 50, 4 May, 2019, p. 3. The author refers to the text of Jennifer A. González, "Autotopographies", in Gabriel Braham Jr, Mark Driscoll, *Prosthetic Territories – Politics and Hypertechnologies*, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1995, pp.133-150.

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