

Telling the Nation: The Case of Angolan Literature via History and Geography

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Abstract: The classical concept of “literary history” has instilled in us a notion whereby each individual literature acts as a kind of magnifying glass through which it is possible to view the world in its particular mode of self-representation. Not surprisingly, this “notion” becomes especially interesting in the context of postcolonial literatures, which have a necessary though ambivalent relationship with the tradition but also an urgent need to settle accounts with their own past. This article analyzes the case of post-independence Angolan literature, which bifurcates in two directions: the “historical tendency” and the “geographical tendency.” It traces the evolution of both tendencies and how they have contributed to the definition of a national canon.

La parola è in chi resta / nella volgente era [...] / da lui a te e a me [...] in me / miserere—Eugenio de Signoribus, “September,” in *Ronda dei conversi*, 2005

An image to guide us: that of a war survivor, or of someone who survived a life marked by violence, and who finally goes home and searches among the rubble for the bell tower of the church, a house, his neighbor’s shop, a street—in an effort to recover his personal geography and thereby return to himself. It is a necessary reconnaissance, the reinsertion of himself in a network of familiar objects that can restore his sense of affective roots and, in so doing, his sense of belonging.

This image contains for me, at a gut level, many of the elements characterizing the specific case of Angola, a context where traumatic violence knows no “after”; there is, rather, an endless “during” that compels artisans of the word to a twofold negotiation (which is also a necessary and inevitable “struggle”) between constructing and conserving the memory of an identity rooted in a bygone, negated time.

If it is true that at the origin of every trajectory leading to the creation of national values there is always a momentous act, a break whose violence is relegated to a mythic past, a “primordial wound” that is at the same time the foundation of a “we,” an almost hygienic and cathartic experience absolutely necessary for the growth of a collective project, in Angola, because of the unceasing war, those who write must witness and record a kind of “past that doesn’t pass,” a “before” that can’t be reached, an excess of the present, which cannot tell the tragedy since it cannot point to an end that would render it explainable and interpretable. Perhaps the particularity of Angolan literature in general, therefore, is precisely the act of telling through writing, since there is normally no talking in wartime, there are only positions, and the face of the enemy—perhaps all the more so in a fratricidal war—should not and cannot be known, much less interpreted. And yet the literature of Angola is known for being fertile and varied; it is the word that insists on telling so as to ground itself in the immensely confused present.

From the time of the colonial war through national independence and up to 2002, when the hostilities officially ended, the enduring conflict has been the only shared national memory possible, and to write of that memory, of how it influences daily life, is to speak about Angola as an emotive space. To paraphrase Pedro Rosa Mendes, those who write are working on a torn fabric, reconstructing or inventing a linearity in the filigree of the fragments (68). They must situate their writing and their own selves in a context where there is no more network, and where constructing a narrative map is the means for being in contact with all the possible “others” that make Angola what it is. Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, who has meditated long and hard on the relationship between national identity and national literature, asks: “How many ‘others,’ then, are needed to make a ‘we’? And how many points of view, logical arguments and reasons must be woven into the task we must confront and out of which will finally emerge our possibility as a nation?” (*Actas* 221).

During the fight for independence and the national revolution, time and space were still definite terms, such that the war-torn present contained in a

certain way the future, and Angola was a country discernible in the distance. But during the years of civil war and the resumption of the conflict, the categories of space and time lost their defining coordinates. Space was lost in the devastation that comes with all wars, and time stagnated in a seemingly endless present, without the limits of past and future. This broke the synthesis between politics and literature that had characterized the emergence of Angola's national literature, and it became difficult to read texts produced in recent years in the light of broad literary movements and trends or even within the narrower confines of a specific genre's development. Each author became, to a certain extent, a unique universe. The shared discourse became individualized, but without ever falling into mannerist autobiography. The feeling of belonging to one's own nation, understood as a "condition to pursue" [condição a perseguir], resorting once more to the words of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, no longer needed to be demonstrated, but the failure of that feeling to be realized made it necessary to bear witness to the existence of that nation and to tell it in writing. This need to tell, when the maps had been forever annulled by war, gave rise to a common effort to (re)construct the idea of a nation and to reinstate in the void—in the universe of destruction where the nation plays out its role in terms of absence and lack—the memory of a country that in its intimate geography could resist the horror of the destruction. The question that emerged was: "Where are we? What is the common ground that makes the Angolans a nation?" In the case of Angola we can perhaps apply, albeit with caution, the notion of genocide understood as the uprooting of people from their own time and space.¹

I am not sure if we can define this literature, in its recent manifestations, as one of "reconnaissance," but it is undoubtedly marked by a sense of subtraction from a space, from history, from memory. Or it is as if space, history, and memory had been subtracted. The writing attempts to offer a response, and the postcolonial Angolan space—this "new world"—attempts a possible (impossible insofar as it is utopian?) synthesis of past and present, upon which a future identity can be erected and negotiated. This follows the suggestion of the critic Robert Young, who stresses the need to reflect on the role assumed by all anticolonial thought within the postcolonial context.²

The insightful book by Ruy Duarte de Carvalho that has already been cited, *Actas da Maianga*, skillfully guides us through all these issues.³ In the volume's various essays, which span the most critical moments of contemporary Angolan history, in part following up on an article published in the

journal *Lusotopie*, the writer insists on the need to distinguish between political practice and literary practice and to consider the project of a formative national canon as well as the project of the nation itself.⁴ Literature thus faces the obvious but complicated task of “telling,” as proposed by Homi Bhabha, to achieve the ambitious goal of postcolonial thought—namely, that of escaping the endogenously produced globalized logic that thwarts the functioning of that “new world” just referred to.⁵ This naturally opens up a wide range of possible solutions and trajectories (as there also was in the past). The other great merit of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho’s book is that it reintroduces a complex notion of identity, even in its formative stage, insofar as it can accommodate the nation’s many endogenous cultural differences.

Given these premises of subtraction (which can be considered the guiding concept of this brief study) of the individual from his or her time and space, we can identify two corresponding thematic (i.e., content-based) threads—one “historical” and the other “geographical.” Both contribute to the constitution of a canon distinguished by its projective character and by its continual dialogue with the notion of collective memory.

The first “lens” I propose—the historical one—negates (in the specific case of Angola as well as in many other African contexts) the Hegelian notion of Africa as a timeless space. Works about the war for independence, such as Manuel Santos Lima’s *As Lágrimas e o Vento* (1975) and Pepetela’s *Mayombe* (1978, but written in 1969), represent the attempt to tell history beginning from the moment when “the dreamed future begins”; they try to reset the starting point for when the future will resume. Despite their undeniable differences, both are foundational novels. This new narrative space, especially in the case of Pepetela, is committed to the forging of an identity, and it has the virtue of recording an epic moment, a point after which the authors undertake to reconstruct a historical trajectory, recovering the precolonial period or the period prior to de facto occupation of national territory by the Portuguese. It is almost like picking up the thread of a discourse, passing across five centuries of colonial occupation. *Mayombe* inherits much of its essence from the pre-independence, engagée literature that greatly contributed to the cause of independence, and it aspires to help build and to be recognized within a space of shared identity. Pepetela’s subsequent novels, on the other hand, present a past that can include the colonial experience but that may at the same time signify the search for a new direction, a new criterion for building an aesthetic canon, independent from the one imposed by the old colonial relationship.

As in other contexts, African or otherwise, to affirm what was is an act that implies redefining the present. To narrate history also means to traverse a porous terrain that joins a narrative plot to historical research. This is the recipe for much of the literature written by Pepetela, who attempts to respond to the negation of the nation's existence, which colonialism to a large extent represented. This model, which reaches its highest expression in novels such as *Yaka* (1985) and *A Geração da Utopia* (1994), sees literature as an explanation of the nation's internal events, and it will be followed, in successive generations, by writers such as José Eduardo Agualusa, at least in his early phase, in novels such as *A Conjura* (1989) and *A Estação das Chuvas* (1997). The reconstruction undertaken by Agualusa in his first novel is concerned to rebuild and reappropriate Angola's protonationalist movements, in which are woven stories—or rather, *estórias*—whose purpose is to characterize the narrative facts but also to anchor them in a definite geographic space. The case of Agualusa is interesting, because the writing in his subsequent books, which open up to other Portuguese-speaking regions, also seems to open up to the sort of writing that was urgently invoked up until the 1960s—a writing that resorts to *estórias*, a term dear to Luandino Vieira, whose stories about contemporary daily life in specific geographical spaces helped Angolan literature to break with the colonial canon, which had tended to describe those spaces with the colors of a facile exoticism. It was in fact the perfect balance that Luandino, in his fictions, was able to achieve between language and content that brought about that break and the birth of a new world, since language finally becomes the dreamed nation, opening up the way to that contemporary sense of Angola that no longer eludes a precise placement in time and space. Luandino's work is, in a certain way, an implied canon for whoever writes in Angola, as demonstrated by novels such as Ondjaki's *Quantas Madrugadas tem a Noite* (2004).

Literature, like historical research, is a voluntary act from the perspective of the practitioner, and the genesis of Angolan literature—like pre-independence history—is, as it were, decoded for us in its critical moments of rupture, when the interactive relationship it maintains between language and society is laid bare. Interesting contributions in this respect have been made by researchers not strictly connected with the literary domain. As an example, we may cite the Angolan anthropologist António Tomás, who in his considerations about the literature of his country stresses precisely the importance, in terms of identity and rupture, of a literary canon that follows the

path forged by Luandino, with the work of writers such as Manuel Rui being mentioned in this connection.⁶

This descriptive capacity, which resorts to a precise linguistic form capable of expressing once more a “we,” corresponds to the need of inventing a territory through words, understood yet again as a foundational act, namely that of founding the land, the common *chão* [ground] itself.⁷

Looking through my second, geographical “lens,” we find works by authors such as Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Ana Paula Tavares. Both writers, in my view, respond to the need of renaming, subverting a certain type of canon represented by ethnographic writing. If it is true that the term “ethnography” has two meanings, indicating a particular mode of research as well as the results of that research, thereby guaranteeing in its own duality the transmission of the “knowledge” acquired during field work,⁸ the above-mentioned authors pursue an exercise in which geography coincides with a process of renaming in an attempt to restore names to things. The literary project of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho is characterized by an impressive internal coherence and a keen sense of purpose, which is evident even in the titles of his works: *Chão de Oferta* (1972), *Como se o Mundo não tivesse Leste* (1977), *Vou lá Visitar Pastores* (1999), *Observação Directa* (2000), and the very recent *Paisagens Propícias* (2005). His pseudo-ethnography of other Angolas, such as that of the Kuvalé people or of the Axilunada (on the Island of Luanda), maps out the loci of the nation,⁹ making it possible—through the apparently ethnographic description of their complexity, considered as a moment of alterity—to revisit the very canon of ethnographic writing. Thus divested, from within, of its ideological apparatus, it takes on a different character, overcoming whatever implicit relationship it had with the colonial experience. Perhaps the profound intent of Ruy Duarte’s research, of his endeavor to describe so as to name, is to restore voice to the “words” of the people, against the “language” of laws, cancelling their rigid boundaries so as to make the border between ethics and aesthetics porous again. The same concern informs the writing of Ana Paula Tavares. In both her poetry and prose, the fruit of the land, the rituals, and the wisdom of tradition are not stock images or pretexts but the flesh and blood of a relentless project of telling and preserving.

What is needed, then, is to reconstruct the maps and the most intimate geographies, with full awareness of the ongoing negotiation between the individual and the collective. War and blood cannot found a country, but the word that is restored through time and space to its full dimension in mem-

ory—as occurs in the poetry of authors such as Arlindo Barbeitos, Maria Alexandre Dáskalos, and José Luís Mendonça, or in the work of the artist Fernando Alvim, as well as the writers I have discussed—is perhaps a personal exercise capable of inventing “we” ourselves.

Notes

¹ The term “genocide” was used at the Angola and São Tomé Bishops’ Conference during a visit by Madeleine Albright to Angola in the 1990s.

² See his *Postcolonialism. A Very Short Introduction*.

³ The volume is significantly subtitled “[...dizer da(s) guerra(s) (.) em Angola(?)...]”

⁴ See “Sobre a expressão literária angolana.”

⁵ See “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*.

⁶ See his essay “Letteratura angolana: decolonizzazione o ricolonizzazione?”

⁷ Ruy Duarte de Carvalho also addressed the issue of language during the launch of his latest book, *As Paisagens Propícias*, in Coimbra, on 28 February 2005.

⁸ See Matera, 23.

⁹ See my “Aulas de geografia: cartografias, mapas e local da nação. Construção e desconstrução do cânone em Ruy Duarte de Carvalho,” in *5 Povos, 5 Nações* (Lisboa: Novo Imbondeiro, 2007), ed. Pires Laranjeira, Lola Galdes Xavier and Maria João Simões.

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