

## Subjects on a Voyage through Alterity

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**Abstract:** In this article, Laura Padilha offers a voyage through alterity. Angolan authors are read as products and producers of a culture that fuses tradition and modernity, oral and written. Their main purpose on this journey, in which we as readers participate, is to locate their own culture in difference, and to know themselves by knowing their own Others.

Ouvi dizer que as teorias viajam e, quando chegam aos lugares, são transformadas, transculturadas (...). Algumas vezes, entretanto, as teorias não viajam. E, quando isso acontece, a diferença colonial as torna invisíveis para as teorias dominantes e universais que podem viajar e têm passaporte para atravessar a diferença colonial.  
—Walter Mignolo

The process of colonization and, more generally, colonialism, often begins with a maritime voyage. Indeed, the voyage was regally inscribed in our imaginations as readers in the very fabric of the Portuguese language by the most important sixteenth-century poetic voice, who, after decanting some of the names of the “barões assinalados,” addressed himself to his king, in *Os Lusíadas*, as follows:

E enquanto eu estes canto, e a vós não posso,  
Sublime Rei, que não me atrevo a tanto,

Tomai as rédeas vós do Reino vosso:  
 Dareis matéria a nunca ouvido canto.  
 Comecem a sentir o peso grosso  
 (Que polo mundo todo faça espanto)  
 De exércitos e feitos singulares  
 De África as terras e do Oriente os mares. (I.15)

In contrast, the desire for decolonization, when it surfaced with urgency in the then Portuguese colonies of Africa, found one of its strongest symbolic paradigms in the fictionalization of travel through land. Such a journey through the “inside” aims to connect the Self to its own Others, and no longer to think of and through Others brought from over the endless sea, in an act of Western expansionism. With this in mind, I return to Camões, remembering his perception of expansion: “Os Portugueses somos do Ocidente / Imos buscando as terras do Oriente” (I.50).

Through their new journey, or counter-voyage through alterity, here thought of as the relation formed between the Self and one’s own Others, African writers, and I intend to refer principally to the case of Angola, somehow respond to the questions raised by Camões’s navigators, who found “gente estranha” of a “cor (...) verdadeira / Que Faeton, nas terras acendidas; / Ao mundo deu, de ousado e não prudente” (I.49, 46). They ask:

Que gente será esta? (em si dezião)  
 Que costumes, que Lei, que Rei teriam? (I.45)

The search for a reply to such a fundamental question cannot but draw on another type of cultural archive where other customs reside, other “leis” are kept, and whence springs the force of other “reis.” A principal part of the African cultural archive is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, oral tradition. As is well known, such tradition is one of the most important elements when one considers African ancestral culture.

The power and prominence of oral tradition should not be confused with the opinion that African peoples cannot write. Rather, it means insisting on the force of a whole semiotic set that finds other ways of signifying beyond letters on a page, as Simon Battestini has amply demonstrated in his *Écriture et texte: contribution africaine* (1997). At the end of the day, these modes of identification give a people the contours of its identity. Through them, alterity is affirmed

as difference, allowing us to know, along the lines of Homi Bhabha, *a priori* cultural contents and customs. These have little or nothing to do with those used by white-European Western culture as it moulds its symbolic and cultural roots.

To voyage through oral texts implies an attempt to know this Other archive, an archive governed by an Other logic. Such an archive, always silenced in the game of obliteration intrinsic to the process of colonization, ends up offering to the producers of African symbolic goods an opportunity to reactivate the legacy of their ancestral memory, something that they do frequently and compellingly.

I believe that revisiting the corpus of oral texts means looking for the imagistic traces or threads they continue to produce in the fictional web to this day. One such element through which new meanings are negotiated in the Angolan novel is the depiction of subjects on a journey. In fact, this journey has nothing to do with that other journey that was at the origin of the colonizing process. These subjects frequently seek to reinforce their own location of culture, in order to demarcate the limits of their difference, as I shall now explore.

### The Ritual Power of Naming

I will begin by remembering that the journey is an intrinsic part of the rites of initiation. In order to complete such rites, the neophyte must leave behind his or her known world—family, village, slave quarters, *quimbo*—in order to undertake his or her passage into a new social condition in other locations such as the forest, the river side, the savannah, or even distant villages where their future initiators live. On their return, the now initiated youth gains at the rites of puberty a new and definitive name, ceasing to be a mere walk-on part in the life of the community, as Honorat Aguessy points out.

The gesture of naming and/or being named means, in the words of another scholar of African cultures, Alassane Ndaw, “the act through which a man concludes a true pact of peace and fraternity” (163). In this sense, and digressing a little from Angola in the direction of Mozambique, I am reminded of the saying of the old grandmother in Paulina Chiziane’s *O sétimo juramento*. In a given scene, she declares in her wisdom: “Nome é testemunho da existência e delimitação da fronteira de todas as coisas” (59).

The power of naming is a recurrent trait in modern lusophone African fiction. Significantly, in Pepetela’s *As aventuras de Ngunga*, the child protagonist, on ending his journey into knowledge, inverts the order of the ancient rites, in which the initiated would receive his name, and names himself. He shares his secret—that is his new name—only with Uassamba, the object of his affection. Thus, the

last stage of his initiation is completed. His name is a type of temple of being.

As a palpable object capable of being known, through its very materiality, the African novel also performs a naming pact. Through its words, it tells of the cultural diversity that engendered it. Through its very texture, it engenders that cultural diversity. It becomes an initiation rite, a type of return journey, with its reader participating as a special subject in a ritualistic ceremony through which, to repeat the phrase of Alassane Ndaw, "a true pact of peace and fraternity" is sealed.

Such an invitation to the reader to participate, in the sense of becoming a companion on the text's voyage of initiation, takes concrete form in the narrative wrapping of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho's *Vou lá visitar pastores*. In this novel, the narration is the result of a tape recording of what the narrator lived through in his dislocation to the Cuvale territory. In other words, it is a concrete attempt to know, as the Angolan that he is, a little about his own Others, in this case, the pastoral Cuvale people.

At a diegetic level, the recording objectifies the recuperation of everything that the narrator saw, heard, and experienced, for a friend, who does not appear to accompany him on his voyage. At the level of enunciation, however, it is a way of including the reader in the "telling" of the text and in the journey this very text triggers, so that one can get to know more closely the Cuvale shepherds and by extension the Angolan land itself. This land of necessity can only be conceived of in its dense cultural multiplicity. The enunciator, through the voice of his narrator, tells us:

Era a maneira de tentar ajudá-lo (...) a alargar o contacto com o que buscava. Não chegou a aparecer e mais tarde transcrevi essas cassetes. Divulgo agora os salvados, são a viagem do texto. (11)

The transcription referred to by the narrator should be read as a way of translating the Other, in this case, a way of organizing the Cuvale world. At a deeper level, what is translated is Angola, in one of its many ethnic versions. It is not by chance that, at the end of the first paragraph of the work, the narrator enounces his intention to give "o sentido da colocação geográfica (...) para fazer sentido" (15). In this demarcating action, he seeks a way of strengthening the very act of naming a culture that was always elided in the reductive gaze of the Other. This quest answers in some way the question of Camões's navigators who did not know who those people were. Nor did they

know their fundamental cultural codes, as becomes clear in those verses that talk of “costumes,” “Lei,” and “Rei,” in a game of allegorizing capital letters.

### Journeys at Various Times

Given what I have already discussed, I do not think it a fluke that so many Angolan writers have tried and continue to try to find new modes of representing the culture that they have formed, and which has formed them. Mohamadou Kane points out that the originality of African works resides precisely in the fact that their writers always end up mimicking their dual legacy. They draw on both the traditional and the modern, but nearly always with an emphasis on the former. This is what happens, for example—and here I am making a necessary temporal leap—with António de Assis Júnior, in his enigmatic novel *O segredo da morta*. For him, the novelist invites his reader to journey in his company, evidently through the voice of his narrator. They journey through the lands of Dondo, Pungo Andongo, Cambo Camana, and elsewhere, where not a king, but a mythical queen, Jinga, or Nzinga Mbandi, imposed her laws and left her mark. That impression overcame the corpus of history and created a myth that could not be extinguished. Inverting the colonial paradigm, the imaginary of Assis Júnior substitutes the River Kuanza for the sea, and its ships become the little steamboat where, in mid-voyage, one of the novel’s protagonists, Elmira, is born. In the name of the land, Kapaxi, she represents a fictional bringing-up-to-date of the Jinga myth. It is equally not by chance that the timeframe chosen by the novelist is the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when a desire for “angolanness” began to gain currency and the voice of the “naturais de Angola” made itself heard, echoing the desire for emancipation in the then colony, as has been widely pointed out by scholars of the history and culture of Angola.

Proposing such an inversion in the Western paradigm may be read in another form not just at the diegetic level, with the many journeys that authors have enacted, but also as a discursive solution that brings up to date the entire source of Angolan oral tradition. It becomes a kind of narrative game—a creative hide-and-seek in the literary history of the nation. The novel is a camouflage for *missossos*, *makas*, *malundas*, and riddles—every type of traditional narrative that thus, through its compass, travels from the oral to the written, donning new and surprising clothes.



In an echo of *O segredo da morta*, another Angolan, Arnaldo Santos, seventy years later, in *A casa velha das margens*, brings up to date the thematic tapestry of the earlier novel, inviting the reader to accompany Emídio Mendonça, a mulatto, on his voyage as he returns to Angola and is almost killed as his Portuguese father had been. The scene of both novels is, in principal, the same—Dondo, which also represents the region of Massangano, as well as several populations on the banks of the River Kuanza, with incursions into the lands of the Quissamas, namely, Songo. In the words of the text, they are lands “áridas e sem vegetação,” where “estranhos mitos” took place that rendered those who lived there beings with a “feitio (...) belicoso e exaltado” (110). The mother of the protagonist, who comes from there, is called Kissama.

The time setting of the novel is also towards the end of the nineteenth century, with all its historical importance to Angola. It is no coincidence that the poet Cordeiro da Matta, one of the icons of voyages through alterity, becomes one of the characters in Santos's novel, and is presented as “chefe da primeira divisão de Calumbo,” in 1889. This year is very significant when we remember that the canonical texts of the poet, “Kicôla” and “Uma quissama,” were from 1888 and 1891 respectively.

The ends of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are interlaced when Arnaldo Santos's novel echoes the work of Assis Júnior. It revisits Angolan society from the time in which the Generation of 1880 came to prominence, exactly the generation of Cordeiro da Matta. That generation embodied a movement that challenged the prior politico-cultural consensus and envisioned “angolanidade” as an ideal that could be realized. With Santos, on his voyage undertaken over both time and space, the doors of the old house which was Angola at that historical juncture are opened. Thitherto, Angola had always been put at the margin of reductive westernization. Nowadays, in our new era of so-called globalization—the new buttress of westernization—it remains marginalized by the globalization process that opens the new avenues of neocolonization. Today there is a new collision, like the one of old, against what is classified as the periphery. There is a certain effort to elide differences, branding that same margin—where we place everything we are incapable of understanding—as a non-place, which is utterly archaic and without any cultural or ontologic value.

The novel *A casa velha das margens*—precisely because of the suggestion of its title as something *old*, *marginal*, and related to a *place*—draws on African cultural roots in their Angolan manifestation, and has the ethical

dimension of an Other. It provides a counter-discourse that exalts difference and practices inclusiveness, effectively erasing the gaps and silences imposed historically by the agents of cultural domination. It attempts to translate voices long buried in a move that gives them new life through the gesture of artistic creation, which does not avoid ways of bringing oral tradition up to date. With this modernization, the whole foundation of the modern novel is shaken. The *missossos*, the *makas*, and the *malundas* all reappear, while riddles are sown into the very fabric of fiction.

In this collision, what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called a “sociology of absences” abounds. Through such an inclusive gesture, “os silêncios e as ignorâncias que definem as incompletudes das culturas, da experiência e dos saberes” are denounced, to quote João Arriscado Nunes (26). Thus reconfigured, “a casa velha das margens” offers itself as a shelter of Other imaginaries alongside the identity maps that sustain them.

There are many novels that narrate journeys through alterity, or subjects in search of recognition of their own body of cultural difference and, as such, the very body that signifies for them. However, cultural difference should not be taken as a synonym for an essence nurtured on the lap of first principles. Following Bhabha, we know that such a difference is always a construction of systems of cultural identification and should be understood as a process of signification through which the affirmations *of* culture *about* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of power, reference, applicability, and ability. As Bhabha alerts us, it becomes about the recognition of *a priori* cultural contents and customs.

Ruy Duarte de Carvalho reinforces Bhabha’s critical position in his *Vou lá visitar pastores*, considered by many to be a non-novel, to be situated in an interstitial zone, crossed by anthropology, ethnography, and the history of ideas, among other disciplines. His book becomes a generic hybrid and, for many critics, a work that defies categorization. He affirms at a given moment in the novel through the voice of his narrator that, by staging the pastoral world of the Cuvale, he wanted to undertake:

(...) uma aventura pessoal que me situa, em plena recta final do século XX, a pouco mais de dois anos da viragem do milénio e cercado pelo rumor histórico da globalização, empenhado mas é em decifrar os termos da resolução—rigorosamente situados no tempo e no espaço (...)—de uma cultura milenar que todos os dias se reafirma actualizando, desenvolvendo, no presente, uma estratégia

de integração total entre o meio que lhe assiste, as pessoas que a compõem e o “impalpável” que a envolve, sem no entanto poder descurar nunca a relação com um exterior que a nega e a longo termo acabará por inviabilizá-la? (357-58)

The desire to reaffirm culture artistically, through a fictionalization in difference that attempts to give a voice to “uma estratégia de integração total entre o meio que lhe assiste, as pessoas que a compõem e o ‘impalpável’ que a envolve,” leads the novelist to excavate the terrain where the pillars of the very genre of the novel were planted. The narrative paradigms of an oral tradition and the discursive model baptized by the West with the name of novel refine each other as if they were river and sea. The bustle of the waters of knowledge creates a hybridity of expression that assails the bulwarks of genre. In Brazil, João Guimarães Rosa did the same thing when he recreated the pathways of the hinterland of Minas Gerais, through which the speech of an Other walks in difference: it is the speech of nature; of men; of myths and social rituals. *Grande sertão: veredas* emerges as a landmark in Brazilian literature. In it, the voice of Riobaldo unravels his “causos” to a mute interlocutor—the mask of all of us, his readers. In his words, “lugar sertão se divulga: é onde pastos carecem de fechos (...). O gerais corre em volta. Esses gerais são sem tamanho” (7). Voice and the written word contaminate each other, embodying what has no limit or size.

In the African cultural universe to which we will now return, narrators frequently clothe the skins of ancestral storytellers in the written word. In so doing, they de-immobilize the rigidity of the written word captive on the page, so to speak. They travel through the pathways of orality, as if the text unleashed its own voice. A voyage of the written word, which is a gesture of naming difference, thus becomes a rite of initiation.

There are many novels that revolve around voyages. Listing them all would be a futile exercise. Among the many I could mention, think of Boaventura Cardoso’s *Mãe, materno mar*, an incredible contemporary *missosso*, as Carmem Lúcia Tindó Secco points out in her preface to the work. In this novel, the character of Manecas undertakes a voyage—a rite of initiation in the culture of his land—that takes fifteen years, leaving from Malanje and reaching Luanda, where he will glimpse the sea of which he has so often dreamed.

Another novel I would like to mention is *Rioseco*, by Manuel Rui Monteiro, in which we accompany the encounter of river dwellers—Noíto and Zacaria—with those from the sea—Mateus and his son, who is purposefully called



Kuanza. In the work, whose main protagonist is an old woman, Noíto, ancient tradition is rewoven and controlled by the body of an elderly woman with the heart and the mind of a mere girl. Manuel Rui draws on tradition, with the memory of ancient knowledge impregnating the present and recreating Angola, as Lourentinho, one of Luandino Vieira's creations might say. In this novel, the multiple is inscribed and the meeting of the Selves—those from the river—with their own Others—those from the sea—shows this very well.

### Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, I would like to cite the words of the Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia, taken from an email discussion he had with a Chilean writer, Roberto Bolaño, that was published in *El País* in Argentina and republished by the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in its supplement "Mais!" [12 September 2004]. The two writers discuss Latin American literature and its reception. What interests me is a section in which Piglia argues for the importance of conceptualizing beyond the contingency of his own territoriality as a Latin American subject. He says: "Penso que há novas constelações em formação e que são essas constelações o que avistamos do nosso laboratório quando apontamos o telescópio para a noite estrelada" (4).

This pointing of "o telescópio para a noite estrelada," where there are various nodes in difference, or new identity constellations, if they can be glimpsed, is a gesture that repeats itself in the body of new African fiction. This literature not only tackles the global, in which it cannot avoid being inscribed, it also reinforces the local where it was born and which it cannot and will not avoid seeing and sensing. Rivers, islands, forests, distant villages, mountains, savannahs, *quimbo*s, and even ancient cities and their dwellers gain new meanings. Other identity mappings are elaborated in this process, which are moulded "nas margens das representações e através de um movimento que vai das margens para o centro," to quote Boaventura de Sousa Santos (33). In such a projected space, other narratives are born, as I have tried to show. According to Walter D. Mignolo, such narratives "não são (ou, pelo menos não apenas) nem narrativas revisionistas nem narrativas que pretendam contar uma verdade diferente, mas, sim, narrativas acionadas por uma lógica diferente" (47).

I wanted to walk through one of these spaces where an Other logic is offered to us. I have tried to reread certain stories and open up some maps that Angolan authors have offered to us. By opening its windows and doors,

they try to air the house that another culture said or deemed to be hegemonic, both domestically and abroad, tried so hard, and still tries, to seal. Those of us who are foreign people, whose colour was “imposed” on us by the error of Phaethon, and who reside in the south of the south, have embarked on a journey through our own alterity. In many cases, it has been through literary texts being written in this south. In other cases, it is through the act of reading what has been written there. In all cases, we try and answer the question that was asked of us so long ago:

Que gente será esta? ( em si deziám)

Que costumes, que Lei, que Rei teriam?

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