

# Colonial Representation and Conquest in Pepetela's "As Cinco Vidas da Teresa"

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**Abstract:** This article offers a reading of one of Pepetela's first literary publications, the short story "As cinco vidas da Teresa," originally published under Pepetela's legal name, Artur Carlos Pestana, in 1962.

In a column published on the occasion of Luandino Vieira's long-awaited novel, *Nosso Musseque* (2003), Leonel Cosme criticizes the writer for a narrative *regresso* instead of a promised *ruptura*. After more than two decades following the publication of *Lourentinho, Dona Antónia de Sousa Neto e Eu*, Cosme argues that Luandino's return to the colonial past represents a double regression, not only to the narration of a creolized *musseque* space but also to the threads of a previously published text. The critic, moreover, knows of what he speaks since the text to which he refers, "Os miúdos do Capitão Bento Abano," appeared in *Novos contos d'África* (1962), an anthology of short stories edited by Cosme and Garibaldino de Andrade.<sup>1</sup> Luandino's prolonged silence is compounded, according to Cosme, by his dislocation from Luanda to Alto Minho, and led to the expectation of a "explosive text," particularly since "outros camaradas seus, da literatura e da acção política, já tinham 'actualizado' as fontes de inspiração e a profissão de fé com o desejado sucesso" (44).

If Luandino's *Nosso Musseque* marks a regression to the roots of the hybrid and ambivalent *angolanidade* of texts such as *Luuanda, Nós os do Makulusu*,

and *Macandumba*, which ruptured the conceptual binary oppositions of Portuguese colonial discourse, it is a return that is at once both nostalgic and essentializing. The *musseque* of Luandino's earlier works, primarily written in the prisons of Luanda and Tarrafal, was an interstitial space, the narrative site of the cultural and linguistic processes of an imagined *angolanidade* and a textual reclaiming of both geographical and cultural location. That reclaiming, however, was always ambiguous and self-questioning at every narrative turn. Forty years after the rupture of *Luanda's estórias* and the inevitable breakdown of the collective subject in *Nós os do Makulusu*, the regression to *Nosso Musseque*, originally written while Luandino was imprisoned in Luanda, but rewritten in Alto Minho, essentializes the very *nós* of Angolan collective identity.

Without entering further into the "regresso" versus "ruptura" debate posed by Leonel Cosme, my intent here is another return, in this instance to an early text published by Pepetela, one of Luandino's literary and political contemporaries whose works of fiction are foundational narrations of Angolan nation-ness. The text, "As cinco vidas da Teresa," appeared in the same aforementioned 1962 anthology along with short stories by a pantheon of then emergent Angolan writers including Mário António, Arnaldo Santos, Henrique Guerra, Henrique Abranches, Ernesto Cochat Osório, Fernando da Costa Andrade, and António Jacinto. Pepetela's narrative pre-dates the adoption of the *nome de guerra* that would also become his literary pseudonym and is published under his birth name, Arturo Carlos Pestana. In the accompanying bio note, the author's birthplace and date are listed—"Benguela a 29 de Outubro de 1941"—along with summary literary credentials: "É estudante da Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa. Tem colaboração em *Mensagem*, boletim da Casa dos Estudantes do Império" (44).

The focus of this present work on "As cinco vidas da Teresa," represents, in fact, more of a turn than a return. The short story has not received critical attention nor is it acknowledged formally as part of Pepetela's literary production. My intent here in the first instance, therefore, centers both on recuperating an early text by a writer whose narrative fiction is intricately linked to emergent national literature and to offer a preliminary reading that draws upon the critical paradigms of postcolonial theory to engage the text with questions of representation both from a colonial and nascent Angolan perspective. Of particular interest will be the ambivalent representations of the feminine, geographical location, and the masculine colonial conquest.

The narrative line is relatively familiar in the context of contemporary Angolan texts; Teresa, a young woman, has relocated to Benguela from then Nova Lisboa. On her daily route to work, Teresa meets Manuel, a young Portuguese office-worker and recent settler in Angola, who pursues and seduces her. The set of mutually exclusive expectations notwithstanding—Teresa believes herself to be in love and that the sexual encounter would result in marriage, whereas Manuel, who is portrayed with more ambiguity and depth, acts out his colonial role in terms of exploitation and power—the narrative plays repeatedly with intertwined notions of sexual and colonial conquest as part of a larger discourse of masculine imperial *aventura* again, both in terms of Teresa's body and the geographical space of Benguela.

This discourse of colonial conquest is evident from the beginning of “As cinco vidas da Teresa,” which opens with the perspective of the masculine gaze: “Viu-a à saída do emprego. Seu corpo jovem, alegre, era um mundo de quentes promessas mal disfarçadas pelo vestido de chita” (45). In the gaze of the Portuguese settler, Teresa's body is part of the colonial landscape and that which may be conquered and colonized. In this opening passage, Manuel follows Teresa through the streets of Benguela until she reaches the “extremo da cidade branca” and watches her “tomar o caminho para a sanzala da Cambanda” (45). Benguela, itself, emerges in these beginning lines as a major character in the text, and supports a reading of geographical conquest and colonization.

As Alfred Crosby and others have iterated, the enterprise of colonization centers as much on the natural environment as it does on the “native peoples” and results in what he terms “ecological imperialism.” Crosby, of course, builds on the work of the pioneering theorist of colonization, revolution, and decolonization—Frantz Fanon. Fanon, in particular, wrote extensively about the colonial conquest of the natural environment as linked to economic exploitation and argued that “hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented in the colonies by the bush, by mosquitoes, natives and fever, and colonization is a success when all this indocile nature has finally been tamed (*Wretched* 201).

In Angola, the conquest of nature and natives was always intrinsically fundamental to Portugal's participation in the Atlantic slave trade and, in the latter stages of colonialism, to the exploitation of African labor. Benguela, the setting for “As cinco vidas da Teresa,” was one of the major slave ports of Angola; in the narrative, this history haunts Teresa at every corner in the “white city”: “Benguela, o Mercado de triste memória, amedrontou-a com

seus fantasmas do passado, saídos dos soturnos quintalões, tilintando com fúria as grilhetas que os manietaram” (46). The history of enslavement is hidden in the “civilized city,” but is transmitted, as the elders tell Teresa, through memory and blood from generation to generation of Angolans (46).

Teresa’s movement twice daily from the “sanzala” to the white city further situates the narrative in the context of environmental conquest and the establishment of colonial settlements. For Fanon, colonial cities were always paradigmatic of relationships of conquest and power as they were divided between two towns, those of the settlers and those of the natives (*Wretched* 30). The “Settlers’ Town” encompasses privileged zones that are built and maintained by “natives” but from which they are excluded. Teresa may work as a domestic laborer in the urbanized section of Benguela, but in the evening she returns to the “sanzala,” never seen in the text but understood by even its designation to be “native” and “untamed.” Interestingly enough, in relation to Pepetela’s later works, the “untamed” and “uncivilized” space is always depicted as such in colonial terms; in the recuperation of African space, those territories become revolutionary space, whether it be the forest of Mayombe in the text of the same name or the *chana* where Mundial, one of the guerrillas of *A geração da utopia*, recoups and regains his revolutionary vision.

That “As cinco vidas da Teresa” takes place almost entirely in the colonial “cidade branca” reinforces the space of sexual conquest and exploitation as the site of an inherent practice of colonization in all of its stages. Manuel follows and accompanies Teresa through the paved streets as she walks in the evenings towards the *sanzala*, but always stops at the border. Teresa, for her part, continues on the unpaved path—“língua de terra batida entre o capinzal doirado”—imagining a possible life with Manuel and the world that he describes to her. As the narrative line ensues, the more that Manuel desires Teresa’s body, the more she imagines her life with Manuel, “igual à de seus pais que desceram juntos para a cova” (49). For Teresa, whose parents died—“libertados pela febre”—when she was a child, the prospect of true love with Manuel is fraught with ambiguities. Is she betraying her community and “os sentimentos da raça” as she longs for a world to which she does not belong (48)? This incipient sense of betrayal is mitigated by her conclusion—“Mas ela ama Manuel” (48).

Manuel’s motive is more explicitly played out as conquest in his thoughts as he sits at a café in “esplanada barulhenta” of the colonized city: “Deseja-a. Adivinhou nela uma virgem y saboreia antecipadamente a violência da posse” (49). From the very opening of the text when Manuel places Teresa’s body in

his sight, the pursuit toward conquest is heightened by the fact that her body is “untouched” and “unconquered.” In Pepetela’s narrative, however, Teresa’s questioning of her feelings for Manuel as an abandonment of the *sanzala* community and all that this would entail finds its ambivalent counterpart in Manuel’s self-questioning: “Ter-se-á também apaixonado?” (49). Ultimately, however, he rejects this notion “com repugnância” and resolves to “possess” Teresa the following day.

Their sexual encounter, which should be read as part of the colonial pattern of violent conquest, takes place in that border zone between the white city and the *sanzala*—“quando ultrapassaram a última fila de casas e a sua frente apenas a estrada vermelha se avista” (50). Manuel’s exploitative purpose is revealed to Teresa when she attempts to kiss him and sees “a reação dele, o rictus de nojo que a Lua iluminou” (51). His explanation—“Mas eu prometi a mim mesmo só beijar aquela com que casasse” (51)—ruptures the landscape of Teresa’s imagined entry in the colonial city and world. As she flees into the *sanzala*, Manuel first questions whether he has abused her, but then relegates Teresa to the world of his “passatempos,” not to the colonial world in which marrying an African woman would have cost him his privileged life as a Portuguese settler in Benguela. To complete his colonization of Teresa, Manuel brags to his Portuguese buddies of his conquest and tells that she would accept the first one of them who went after her. Manuel acts with complete awareness that he is sacrificing her future for his own colonial privilege, since as Pepetela describes, he must mitigate his remorse by passing Teresa on to the next Portuguese man. The closing paragraph of the story mirrors the opening; as he watches Teresa re-merging into the *sanzala* landscape, Manuel’s gaze turns to a vision of an imagined world of the “grilhetas dos escravos, os lamentos e gritos dos torturados” (54). For Manuel, however, “em breve essa visão fugidia desaparece” and his desire for Teresa would no longer threaten his privilege.

The title of Pepetela’s story refers to the various overlapping colonial spaces that Teresa crosses in the space of the narrative text. The first is the world of a domestic female laborer in the white city in which she is exploited by her boss. The second, “o seu Mundo” is that of the “sanzala miserável” and what she sees as her narrow family life with her brother and sister-in-law. Teresa’s third life takes form through Manuel’s discourse of the expansive colonial world, while the fourth is the imagined future marriage and life with Manuel. Her fifth life is the one of sexual exploitation and conquest that she could not imagine, the one to which Manuel condemns her in order to extri-



cate himself from the contradictions of his own guilty conscience. In the space of ten pages, as Teresa traverses the divided colonial city of Benguela, but not the colonial divide, she negotiates five lives and an affirmation of her own blood line of exploitation and possession.

Published in 1962, "As cinco vidas da Teresa" predates Pepetela's revolutionary narratives that violently negate colonial identities as they express revolutionary *angolanidade* with equal violence. A reading of the short story, however, might posit that the early text is essential to an understanding of Pepetela's narrative progression. Undoubtedly influenced by Franz Fanon's writings during his revolutionary training and study in Algeria in the late 1960s just prior to his return to Angola, "As cinco vidas da Teresa" points to the questions of identity that mark his later works and could well draw upon Fanon's treatise on colonial Manichean representations and the construction of self-identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trapped within the colonial gaze, Teresa questions her own African identity and world as miserable and small, and envisions her release from the *sanzala* via the imagined life of privilege as the wife of a Portuguese settler. That this imagined life is a betrayal to her own selfhood, her community, and the generations of exploited and enslaved Angolans who have come before her also represents the bridge to the beginning of her fifth life of sexual exploitation and, perhaps, self-hatred. The narration also enters with more detail into Manuel's thoughts as he moves from the desire of possession to its violent enactment. If Manuel is to truly assume the role of colonizer, he must forgo any sense of Teresa as an individual with her own self-identity. Rather, the Teresa that Manuel captures in his gaze is primitivized, de-civilized and, ultimately, essentialized as an Angolan woman whose representation must always be both submissive and promiscuous if his own position of privilege, however ambivalent, is to be secured.

In this early text by the writer who would become Pepetela, the colonial representations of women, history, and urban space form an essential and essentializing part of the discourse of violence, conquest, and power. The Angolan contestations, articulated through political theory, violence, and discourses of utopia in Pepetela's later questioning narratives, are only hinted at in "As cinco vidas da Teresa." That the unseen *sanzala* is the hidden site of resistance to the locus of power in the *cidade branca* revitalizes the potential of Angolan self-identity and that Teresa, perhaps, in the future revolutionary location of Pepetela's narrative discourse, might have a possible sixth life.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The short story to which Cosme refers was published in 1962, but was not the first appearance of the narratives that were to become part of *Nosso Musseque*. In 1961-1962, Luandino published a series of *contos* in the *Jornal de Angola* with interrelated characters and geographical locations. One of the stories, for instance, "Os amores de Silva Chalado," refers to characters in "Os miúdos do Capitão Bento Abano," as is the case with, "Meninos de muceque," also cited as excerpted from the "romance inédito de Luandino Vieira."

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