

Specters of Colonial Violence: The Archive in António Lobo Antunes's *South of Nowhere*

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Abstract: António Lobo Antunes's novel *South of Nowhere* is plagued by ghosts, which function as an archive of the violence perpetrated during the Portuguese colonial war. These specters can be read in light of the notion of "archive fever" propounded by Jacques Derrida, in that they concurrently keep memory alive and lead to the annihilation of archival normativity. It is from the double bind between conservation and destruction of the archive that the possibility of a future emerges. Embracing the ghosts of colonial violence is the first step in the direction of a future where openness to what is to come can be allied to responsibility.

António Lobo Antunes's novel *South of Nowhere* finishes with the prospect of an arrival: "[...] but it may very well happen that Aunt Teresa will visit me" (229), utters the narrator as a form of goodbye, both to the stranger leaving his apartment and to us, readers of the book that has just ended. His remark is not a neutral one. It is a performative statement, as though, by alluding to the possibility of the woman's coming, he could magically make his words come true. We sense longing, desire, and a quiet hope in this farewell. At this point, the reader is already acquainted with Aunt Teresa, who had briefly entered the narrative as a maternal African prostitute. Is she really traveling from Angola to Lisbon to visit one of the many Portuguese soldiers who were her clients years ago? Is she even still alive? Or are we speaking of something else? The ref-

erence to the potential return of Aunt Teresa, strategically placed at the closure of the book, is the conjuring up of a ghost. It is the specter of the prostitute that the narrator awaits.

Specters always point in the direction of the past, when they were among the living. In this, they are very much like an archive, with which they also share the injunction to remember: a law, a story, a debt, or the violent death of a monarch, as is the case with the specter of King Hamlet, father of the homonymous prince and of all modern ghosts. But archives, again like specters, are not only traces of the past in the present, as Jacques Derrida states in *Archive Fever*: "[...] the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past [...]. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility" (36). Where lies the future in an archive? Can it be reduced to some kind of futurology, a prediction of what will happen by referring to what once was, the same way certain spirits announce impending events? Rather, what Derrida seems to be addressing is the openness of the archive toward the future. Archives can never be closed, as ghosts are not ever fully exorcised. They keep coming back, in different moments and in various forms. The future of the archive, of the archive-as-specter, is thus a question of the future response, promise and responsibility of individuals and communities haunted by past violence and, ultimately, a question of our own future response, promise and responsibility, as scholars and readers of texts dealing with war, torture, and mutilation.

South of Nowhere is replete with specters. One of the various novels about the Portuguese colonial war that proliferated in the years following the 1974 overturn of the dictatorship, the text is plagued by the ghosts of the dead. The narrator, a doctor who served as a medical officer on the front lines, relates to a woman he has just met at a bar the cruelties he witnessed as a soldier. Throughout his tale of brutality and despair, intertwined in the trappings of a seduction plot, he is visited by the recollections of those he met in Africa, of the ones he saw being killed and of those who helped him live. The text is organized, archive-like, in 23 chapters, labeled after the letters of the Portuguese alphabet and, in its materiality, it performs an attempt to lend reality to the specters it contains. The book, as an artifact and an archive, becomes the embodiment of ghosts that a whole society has tried hard to forget.

Lobo Antunes's narrative, like many of the novels about the Portuguese war in Africa, has been widely interpreted as a condemnation of colonial policies during the dictatorship and as a denunciation of the veil of collective

amnesia that cloaked the past, ensuing the independence of those territories. Some critics have stressed the text's deconstruction of imperial myths (Madureira), while others predominantly focused on the predicament of the main character (Seixo), whose traumatic experience as an officer metonymically stands for the situation of many soldiers who fought in the war. Compelling as these approaches certainly are, they have remained bound to the book's reinterpreting of the past or, at most, have striven to highlight its emphasis on the relevance of the past in the present. In this essay, I would like to take these interpretations as a starting point and venture a step beyond them. I will read the novel not only as an instantiation of a call for remembrance but also as a reflection about the possibility of a future—and what kind of a future—for societies that have both been responsible for violence and undergone traumatic events. Guided by the tropes of the archive and of the specter so prevalent in *South of Nowhere* and building upon the Derridean notion of the archive, I will adumbrate the concept of the archive-as-specter as a possible path to envisage the future. What is at stake is not the exorcism of ghosts but rather the decision to embrace them as the only way to face what is to come.

Toward the end of *South of Nowhere*, when the main character is already in his apartment with his female listener, he leaves the living-room and sits alone in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, to talk to the ghost of Sofia, an African woman he loved during the war and who was killed by the political police (PIDE) for being an informer. The narrator describes his reaction when he learned that she had been assassinated:

And I leave this tile aquarium as I left PIDE's headquarters, where prisoners tilled the agents' crops bending over the earth in the short, soft gestures of corpses, without the courage of a scream of indignation or rebellion. And I go through this night as I once went through twenty-seven months of bloody slavery, without a protest. [...] Because this is what I became, what they turned me into, Sofia: a precociously old creature [...]. (181)

This passage permeates the various interrelated realities forming the disturbing experience of war at the kernel of *South of Nowhere*: a sense of culpability for the cruelties that took place during the fighting, impotent rage against those in command and remorse for being unable to stand against them. The specter of Sofia and those of the African prisoners continue to trouble the nar-

rator, together with his guilt for conniving with their deaths. In fact, anything remotely close to dissent would not have been tolerated in Portugal during the dictatorship. In the 1960s and early '70s, Portuguese society was placed in the peculiar situation of concurrently occupying the position of hangman and victim. Boaventura de Sousa Santos's notion of "borderland culture," though developed to explicate different phenomena, might prove germane to the understanding of these circumstances. A semi-peripheral nation in terms of the world's colonial system, Portugal always occupied an intermediate position between Europe and its overseas territories, never fully identifying with either (Santos 133).¹ Throughout the 20th century, the country continued to inhabit a threshold. Agents of a despotic domination over their African colonies, the Portuguese were also the objects of political repression at home. Thus, after the overturn of the dictatorial regime and the end of the colonial war, Portuguese society was left with the thorny mission of dealing both with the infinite responsibility of a country that was the perpetrator of atrocious war crimes and with trauma caused by years of oppression at home and fighting abroad. *South of Nowhere's* many ghosts point toward a possible path for negotiating the meanders of this dual task.

One of the issues that frequently arises in discussions about responsibility and trauma is that of defining whether it is more efficacious to deal with past events through memory or the archive, which, in the context of Lobo Antunes's novel, would be tantamount to enquiring if specters are memorial or archival. In *Archive Fever* Derrida, following the footsteps of Freud, suggests that the archive takes place at the point of structural breakdown of memory. Archives are necessarily consigned to an external place and are consequently hypomnesic and prosthetic, assuring the possibility of repetition, reproduction and memorization (11). However, Freud always maintained the primacy of memory, and psychoanalysis permanently aimed at returning to the live origin, of which the archive was a mere mnemotechnical supplement (92). This stance has not been radically altered in recent debates on the subject. The contemporary proliferation of archives has variously been interpreted as a decline of our capacity to remember (see Nora) or, more optimistically, as a contestation of forgetting (Huyssen 9), yet both positions seem to coincide in their nostalgic longing for unmediated recollection. But was there ever really a time without archives, where everyone and everything was either alive or living on in our memory? Derrida's reflections in *Archive Fever* expand from this very question:

Supposing, *concesso non dato*, that a living being ever responds in an absolutely living and well-adjusted manner, without the least automatism, without ever having an archival technique overflow the singularity of an event, we know in any case that a spectral response (thus informed by a *techne* and inscribed in an archive) is always possible. There would be neither history nor tradition nor culture without that possibility. It is this that we are speaking of here. It is this, in truth, that we must answer for. (62-63)

The supposition that we might ever receive an event as absolute singularity is a theoretical fiction. Every response is irretrievably contaminated by automatism, by specters and archives. Thus, if the archive is a mere auxiliary of memory, it is a supplement that opens the possibility for history, tradition and culture, i.e., for the capability of remembering as such. Archives cannot arise without memory but remembrance always has a trace of the archival.

South of Nowhere illustrates this interrelation between memory and archive. The main character's diatribe against forgetting is accompanied by his compulsive necessity to relate the experiences he went through during the war.² The narrator's iteration of the past translates his need for the exteriority of the archive. He disseminates his recollections through his female listener, who is transformed into a prosthetic support of his memories, thus lending her own reality to the events he remembers. On another level, writing is itself an archival process, as Derrida points out: "What is the moment of the archive? [...] Is it the moment when one presses 'save' in the computer? Or is it simply the moment of writing?" (25). To write is to employ a technical means to create a mnemonic support. Thus the physical existence of the novel in paper can itself function as an archive.

If remembering is inextricably bound to the archive, then a society's unlimited responsibility for its past will always have to involve a form of external support for memory. But archives not only enable our thinking in the preterit. They equally represent a constructive way of relating to disturbing events, as Dean Franco states in an article published in 2005 in *PMLA*. Cultural archives are a particularly efficient way of working through trauma and constitute a model for interpreting what the author names "historically problematic literature" (376). Franco opposes the process of mourning, which he associates with a teleology of cultural wholeness, to the non-redemptive character of working-through, mediated by cultural archives and based upon repetition-with-difference: "Working-through suggests an approach to ethnic history that privileges reading and critique and ever-expanding archives over

closed canons" (382). The archive created by fiction would therefore constitute a privileged means to enable the process of working-through in societies with a traumatic past.

Franco's article offers several valuable insights for the reading of Lobo Antunes's text. On the one hand, its emphasis on culture and literature points toward the collapse of the artificial distinction between private and public archives at work in the novel. This breakdown becomes clear when the main character ironically describes the tutelary entities that dominated his childhood: "The specter of Salazar hovered over the bald and pious small flames of corporative Holy Ghost, saving us from the tenebrous and deleterious idea of socialism" (16). The ghost of Salazar, the ruler of Portugal for over four decades, hovered over the early years of the narrator and embodied a paternal and protective figure. Similarly, the dictator's specter was a constant presence in Portuguese society, all the more insidious for its "rhetoric of invisibility" that made his influence stealthily felt, in the shadows of a low-profile persona.³ So a personal recollection embedded in a fictional text can form an archive that will prove relevant for a whole community. On the other hand, by stressing the significance of ever-changeable cultural archives, as opposed to the fixity he associates with libraries and museums, Franco identifies the tension between normativity and openness at the core of the archival and of *South of Nowhere*.

Every archive and every text, fictional or otherwise, is built upon an original act of violence, since what is recorded always involves the repression of what remained undocumented. Is the narrator of *South of Nowhere* hiding something? Did the colonial war really happen as he describes? At the moment when something is written, i.e., archived, it silences the suppression of the unwritten and acquires a reality that perpetuates itself. This normative character was already present in the root of the word "archive," which Derrida exhumes in *Archive Fever*. The Greek origin of the term designated the domicile where documents were kept and the concept was closely bound to the authority of the archons, those who possessed the privilege to interpret the law.

Placed from its inception at the intersection of topology and nomology, the archive is dominated by the principle of classification and unification and, therefore, always aspires at repetition without change, at being one with itself. Solipsistic reproduction could also be propounded as the main trait of *South of Nowhere*.⁴ The only voice in the novel is that of the main character and the existence of his female interlocutor can only be inferred by some references to the situational context of the discourse. The narration completely adheres

to his perspective, throughout a claustrophobic voyage to his interiority that amounts to a *de facto* monologue. Furthermore, it becomes clear that he is not telling his tale for the first time, as he sometimes interrupts the story to mention other occasions when he recounted those events to different listeners: "Don't pay too much attention. The wine is following its course and I will soon ask you to marry me, as usual" (30). Enclosed within his subjectivity, the narrator strives to replicate the iterability of the archive. He is the archon who possesses the true elucidation of the events he describes.

Yet, can the narrator of *South of Nowhere* really maintain his pretence of control, this fiction within fiction? Can an archive uphold its institutionally sanctioned iteration without difference? Archives are permanently changing in that, each time they are consulted, they are augmented by new interpretations that will from then on incorporate previously existing files (Derrida 68). Similarly, every time the main character in Lobo Antunes's novel repeats his story he will be amplifying the archive of his war experience and fashioning it anew in adapting to his variegated interlocutors. Any archive or any text pre-emptively subverts normativity in that, ultimately, the power of its interpretation will lie in its multifarious listeners or perusers.

But Derrida mentions still another reason why the archive can never be equal to itself—namely the fact that its conservative character is always counter-balanced by an archival "death drive" defined as "archive fever." Archive desire and the ability to remember would not exist without the *a priori* possibility of forgetfulness and the destruction of recollections. It is this archiviolithic drive that originates the need for the archival or, in other words, the archive takes place in the tension between conservation and oblivion. In *South of Nowhere*, Portugal collectively wants to forget the war. However, this desire to destroy the recollection of what happened flips into its opposite as the archive fever in the novel originates the narrator's necessity to record the past and the specters that haunt him. Archival authority is thus undermined by archive fever, which, paradoxically, both consumes the archive and is a condition for its creation.

As Dean Franco points out, cultural archives are particularly effective in mediating the process of working through trauma. This is not the case because they possess a flexibility that they would not share with traditional archives, but rather because of every archive's inherent destruction drive. In fact, the archive's desire for annihilation challenges its normative tendency and lends it the openness necessary in a non-redemptive process of working-through. In *South of Nowhere*, the combination of the archive and the archiviolithic

could thus provide a model for Portuguese society to deal with its double burden of responsibility and trauma. The archive, in its conservative, iterative dimension, points toward the need for permanent remembrance. But this authoritative stance already portends the archive fever that lies at its heart. Archivization means the imminent possibility of destruction and the destabilizing difference in repetition, which is also a feature of working-through. Infinite responsibility for the horrors of the colonial conflict and working through the war's traumatic events are part of the same movement.

But the archive, in its pendular motion between conservation and destruction, is not limited to constituting a bridge between past and present. According to Derrida, it is, in fact, in the interstices between archival normativity and archive fever that the possibility of the future emerges:

The One [...] can only affirm itself and engage itself in this repetition. This is even what ties in depth the injunction of memory with the anticipation of the future to come. The injunction, even when it summons memory or the safeguard of the archive, turns incontestably toward the future to come. [...] If repetition is thus inscribed at the heart of the future to come, one must always import there, *in the same stroke*, the death drive, the violence of forgetting, *superrepression* (suppression and repression), the anarchic [...]. (79)

The future to come presupposes the repetition of the archive and concurrently entails forgetting. It is not knowable or predictable but rather messianic, which Derrida distinguishes from messianism, in that the latter awaits the arrival of a messiah while the former feeds only on hope (72). Further, this promise of the future is spectral, since specters, like the archive, combine iteration and singularity: "A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it [...] to a very singular experience of the promise" (Derrida 36).⁶ The future is hauntological; it arrives in and through ghosts. The archive-as-specter, placed at the intersection of the archive and of archive fever, will keep recurring in what is to come.

The many specters in *South of Nowhere* mirror the tension between an archival drive and archive fever and point in the direction of the future to come. Toward the end of the novel, when the main character is making love to his interlocutor, he is visited by the spirits of war victims he had met years ago:

[...] because the guy from Mangando and all the guys from Mangando and Marimbanguengo and Cessa and Mussuma and Ninda and Chiúme will rise inside me out of their lead coffins, wrapped in bloody bandages flying around them, demanding from me in the resigned laments of the dead what I never gave them out of fear: the cry of rebellion they expected from me against the warlords from Lisbon [...]. (191)

This rise of the dead, which could easily have been a scene out of a classic, horror B-movie, happens against the narrator's wishes. Yet, even though he might desire to give in to archive fever and erase some of his worst war recollections, he cannot avoid his ghosts, which function as an archive and keep the remembrance of what he went through alive. The specters' coming is led by their demand that the main character belatedly rebel against the combats waged by Portugal but, even if he repents for his lack of protest, he will never be able to modify his past silence. The spirits' request is, in this sense, impossible to fulfill and, since their command will never be fully satisfied, they will continue to torment the narrator.

Likewise, the experience of the war will continue to disturb the Portuguese people, in spite of their desire to bury the past. Furthermore, the apparitions in the passage quoted above are particularly striking because they arise *inside* the narrator. It is as if, through a process of Freudian melancholia, they had been incorporated into the main character's self. Moreover, in some parts of his discourse the speaker insists upon the spectral traits of his own existence: "[...] I found out one afternoon, as I was sitting in an esplanade in Algés in the bubbly presence of a bottle of sparkling water, that I was dead" (11).⁷ The narrator has become living-dead, almost indistinguishable from the other phantoms surrounding him. The text thus carries out an undoing of traditional categories in the novel insofar as the fictional reality embodied in the characters can hardly be disentangled from the fictionality of fiction represented by the ghosts. The specters in Lobo Antunes's narrative, archives of the colonial war's most atrocious crimes, could be read as standing for the ghosts that haunt Portugal. They cannot be disavowed or considered as mere external presences but are embedded in society and form a part of the country's understanding of itself. These spectral archives have acquired a reality of their own and need to be accounted for in any possible future.

At the end of chapter D in *South of Nowhere* the speaker states that, as he left Luanda to travel to the heartland of Angola, he initiated a "painful

learning of agony" (43). But the text cannot be reduced to a mere recounting of past misery and to the realization, in hindsight, of the deleterious effects of a deadly war. In fact, the discovery of suffering goes hand in hand with the apprenticeship of how to cope with it. This reading would concur with João Camilo's description of the novel as a "Bildungsroman" (245). However, while Camilo considers that the text recounts a failed learning, we might rather allege that it is simply an unfinished one, which is still going on at the moment of enunciation. The narrator slowly realizes that any attempt to exorcise his ghosts is doomed to failure. Salazar's spirit, his militaristic dead grandfathers and all those he saw dying in Angola, both his fellow soldiers and the Africans assassinated by the military and the secret police, will have to be acknowledged as the spectral archives of his past and, ultimately, as part of his identity. Learning to live with ghosts is learning to live with oneself, and this is a process that stretches endlessly into the future. If justice is the opposite of forgetting, as Derrida mentions in *Archive Fever* (76), then any society behooves its archives. Lobo Antunes's text seems to suggest that, in the case of Portugal, the acceptance of the archive-as-specter collates both the need for working through traumatic events and the responsibility for the colonial war. Learning to live with ghosts is the only possibility of openness to the promise of a *to come*. This is why, at the end of the novel and of a voyage through the violence of the conflict in Africa, the narrator of *South of Nowhere* summons the spirit of a woman he had met years ago. His encounter with Aunt Teresa's ghost is a token of his future. He wants to be haunted.

Notes

¹ Santos illustrates his affirmation through a Shakespearean metaphor: "Contrary to all other European nations, Portugal had to see itself in two mirrors, Prospero's and Caliban's, and was conscious that its truth lay somewhere between them" (133).

² Throughout the novel, the narrator frequently accuses Portuguese society of attempting to erase the recollection of the war: "Why the hell don't we talk about it? I am beginning to think that the million and a half men who were in Africa did not exist and that I am telling some sort of tale of poor taste and impossible to believe, an invented story with which I make you feel emotional" (79).

³ In *Retórica da invisibilidade*, José Gil argues that Salazar developed a rhetoric of silence, which rendered his public persona almost invisible. This invisibility made Salazar even more revered and was a powerful tool in helping him maintain his power for so long.

⁴ *South of Nowhere* has frequently been criticized for its solipsism. Maria Alzira Seixo, for instance, argues that, by negating the other's voice, the narrator becomes imprisoned in his own

subjectivity, thus forming a circle from which he cannot escape: "This novel represents the negation of the other's word [...]. In an attitude of continuous circularity, enclosed within himself or turned to mirrors, he [the narrator] loses the word of his partner, the event of dialogue and the plot of live conversation" (64, translation mine).

⁶ The spectre unites the repetition of the archive and archive fever, the undoing of archival authority: "Also, the spectral motif stages this disseminating fission from which the archontic principle, and the concept of the archive, and the concept in general suffer, from the principle on" (Derrida 84-5).

⁷ The notion that the narrator is himself dead is reiterated throughout the text: "If the revolution has ended, do you understand?, and, in a certain sense, it really has ended, it is because the dead from Africa, their mouths full of dust, cannot protest [...]. And we, the survivors, remain so doubtful that we are alive that we are afraid that, through the impossibility of some movement, we will realize that there is no flesh in our gestures and no sound in our words and we realize that we are as dead as they are [...]" (73).

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