

## Introduction to “O Rumor da literatura negra”

Agostinho Neto, the first president of Angola and one of the nation’s most renowned poets, is not an uncontroversial figure. He headed a liberation movement, the MPLA, that was riven by factions and ideological disagreements during and after the struggle for independence. Some revere him as the father of the nation. They see him as a leader driven by the desire to bring dignity, literacy, education and development to Angolans.<sup>1</sup> Others loathe him, pointing to his autocratic tendencies and intolerance of dissent. They claim his hands were steeped in the blood not just of his fellow countrymen and women but of thousands of members of the movement he led.<sup>2</sup>

Before Neto became the towering figure of Angolan independence, he co-founded in 1950 the short-lived Center for African Studies in Portugal, with one of Portuguese-speaking Africa’s most formidable intellectuals, Amílcar Cabral, and Francisco José Tenreiro – the poet from São Tomé e Príncipe whose work is often read to exemplify negritude in the Portuguese language. The other co-founder was Mário Pinto de Andrade, a fellow Angolan with whom Neto had an increasingly fraught relationship that completely broke down shortly after Angolan independence. From the 1950s onwards, Andrade curated anthologies of “black” writing from Portuguese-speaking Africa that repeatedly included work by Neto. “Aspiração”, one of Neto’s first published poems, appeared in Tenreiro and Andrade’s 1953 anthology *Poesia negra de expressão portuguesa*.<sup>3</sup> In it, Neto juxtaposes the Congo, Georgia and Amazonas, as well as the traditional Angolan musical instrument the quissange, the marimba, the viola and the saxophone, following the aesthetic paradigm of negritude that sought to represent a cross-continental solidarity of experience and culture as it affirmed black pride.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Neto became an international cause célèbre. The Salazar regime attempted to silence his calls for an independent Angola and to crush the liberation movement of which he was part. After one of Neto’s many detentions by the New State, the writers Doris Lessing and Irish Murdoch were among those who signed a letter to the *Times* calling for his release. They characterized him as Portuguese-speaking Africa’s equivalent to Léopold Sédar Senghor.<sup>4</sup>

Like Neto, the Senegalese poet Senghor would go on to become the first president of his liberated country. Alongside the Martinican Aimé Césaire, he is credited with formalizing the concept of *negritude*. Interestingly, Senghor saw positive parallels between practitioners of his kind of *negritude* and the Portuguese national self. On a state visit to Portugal in 1975, he claimed among other things that the Portuguese and black Africans shared the same gift of being instinctively and genetically poets.<sup>5</sup> Even more oddly, Senghor's address to the Lisbon Academy of Sciences showed a complete imbibition by the Senegalese president of Gilberto Freyre's lusotropical mythology as it had been distorted by the then-overthrown New State. The supposed conviviality of the Portuguese and their Brazilian scions found a parallel in Senghor's essentialized black Africans.

All this points to the limitations of Lessing and Murdoch's comparison of Neto with Senghor. Politically and personally, the two were far apart. One suspects that in visiting post-revolutionary Portugal and linking lusotropicalism with black affirmation, Senghor knew he would irritate his Angolan rival. Senghor was averse to the revolutionary Marxism that would come to underpin Neto's MPLA. Neto developed misgivings about the affirmation of race as a unifying concept, particularly in post-independence Angola, where he spoke out against what he perceived to be the anti-white racism directed against those in his coterie of Portuguese descent. For him, to be Angolan was a political choice that implied commitment to an MPLA agenda. It was not a blood right or a territorial given.

This is what makes the text that follows so curious. As Alexandra Reza has pointed out, *negritude* was always an evolving concept. Senghor and Césaire did not hold a monopoly on its definition, even if their names continue to be most closely allied to its theorization as a literary practice. In reality, *negritude* was often articulated to "racially informed expressions of class politics that retained a more-than-national perspective."<sup>6</sup> Neto's "O rumo da literatura negra" sits more comfortably in that vein than with the racialized essentialism of his Senegalese counterpart. Taken from Mário Pinto de Andrade's archive held at the Mário Soares Foundation, the text was originally written for the Center for African Studies, and attempts to grapple with what counts and does not count towards black literature. The difficulty Neto finds in reaching a pure definition parallels the ease with which he enumerates exclusions from Machado de Assis to Rui de Noronha, who despite his "Surge et ambula" "is "merely" a Portuguese poet. Neto would use a similar tactic when it came to defining who was Angolan,

excluding opponents from the framework of national identification, and limiting the concept of Angolanness to a marker of ideological commitment.

Black literature for Neto ultimately seems to be about social commitment. There is no room for introspection. There needs to be a psychological identification with a way of being in the world – something that can only be achieved affectively, by being the committed mirror of the social life of a people. That, one assumes, is what he thought he was doing when he wrote his poetry.

#### NOTES

1. Roberto de Almeida, *A vida e a obra de Agostinho Neto* (Luanda: MPLA, 1987).
2. See for example, Carlos Pacheco, *Agostinho Neto: O perfil de um ditador* (Lisbon: Vega, 2016).
3. Francisco Tenreiro and Mário Pinto de Andrade, *Poesia negra de expressão portuguesa* (Lisbon: África, 1982) [1953], pp. 59-60.
4. Marga Holness, Introduction to translation of *Sagrada esperança*, reproduced in *A noção de ser*, Pires Laranjeira and Ana T. Rocha (eds) (Luanda: Novo Rumo, 2014), p. 770.
5. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Lusitanidade e negritude* (Lisbon: Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, 1975), p. 51.
6. Alexandra Reza, *African Literary Journals in French and Portuguese, 1947-1968: Politics, Culture and Form* (Oxford DPhil Thesis, 2018), p. 98.

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