

memories

Migration, identity and emotion
in the era of transculture

of

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MEMORIES OF DISPLACEMENT
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IN THE ERA OF TRANSCULTURE

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INTERLACEMENTS: ALLOPHILIA AND FIGURATIONS OF THE OUTSIDER IN *KOKOSCHKA'S DOLL* BY AFONSO CRUZ

MARIA JOÃO SIMÕES*

1. INTRODUCTORY NOTES

In several novels by Afonso Cruz, the figurative process involved in constructing characters is achieved by means of a complex shifting back and forth between the individual and the collective, without either one erasing the other. This is the case in *Kokoschka's Doll*, where the most important figures are not stock characters who represent certain types of individuals but are instead very singular figures with traits that are not only unique but even outlandish or improbable. Nevertheless, this does not mean that their fractured identities are not signs that carry profound connotations which contribute to (and are part of) a broader representation of traumatic historical social conditions and periods of conflict.

The initial chronotopical framework for the plot is the city of Dresden under Nazi rule, during the Second World War. Within this context, the novel presents the reader with various figurations of outsiders and displaced, exiled or segregated people or those suffering from the “condition of exile”¹ which, according to Alexis Nouss, is more heavily loaded with meaning than that of the migrant, since it covers the many variables conveyed by the countless words for migration and exile. As he explains:

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¹ Alexis Nouss explores the roots of the word “exilience” (which was, as the author explains, created in the same way as Levinas’s notion of “essance” and Derridean neologism “différance”, in order to point the passive and active simultaneous meaning) and he says that, if combined with the word “angst”, it would become “exilangst” (Nouss 2014, 341).

...the experience of exile would represent an existential core common to all such phenomena involving constraints on mobility of any type, and consequently, the exile would be able to [...] model all other notions without covering them typologically. This paradigm's shift – that would replace the migration lexicon with a thought based on the notions of exilic and exilience conditions – is all the more grounded as it is based on the knowledge that the exilic experience shakes the human categories concerning space, time and identity

The existential core common to all subjects engaged in migration will be referred to as *exilience*, which is both a condition and a consciousness. (Nouss 2015, 22, 26)

The condition of the exile thus encompasses a wide range of cases, in a list that always remains open:

The list, which is not exhaustive, would include exiles, foreigners, émigrés, immigrants, migrants, the children of immigrant parents, expatriates, the repatriated, the displaced and the uprooted, refugees, asylum seekers, illegal immigrants and undocumented migrants, stateless, banished, proscribed, pariahs, wanderers, excluded, disappeared, repressed, deported, interned, relegated, ostracized, reprobate, fugitives, *desterrados*, *desplazados*, *personae non gratae*, *Gastarbeiter*, *confinatti*, *boat people*, *aliens*, *cross-borders*, *non-citizens*, *nomads*, *cosmopolites*, *météques*. (Nouss 2015, 21)

An approach leading from the particular to the general will be adopted to analyse certain methods used in the figurative process integral to the various cases of displaced/out-of-place characters in Cruz's novel. These characters are part of a complex fictional world of plots that are interlaced yet separated by different periods of time, as illustrated in the following diagram, which shows the three different narrative levels of the embedded stories:

A BONECA DE KOKOSCHKA
– NARRATIVE LEVELS: FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD

1.º Part 1 (c. 1944–1945) – Isaac Dresner, a Jew hiding in the basement of a bird shop owned by Bonifácio Vogel (a man with “cranial gaps”); Dresden under Nazi rule.

1.º Part 2 – Before the War: Isaac Dresner’s ancestors in Bratislava; Tisilia, who belongs to the Jewish community in Minsk, but flees to Vilnius and then Dresden.

1.º Paris (1960s and 70s): Bonifácio, Isaac and Tisilia live together as a strange family; Isaac opens the “Humiliated and Offended” bookshop; The encounter with Mathias Popa, a musician who wants to be a writer (after the Sand War in Morocco).

After the War – The embedded story of the Varga family in Budapest and Dresden: Zsigmond Varga, a rich Hungarian who has eight legitimate children, Luiza and Anasztázia, the grandmother of Adele, who saves the Nigerian Eduwa; Adele’s research.

2.º 3.º 1912 – The doll belonging to the painter Oskar Kokoschka becomes a substitute for his lover Alma Mahler. The doll is worshipped by Eduwa as an image of Oshun, replaced by Luiza.

After making an offering to Oshun, Anasztázia meets Mathias Popa, the future grandfather of Adele, in Nigeria.

1.º Part 3 – Miro Kordo, a Portuguese jazz musician who performs in Lisbon and sometimes in Paris, where he saves Adele from being attacked.

In Paris (the real-life) Adele Varga finds Isaac Dresner in the bookshop and he reinvents Mathias Popa for her Adele meets Miro again; he is playing in a bar.

2. SPACE AND NON-SPACES

Spatiality is a basic element in the representation of exile and the condition of those who are *out of place*. Hence, spaces serve as signs which are fundamental to the process of representing this condition.

One of the first spaces represented is a cramped basement where Isaac is hiding after a narrow escape from death when a German soldier shoots his friend Perelman, whose head rolls off Isaac's boot onto the ground. It is a dark, confined space that offers no possibility of independent existence; a space symbolic of the segregation suffered by the persecuted Jews, a wreck like all the other attics, top floors and spare rooms where many lived in hiding. It is the basement of a shop which sells birds and other items and belongs to Bonifaz Vogel, who became the owner after his entire family died in the war. The shop is therefore a space which represents life since Isaac will be fed by Bonifaz and, in return, offer him advice on the prices he should ask for the products he buys and sells.

The narrow space in which Bonifaz's brain functions – so narrow that a German professor once declared that his head “was composed of cranial gaps” (Cruz 2010, 20) – represents another strangely shrunken space which results in ostracism, offering opportunities for those stronger and more intelligent to exploit him.

Other suffocating spaces include those in which Tsilia Kacev has lived, the first of which was her parents' house. Tsilia was a member of the Jewish community in Minsk and her father, an important businessman, wanted his daughter to marry well and was unaware of her stigmata. Tsilia escapes to Vilnius, where her boss takes advantage of her. She then flees to Dresden, where she lives in hiding in the attic of a painter, serving as a model and serving the painter too. She runs away again and hides by the river during the bombardment.

If these spaces are suffocating, the place inhabited by Eduwa, a gigantic Nigerian, is even more negative, since he is crushed by the tiny rooms, in striking contrast to his stature and peaceful character. Eduwa is yet another outsider who has no chance of even becoming conscious of his situation. After Anasztazia rescues him from death and gives him shelter, he is happy for some months taking care of her garden. The garden, therefore, functions as a heterotopian place, in Foucauldian terms, a kind of limbo between his memory of Nigeria and the narrow, nullifying spaces he is driven into by the ostracism in the surrounding environment. However, this does not last, as he is soon thrown out by Anasztazia's father, the rich Hungarian Zsigmond Varga,

following the accusation that his daughter has been engaged in an improper relationship with a black man.

Although large, the house Zsigmond Varga has built in Dresden is also a negative space, reflecting the decadent lifestyle of his profligate family of eight legitimate children. Like the house he owned in Budapest, which had seven floors and a neo-Gothic facade designed by the (fictitious) architect Liatos (Cruz 2010, 149), it also represents segregation, since it is home to only eight of his children (*idem*, 150) – a relatively small percentage of the fifty sons and daughters this corrupt, conservative Hungarian has fathered in total. If his wealth is shredded by war and his family dismembered by the deaths brought on by the war, the gaps and fissures had already started to crack before, as shown by his eccentricities but, above all, the unruly life of his daughter Lujza.

Wandering is an example of another form of spatiality. Mathias Popa, the son of Lujza and a gipsy violinist known as Ovidiu Popa, who claimed to be blind, travels around various countries burdened by his gift of understanding music and his ability to play well when in reality he wants to be a writer.

After the War, the city of Paris becomes a space that represents freedom for Isaac, Tsilia and Bonifaz. Tsilia invents spaces on her canvases, creating a spatiality in which memories of figures are intertwined through multiple perspectives:

TSILIA PAINTED several different angles of reality for the same image, superimposed with layers of paint as if they were accumulations of hate. A person would appear with the left side overlapping with the right, the upper part with the lower one, as if dancing from all possible angles, even the invisible ones, because a person's left side is different from its own left side, depending on its mood. Tsilia was capable of bringing together what Cubism and Expressionism combined would never be able to achieve. And she only used paint and a little bit of herself. (Cruz 2010, 69)

For his part, Isaac builds a space for himself with the failed business that is the “Humiliated & Offended” bookstore – a bookstore of dead souls (Cruz 2010, 69). That is why he is willing to make the invention of other souls possible by creating the publisher “Eurídice! Eurydice!”

In this far from exhaustive list of places, it is, therefore, possible to identify certain concrete traces and historical features which Marc Augé considers characteristic of the “anthropological place” although, in terms of space in this

novel, it is the markers of emptiness and lack of identity-based relationships which stand out, endowing these spaces with the characteristics of non-places, as defined by this thinker. Nevertheless, Augé himself points out that anthropological places do not exist in their “pure form”, but instead take shape as “opposed polarities”, establishing themselves as “palimpsests” (Augé 2012, 70) which are continually rewritten.

3. SIGNS AND SYMBOLIC DETAILS

Kokoschka's Doll presents symbolic details and meaningful signs which ostensibly take shape as the marks of traumas and fractures in established (or even embedded) relations between specific subjects and spaces.

One of these signs is Isaac's limp: after his friend Perelman is shot by a German soldier, his head rolls off Isaac's boot into the street making an “almost inaudible” and “deafening” sound (Cruz 2010, 13), Isaac, who escaped with his life because the weapon jammed, always walks with a limp in his right foot. It is therefore a psychosomatic trauma. The loss of his friend is a loss in terms of social relations, representing a lost link with a city at war and on the verge of destruction.

Tsilia, in turn, appears in Dresden with her arms clasped across her chest (*idem*, 44) to protect herself from the cold – a gesture which she maintains because she cannot escape the coldness within her. In addition to this sign, which functions as a marker of cold and hunger, Tsilia appears with stigmata, bleeding from her hands and forehead, which she hides to avoid stigmatisation. In this case, they may be considered symptoms, displaying different characteristics from signs because they are “perspectival and subjective”, as Birgit M. Kaiser points out.²

Whilst not intending to examine all the symbolic details scattered throughout the novel, it is nevertheless important to consider, within the embedded story, the tale of the doll which belonged to Kokoschka, which constitutes a kind of third level of narrative. Based on a true story, it is important here because it

² According to Birgit Mara Kaiser, if “symptoms are, thus, perspectival and subjective” it is because they not only “require – very much like signs – to be interpreted”, but also because “their interpretation always has to take into account the specific constellation in which they appear to whom they appear; that is, they are not readable in isolation but only in constellation with other symptoms [...]” (Kaiser 2017, 185).

functions as a sign for retaining “love of the other”, reflecting a kind of attachment that can only be achieved through a simulacrum. After all, the doll, created as a very detailed likeness of Alma Mahler, the lover of the painter Kokoschka, is an attempt to appropriate the “other”, a means of holding on to the body and free spirit of Alma Mahler – even if it is an attempt doomed to failure.

Moreover, in the story embedded within the second level, constituted by the memorialist narrative written by the character-writer Mathia Popa and delivered to his editor Isaac (also himself a character), the doll is salvaged by Eduwa the Nigerian. After the artist (Kokoschka) throws it out, Eduwa picks it up, repairs it, takes it back to his tiny lodgings believing it to be an image of the goddess Oshun, the symbol of fertility, and begins to worship it.

In this way, a narrative jump from the third to the second level is established, since the doll becomes an emblematic element of the story of the Varga family because Lujza takes the place of the doll and will become a fearful and violent incarnation of the beloved goddess.

4. FIGURATIONS OF EXISTENTIAL CONDITIONS AND RELATIONS

These spaces and signs are part of the figurative process developed for different situations and characters' conditions.

From the outset – given the chronotope of the novel – the basement emerges as a means of representing the *ghettoization* of the Jews, which can be characterised as an anthropoemic form, according to the designation proposed by Zygmunt Bauman. In fact, this sociologist makes a distinction (based on Claude Levi-Strauss) between anthropoemic and anthropophagic perspectives on the Other: the former is characterised by a distancing from the other in order to prevent physical contact, which is exactly the case of the hiding place (Bauman 2001, 118).

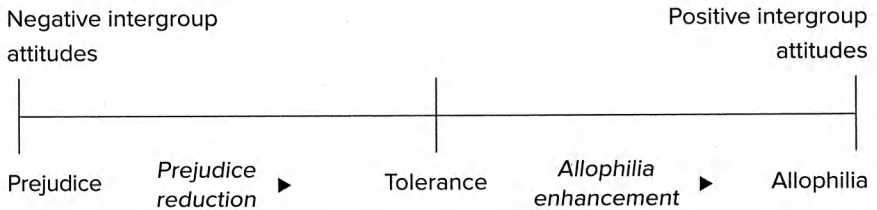
However, the basement where Isaac hides does not entirely represent imprisonment, given that a relationship based on mutual assistance develops between Isaac and Bonifaz: the latter helps by providing food for the former who, in turn, assists him by protecting him from those who patronise the shop intending to exploit or cheat him.

A counterpoint is therefore developed in the novel between relations based on allophilia and those governed by xenophobia, hatred and ostracism.

The lability and range of relationship possibilities can be better understood if considered in terms of a sliding scale, as proposed by Todd Pittinski (2005).

in his research in the field of social psychology and presented in the following diagram:

FIGURE 1. PREJUDICE, TOLERANCE, AND ALLOPHILIA



Anastazia Varga's relationship with the Nigerian Eduwa is also allophilic, from the moment she saves him from death to the point where they establish a filial relationship, where she confides in him and questions him, even getting him to dance with her.

As another example of this counterpoint, in another time frame, Luiza Varga maltreats Eduwa, beating him and taking his money – and her contempt is emulated by her son Mathias Popa, who follows the example set by his mother even though Eduwa has been a father to him and never let him go hungry.

In another episode, the figuration of love for the Other is exposed in the novel as a limit situation, because it is located on the edges or threshold of what can be understood as holiness. Indeed, Eduwa, who had been sent to the concentration camp at Mauthausen where he was tortured by a German guard, ends up saving him from being beaten, nursing him in his tent. Once cured, the former guard repays him with more ill-treatment, which only ends with Anasztazia's altruistic rescue. Through these contrasts, the figuration of hatred and racism is shown with its component of gratuity and irrationality.

However, it should not be thought that negative traits are only to be found in certain characters since the novel rejects any form of Manichean vision. The weighing process developed by Zsigmond Varga is a prime example of this: in his prolonged and assiduous research, he is intent on measuring evil by weighing maids and servants, concluding that men and women weigh more at night than in the morning – precisely due to the “weight of Evil accumulated during the day” (Cruz 2010, 152). This somewhat surreal character also weighs the dying, before and after death, and comes to the conclusion

that the weight of the soul is the same as that of an African butterfly. So a character driven by a good purpose, is, actually, reaching it by devious, even unethical, means.

Different figurations of the same theme can therefore be observed, with different levels and types of status. The theme of imprisonment, for example, is present in the basement and the concentration camp, but this same topic assumes a different psychological outline in the case of the attempt to imprison the body of a lover, represented by the creation of the doll. This imprisonment of the Other signifies a lack of understanding of alterity, as Levinas explains: "It is other with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other. Other with an alterity that does not limit the same, for in limiting the same, the other would not be rigorously other [...]" (Levinas 1969, 39).

As with the range of themes, there is also great complexity in terms of auto-images and hetero-images, which cannot be reduced to stale stereotypes. Whilst some of the Jewish characters are portrayed as rich and conservative, others are poor; some are immoral and others, such as the Jewess Anasztazia, kind and altruistic. Also, the gipsy musician hired to accompany Varga's father in his scientific research trips is not characterised as an outsider – which doesn't make him any better as he remains a scammer and a liar.

In turn, Mathias Popa, who is of mixed gipsy and Jewish descent, presents an unstable identity created from intersecting parts which resembles the "troublesome identity" Edward Said (2000, 90) explores in his memoir *Out of Place*³. Hence an imagological construct develops which is far more complex than mere stereotyping, since each national character represented is already the product of images and counter-images, as Joep Leerssen explains:

Over time images may spawn their very opposite *counter-images*. [...] As a result, most images of national character will boil down to a characteristic [...] polarity. The ultimate cliché about any nation is that it is 'a nation of contrasts'. An *imageme* is the term used to describe an image in all its implicit, compound polarities. (Leerssen 2007, 344)

³ In this famous work, Edward Said explains how his identity was forged outside the conventional modes of belonging, stating: "The overall sensation I had was of my troublesome identity as an American inside whom lurked another Arab identity, from which I derived no strength, only embarrassment and discomfort" (Said 2000, 90).

5. CODA

Aesthetically elaborated, the figurations of spaces, relationships and situations presented in Cruz's novel not only present a continual shifting back and forth between the individual and the collective but, above all, reveal the entanglements between the threads of the different levels.

In particular, the novel demonstrates the subjectivation process which Gilles Deleuze refers to in an interview in which he talks about his study of Foucault, commenting that:

A subjectivation process, that is, a production of modes of existence, cannot be confused with a subject unless that subject is stripped of all interiority, all identity. Subjectivity does not even relate to the "person": it is an individualization, singular or collective, that characterises an event (an hour of the day, a river, a breeze, a life [...]). It is an intensive mode, not a personal subject. It is a specific dimension, without which it would not be possible to move beyond knowledge or resist power. (Deleuze 2015, 77)

Through the character of Isaac, Afonso Cruz skilfully brings to life the many subjectivation processes that were left unrealised due to the Holocaust and the War, both those of the dead and of the survivors who lost memories essential to their identity and specific subjectivation processes, leaving them uprooted and out of place:

And there are memories, shattered, spiked, against the walls, feelings that are more difficult to interpret than arms. The left arm is the left arm, but the feeling is elusive. [...] There are memories that do not fit the body. The smile of a son is a piece of a puzzle that is bigger than the puzzle it belongs to. And Dresden was all in pieces, not just pieces of cement and bones but souls too, a mess of matter and spirit⁴, a most uncartesian brew. (Cruz 2010, 41)

⁴ See the description of Isaac, Tsilia and Bonifaz: "Very often the three of them would sit on the sofa holding hands, as they had done in Dresden, faced with that huge pile of dead things. Their eyes would fill with tears" (Cruz 2010, 71).

To compensate for this absence, Isaac Dresner (a publisher after the war) invites writers to invent characters who could be passed off as real people, establishing such an entangled network of relationships and references that it inspires a number of studies by academics and professors engaged in investigating the origins of these fictitious cross-references. These connexions form a cluster that seems to represent the potential of the relationships that could have happened, but, ultimately, as they have been forged, they only prove to be a fictitious relational network.

Yet Afonso Cruz's novel also explores and manages to construct another set of more contemporary figurations. In the relationships and existential situations of the grandchildren⁵ of this lost generation, it is possible to identify certain representations that may be considered transnational. These can be described as more fluid, erratic and unstable situations. Anasztazia's granddaughter Adele, for example, who is an unemployed economist, goes off to do voluntary work in Africa in order to find herself. There is also the example of Miro Korda, a Portuguese jazz musician who eventually meets Adele on his travels. However, the almost happy ending does not mask the representation of a generation somewhat lost and adrift, for whom a sense of belonging does not depend so much on establishing relations with place and space since they are still struggling to find new forms of belonging based on identity and still trying to invent themselves.

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⁵ No longer exiles or migrants, but the generations descended from immigrants and exiles.

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