

E Agora José, Luandino Vieira? **An Interview with José Luandino Vieira***

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Translated by Phillip Rothwell

A Cidade e a Infância (1960) is the first book by the Angolan author José Luandino Vieira, in which various physical, social, human, and psychological geographies of the city of Luanda appear fractured by tractors and tarmac. This book began a remapping of those geographies, and was the opening salvo of a multifaceted author we came to know through successive literary developments, particularly his *Luuanda* (1965) and *Nós os de Makulusu* (1967). But before this José Luandino Vieira we grew to admire appeared, a certain José Mateus Vieira da Graça existed. He was one of the multiple faces of a man embroiled in the political project of Angolan liberation. Folded into his personality was a literary alter ego characterized by lucidity and artistic playfulness. He had several names and many written texts attached to him. His work appeared in the magazine *Sul*, in Santa Catarina, Brazil. His poems, drawings, and commentaries appeared in newspapers in Angola, or in the publications of the Casa dos Estudantes do Império. They also surfaced in the journal *Cultura*. In fact, he was just about anywhere where a group of idealistic youngsters, “unidos nas ânsias, nas aventuras, nas esperanças” launched “o grande desafio.”¹

The Portuguese Secret Police quickly imprisoned him, afraid of his unique and powerful voice. So began his multiple dislocations: from Luanda to Lisbon; from Lisbon to Luanda; from Luanda to a concentration camp in Tarrafal, Cape Verde; from Tarrafal to Lisbon—an exacting itinerary

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throughout the 1960s. However, his literature endured and grew more intense. It was the space he reserved for liberty. Despite being imprisoned, he circulated through the shanty towns of Luanda via his creative writing, composed in the name of the ever more inventive José Luandino Vieira.

Who was that Luanda through which José Luandino Vieira wandered? Who was that Luanda that José Luandino Vieira sought out and still craves? It was a Luanda that countermapped the colonizer's city of cement, imprinted by tractors in *A Cidade da Infância*. It was a city born through the insurmountable difference imposed by that "tarmac frontier." It was a Luanda full of all sorts, of spaces and life enacted by a *nós*, who could be Vavó Xixi and Zeca Santos, or Binda and friends, or the boys from Makulusu, or so many others who eked out a living there and aspired to be happy.

Luanda pained because of the inhumanity imposed by a colonizer. Yet, at the same time, she was beautiful in her lived humanity, captured so skilfully by Luandino in her pregnant hope of imminent change. She was embodied through Vavó Xixi shielding her grandson, Zeca Santos, who only ever wants to survive, to eat well, to wear flashy clothes, and to fall in love. She comes to life through the women of the shantytown who argue over the ownership of an egg before various levels of wisdom and power, only to agree finally to the theft of the egg *and* the chicken, at the hands of Portuguese authorities. At the end of the day, whose are the riches of that land? Whose is the land? Who(se) is Luanda? Luandino's child characters answer that question. In those spaces, in that environment, through those characters, through that language that simultaneously defines and characterizes the environment of the city, the cultural difference that demanded and justified political independence was inscribed by Luandino into the Portuguese language. Here, the incalculable force of the margin is registered, reclaiming an Other order of knowledge, an Other symbolic organization, an Other language that was never contemplated by the colonial order that imposed the wound-ridden frontier between the tarmac city and the shantytown. That Other order permeates Kianda's song, a song José Luandino Vieira attempted to inaugurate.

Forty years ago the publication of *Luuanda* caused quite a stir. The Portuguese Writers Association awarded it the *Grande Prémio da Ficção*—a prize Luandino could not receive since he was imprisoned in Tarrafal. In fact, the prize jury would not have been able to present it to him since they were also arrested for their daring political gesture at the height of the Salazar

regime. Yet, *Luuanda's* questions remain pertinent today. Where is Luanda? Or rather, where is that Luanda declaimed, lived, and offered to us by José Luandino Vieira? Who is that Luanda? Beyond the legacies of the colonial city that survive either restored or in ruins, beyond the legacies of the shantytowns, which are ever growing, beyond the smothered song of Kianda that Pepetela shows us through the anguish of the elderly of Kinaxixi, beyond the new Luanda Sul, in Luanda itself, other children exist today, whom the pained gaze of Ana Paula Tavares forces us to see:

Olha-me p'ra estas crianças de vidro
cheias de água até às lágrimas
enchendo a cidade de estilhaços
procurando a vida
nos caixotes do lixo. ("November" 36)

New and old doors remain closed blocking entry into *Luuanda*, where some beings remain quiet and voiceless, while others devour the city, filling it with scars and wounds.

The most prestigious literary prize in the Portuguese language, the *Prémio Camões*, was awarded to José Luandino Vieira in 2006 by a jury made up of Portuguese, Brazilians, Mozambicans, and Angolans. It was in recognition of both his work and the path he has traversed. However, "intimate and personal" reasons prevented him from accepting the award. This reaction was from a man who once had only sung of hope and wanted to open doors so that the breeze and the sun might reach all the city of Luanda. What were these "intimate and personal" reasons that led him to reject such an honour? A clue may be found at the end of the interview that follows, in response to a question inspired by Laura Padilha that I put to Luandino. The answer may also be contained in Ana Paula Tavares's poem, "Luuanda," published for the first time in this volume.

"For me, reading *Luuanda* is always an exercise in pleasure and enjoyment. Every time I pick up José Luandino Vieira's work, I can scarcely contain the emotion and ecstasy I feel inside." These are the words of Laura Padilha translated from her reading of *Luuanda*.² When we talk about celebrating the work, Luandino Vieira reminds us what we are doing: we are celebrating something that led to the destruction and closure of the Portuguese Writers Association, in 1965.

Luuanda gained a place in both Portuguese and Angolan history as a key moment of “enfrentamento,” as the poet António Jacinto put it. Its commemoration involves, for us, José Luandino Vieira sharing the history of *Luuanda*.³

JLV: I wrote *Luuanda* while I was in prison in 1961-62. At the time, those of us from the Baixa⁴ used to hang out at three or four cultural institutions: the *Cine Clube*, the *Sociedade Cultural*, which had a journal “Cultura,” part of the *Jornal de Angola*, which was the paper of the *Associação dos Naturais de Angola*. We would read loads of Portuguese and Brazilian authors, including the novelists from the Northeast of Brazil, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado, and many others. I was lucky enough to get on with people who had good libraries. In the fifties, we corresponded with the magazine *Sul*, in Santa Catarina, Brazil.

Anyway, at the time, I was in prison. Writing was a good way of killing time, as well as working out the causes that had got me into that situation. Just for having claimed a national consciousness, a national identity that translated into the nationalist activities that demanded independence, there I was. It was during this time of reflection and through chats with my friends who were also in jail—some of them also writers—that I came to understand that it wasn’t enough just to construct characters who had never been in our literature. I had to make them real, truer, more representative. I also came to understand that the almost involuntary impulse to alter the Portuguese language, which happened when I put words in their mouths, was the path to follow if I was to make them more believable. The language of the working-class neighborhoods where I grew up was an integral and defining part of the identities of my characters, so the path for me to follow was clearly that one. These characters were already present in Angolan literature from the end of the nineteenth century, first in novels and then in short stories. For example, Cochat Osório and António Jacinto’s works already introduced other languages and “tailorings” to Portuguese. The only thing is that these characters had never been central figures in the narrative, by which I mean they were not the characters around which the plot was structured.

So I began to write *Vavó Xíxi* (“Vavó Xíxi e seu neto Zeca Santos”), which, starting from a relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild, tells a dramatic story about hunger. I had been going around with the story’s image in my head for ages. I had known, well actually I mean, I remember a woman collecting things out of trash cans. I later discovered that she was a rich lady,

from the time when the Angolan bourgeoisie got on well with the Portuguese administration, the twenties. It is the story of hunger and of a vain adolescent, of which I am very fond. It's the story I like most from *Luuanda*.

Next I remembered the huge arguments between neighbors that took place in the working-class districts, all about chicken eggs. It was all-out warfare, in which my mother took part. The backyards were right next to each other, and the chickens wandered all over them, pecking in one yard, and laying an egg in another. That's how the "Estória da Galinha e do Ovo" came into being, a tale that inevitably echoes the cliché "which came first the chicken or the egg?" Who discovered whom? To whom does an egg belong, laid by a chicken who wanders from yard to yard? To whom do the riches of Angola belong? Several traditional and institutional authorities argue and give their views, validating power relations, and the traditional authorities compare their criteria with one another in order to reach an agreement. Until the Portuguese police arrive, who no longer want just the egg, but the chicken too. In other words, they don't just want the product but the source of riches too. And when it became a case of taking away not just the riches, but also the land, everyone united against this robbery, this alienation of property. At that historical juncture, there was no alternative. The only option was war. In the short story, the future generation, the children, resolve the issue: neither the chicken, nor the egg! The moral of the story is clearly political.

The story of the boy who robs ducks ("Estória do Ladrão e do Papagaio") has to do with our life in prison. In prison in Luanda, political prisoners were mixed with common criminals. Every time someone new arrived, someone knew or else tried to find out why they were in prison. Everyone lied about just about everything, and especially about the real reasons they had been sent to prison. They always claimed they were there for "manly" deeds, such as having raped a girl, or some such thing. One day, a crippled man arrived, and I asked the guard why the poor wretch was in prison. I was told that it was because he had robbed ducks. And so I began to write the story about a duck thief, which is really a love story.

I had written these stories when a friend of mine, a lawyer, older and more cultured, came to visit and brought me work by what he termed a "great Brazilian writer." He gave me the book, *Sagarana*, by Guimarães Rosa, where I saw written the word I had chosen to call my novellas. They were not actually novellas but they were longer than a short story and they had a form totally connected to orality. The word was "estória." In the first edition, the

Kimbundu title was still in parentheses: *Musoso uá sanji ni uá diiaki*, which means a story told historically in a traditional way. A “musoso” is told and retold and, as such, it evolves as an oral narrative. I finally had a way of designating my type of narrative. According to my fellow-countryman, who knows the Kimbundu language, the anthropologist Carlos Alberto Lopes Cardoso, this is the best translation for the Kimbundu word “musoso.” It means precisely this type of “estória.” Also according to Lopes Cardoso, the word had already appeared in the chronicles of Fernão Lopes. And, in fact, it does. So, I was in quite good company: Fernão Lopes, Carlos Alberto Lopes Cardoso, and Guimarães Rosa. However, for me, at a quite advanced stage of writing the stories—in fact they were finished—the great lesson of Guimarães Rosa was his use of language. He confirmed my intuition. Clearly, the example of his books showed me that if the language style used was not that one then I would not be able to say what I wanted to say with those characters, nor would they be able to say what they wanted to about their relation to the world. Characters are defined with certain physical characteristics, but above all it is the language register that defines them, the way they articulate discourse or handle Portuguese. Mr. Lemos with his legal discourse, his codes, speaks a language that no one there understands. Azulinho reads his Bible. José da Quitanda speaks Portuguese, and orders others around because he can, since he brings food and drink. Guimarães Rosa reassured me that it was legitimate, in literary terms, to construct a literary language to achieve my objective. It represented a rupture, but I think that *Luuanda* achieves a harmonious relationship between the speech of the characters and the voice of the narrator. Reading *Sagarana*, after having written my “estórias,” confirmed for me that I was on the right track. I cleaned it up. I deepened it. I worked at it because “handling” the language implied having a deep knowledge of Portuguese. I quickly got the originals out of prison, in the normal way prisoners use to get stuff out. There were frequent searches of the prisoners’ cells. The PIDE were always looking for evidence or ways to incriminate us. My book was dangerous material, since it had a political message written in it. The language I had used demonstrated cultural autonomy. In my characters, in my countermapping of the city of Luanda, which brought the *musseques* to the fore, cultural difference was embedded, a difference that justified claims to political independence. At the time, this made my work political. Luckily, today, all this has been overtaken by history.

My wife, Linda, to whom the book is dedicated, typed it up, and showed it to a friend who was a journalist for the *ABC*, which was the paper of the democratic liberal Portuguese. Alfredo Bobela Motta, an Angolan, a writer and one of our friends, was at the time, 1963, its editor-in-chief. He decided straight away that we should go ahead and do the book. The book was put together in the paper's printworks. The typesetter did page proofs that later did the rounds in the *musseques* of Luanda. That was the edition that reached Portugal to compete for the Portuguese Writers Association prize. I think there were some hundred copies or so, and the Casa dos Estudantes do Império distributed it. I designed the cover, a hut with dripping letters, and I sent it with the original. Later, I suggested that they could place a picture of the actual city in dim grey in the background, and in the foreground, that black hut dripping, and the title in black. My design heralded in itself a countermap of the city. In the next edition of *Luuanda*, the letters of the title became red.

Now to the so-called "Brazilian" edition. That is an incredible tale. According to the cover information, the edition was done in Belo Horizonte. In fact, this edition was done completely without my involvement by two PIDE agents, in Portugal, at a local printworks. With all the scandal, which included the destruction of the Portuguese Writers Association, the book was in great demand. These two agents made the book in Braga and distributed it, earning a packet out of it. My lawyer wanted to file a law suit straight away, and this led to another incredible episode. To cut a long story short, I lost the case, because nothing could be proved—despite the fact that everything was totally obvious. The printworks were really easy to identify by the type of paper used. Worst of all, I had to pay all the court costs. In 1972, when I republished *Luuanda*, I was living in Lisbon on parole, that is, I had to present myself to the police every time I left the city, both before going and after coming back. Marcello Caetano tried a little liberalization, and that's how the poet António Jacinto and I got out of Tarrafal and came to Lisbon on parole. I got work with Edições 70, whose editor Soares da Costa told me that I ought to do a new edition of the book. I agreed. Ten years had passed and he was convinced that everything would work out fine. A standard edition was done, and a collector's edition too, with three sketches by José Rodrigues. But three or four days after the book had been launched, the National Information Secretariat ordered its seizure. My editor appealed this decision, and the appeal was in progress when the Carnation Revolution

happened. Then, all of a sudden, the book was finally free to be distributed unimpeded.

At the time of the Carnation Revolution, the original manuscripts were sold at auction to get money for I no longer know what. I only have the first set of page proofs, with the corrections of another of my friends, Manuel Teixeira Dias Carvalheiro, who had done the copyediting. About ten years ago, I went to Lisbon for a writers' roundtable, and some friends turned up with something for me. In a small black box were the page proofs of *Luuanda*, which I have to this day. The 1972 edition included some changes that were due to the fact that in the meantime I had written *Nós, os de Makulusu* and *No Antigamente na Vida*. They were ten years of learning, of living with colleagues in the concentration camp. My comrades there included the writers António Jacinto, António Cardoso, Uanhenga Xitu, and Manuel Pedro Pacavira. Uanhenga Xitu and Manuel Pedro Pacavira had never written literature before and began to write in prison, showing us their texts. Seeing how my comrades used Portuguese, and discussing this with them, helped me to mature as a writer. Also, my contact with many people who were friends in my childhood helped me a lot, as did music, the musicality of the Kimbundu language. All this helped me to clean up the text, because the 1964 edition lacked some of the markers of Angolan Portuguese. Caminho is about to republish *Luuanda*. This time, I'm not making any changes to the text. The text is finished. Also, when I read it ... it was written by someone else, someone who no longer exists. So it cannot be changed. It would be an act of disloyalty to interfere with something written by someone else....

MCR: I want to end by asking, in an echo of Laura Cavalcante Padilha: "Today, almost fifty years after the text was first written, trapped in the iron fists of neoliberal globalization, we can't help but remember the famous verse of Drummond—'E agora, José?' [And now, José?]. So let us ask another José, an Angolan: Does the Cabíri continue to fly? Can Xíxi and Zeca Santos still fish today to eat tomorrow? Did Beto and Xico build the future? And what happened to Garrido, Dos Reis and Xico Futa? Where might they be? Stubbornly, only the hope hidden in the cashew nut, the *sape-sape* or the egg may, if revived, be able to provide an answer."

JLV: The Cabíris will continue to fly. It is in their nature, even if, of course, man may begin to rear them in aviaries without feathers to increase capital-

ist profits, given the iron fist of globalization. I see it more as a “cage,” and want the best for my “little bird,” which otherwise is subjected to inclemencies, dangers, rivalries and has no food or water. . . . Yet, it only needs to carry on whistling. Grandma and grandson, for many more centuries, will have to get their food at the margin of the banquet of Others (hidden under their tables to catch a few of the crumbs, which these Others will allow to fall in their own interests), because Beto and Xico could not build the future after all. The mistake was theirs, and it will be repeated again and again because the future cannot be built—you can only struggle in the present in order to stop our future being built by those Others. But it’s good that every generation of Betos and Xicos make the same mistake, and go on struggling. Garrido, Dos Reis, and Xico Futa have grown up and multiplied. There are more and more of them. And yes, the cashew nut, *sape-sape*, and the egg continue to be the seat of hope, because, fortunately, the Others cannot defeat two things: nature and her lessons, with death as her final exam.

Notes

* I wish to express my immense gratitude both to José Luandino Vieira for granting this interview, and to Laura Cavalcante Padilha for her invaluable guidance.

¹ A reference to the poem “O Grande Desafio,” by António Jacinto. On the birth of modern Angolan literature, see Vieira 109. See also Tavares, “Cinquenta Anos” 128.

² See her “Um Texto e os Máximos Sinais de Suas Palavras Mais Velhas.”

³ See Orsi for an interesting exploration of “estória/história” in relation to *Luuanda*.

⁴ “Baixa” was the lower part of the city, inhabited almost exclusively by Europeans and their descendants. It was used in opposition to the *musseques*, which were the areas occupied almost exclusively by Africans.

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