



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Afri-Cola | 2017 | Tatiana Macedo (courtesy of the artist)

48 WAR PORTRAITS 48 TIME BOMBS 48 ELEGIES

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In memory of José Arruda,
President of the National Directorate of the Association of Disabled Veterans

*I am a brief fatherland of skinned feet.
I bring live vials and a cruel vocabulary.*

Fernando Assis Pacheco



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W.H.R. Rivers was a British anthropologist and psychiatrist at Craiglockhart military hospital in Scotland. On the 4th December 1917, as the First World War was raging, Rivers gave a now classic speech on ‘The Repression of War Experience’ at the Royal Society of Medicine in London, later published in *The Lancet* in February 1918. (1) Rivers argued that in order to address the issue of trauma arising from war it was essential to consider art. Above all, he encouraged attention to the arts of discourse, such as literature. In the paper he explained his doubts about the methods that had been adopted up to that point to cure war veterans suffering from what psychiatry of the time referred to as “shell shock” or “war neurosis.” Their treatment generally consisted of voluntarily or involuntarily repressing the traumatic episodes they had experienced, so as to make those experiences inaccessible to memory and produce a state of so-called ‘suppression’, after which the patients were considered cured and sent back to the front. In his article, W.H.R. Rivers challenged mainstream therapy and presented cases from his work with patients at Craiglockhart. He argued that the repression of war memories was not the right method. According to Rivers, the natural human mechanism to deal with painful memories is precisely to try to forget or avoid them. If the individual cannot do either, to the extent that they are diagnosed with “war neurosis”, it is precisely because it has become impossible for them to forget. They therefore live on with this suppressed trauma. Depending on what kind of method was deployed, even if the trauma was suppressed during the day it would often rise up at night in the forms of insomnia, nightmares, fearfulness and other psychosomatic disorders.

According to Rivers, the most effective form of therapy was to give the patient the opportunity to talk about their experiences. To follow, that is, the principle of catharsis, rather than the principle of repression. However, Rivers emphasized that it was not only a question of promoting active discussion of, or an exhaustive concentration on, the memories of war. On the contrary, it was precisely by confronting these memories – often connected to guilt, cowardice, regret, shame, loss of identity and deception – that it was possible to mentally attenuate them. Indeed, in spite of everything, these memories would always return in the form of dreams, nightmares, apparently unrelated physical or psychological reactions and various kinds of maladjustment to civilian life.

This article, published in the midst of the First World War, and dealing with the principles of effective treatment of what we now call post-traumatic stress, was pioneering for its time. But beyond the question of what treatment to give patients during their stay in hospital, Rivers was also preoccupied by the future of these men. One of Rivers’ patients was the English First World War poet Siegfried



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Sassoon. In October 1917 he wrote the poem 'Survivors' about the men being treated at Craiglockhart War Hospital. The poem's title itself indicates the intermediate condition of these men: they have technically survived the war, but what will remain in them of the trenches and the hospital wards? It served to warn that against initial expectations, for those who had experienced the war, it would not end with its end. The abandonment veterans would suffer in the post-war era would be part of the "disenchantment" to which EC Montague referred.

Reading Rivers' article today puts Vasco Luís Curado's latest book, *Declarations of War – Visceral Stories of the Colonial War* (War and Peace, 2019), into sharp relief. It is clear that more than forty years after the end of the Portuguese Colonial War, the conflict remains very much alive in the minds of its protagonists. The author – a clinical psychologist, who has followed various men who were in the Colonial War – underlines this ongoing legacy in the book's subtitle, and the testimonies he explores attest to this trauma:

"I can't be in noisy places, like supermarkets, or cafes. I'm only alright when I'm in a corner alone in the dark. I dream of the war. When I'm deep asleep I crawl on the bedroom floor and speak to myself as if I were transmitting on the radio: "Here charlie alpha ... my coordinates are such and such ... Send the flippers [bombers]... We're getting screwed from Cacine 5 ... "

My wife puts a blanket over me. I wake up in the middle of the room. "
(First Marine Sergeant), p. 59

"At night, I dream that I am there and in the morning I wake up sick and angry, I have to go out, I can't be at home. That won't do. I see the wounded, the dead. I never looked at the photos again."
(Sniper), p. 156

From 1961 to 1974 Portugal pursued a Colonial War in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. Nearly a million men were mobilized in mainland Portugal and in the islands, affecting practically all Portuguese families. Whether in terms of its officially ensconced denial or the radical geopolitical reformulation of Portugal after decolonization, the Colonial War remains historiographically unresolved. The experience of participation in the war is one of the most repressed and complex, but also one of the most tragic, events of Portuguese contemporary life, and it continues to resonate today.



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Declarations of War – Visceral Stories of the Colonial War is composed of 48 texts written in the first person. It is comprised of the testimonies, conversations and stories of 48 veterans of the Colonial War. They fought on various fronts of the empire, including in India and Timor, but mostly Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau (the three main fronts of the Colonial War from 1961 to 1974). The book's "authors" are soldiers, corporals, sergeants, lance sergeants, militiamen; men with experience of war on the ground in conspicuously difficult places. Their testimonies do away with any cosy idea of the war and the behaviours it has triggered, any reassuring myths about the treatment given to so-called "natives," and any tranquil sense of defending the glorious homeland. Rather we find the constant fear of death. The bodies broken by mines and gunshots, napalm. The "cleansing" of villages, summary executions, torture, alcohol and amphetamines and the lack of almost everything. Individual and collective madness. The death drive in and beyond the war. These things are all there in the 48 "declarations of war" – they line up in front of us, like photographs of someone who once had a name.

We are faced with men whose experience of the war has turned them inside out. They are condemned to live with ruptures: of identity, society, space and time. They barely recognize their own narratives:

"I've been going over and over my life to try to figure it out. All my life I have repressed the war, and now it is bubbling to the top. (...) I find that I am full of anger, hatred and fury at the way veterans were treated by this country in the years after the war. (...) Lately I have had difficulty sleeping. I wake up at five in the morning and go over and over the war in my mind. (...) It's not a feeling of guilt or problems of conscience, but rather astonishment: it amazes me that I managed to do what I did. I thought for decades that the war was forgotten. I know that sooner or later my astonishment will turn into guilt." (Sapper) (pp. 73-4)

The language is direct and dispassionate, the violence is explicit. For the reader it is an unfiltered window onto episodes of the brutality of war and its spoils today. In spite of our inevitable solidarity with these brutalized and disjointed lives, we cannot fail to see in them the faces of the perpetrator of all wars. At the same time – to adapt a phrase recently used by Rachid Mokhtari in work on the Algerian war and its representation in the French novel (2) – the Portuguese soldier of the Colonial War emerges as the "victim in uniform". Much has already been written about this war, in the forms of direct testimonies, diaries, poetry or novels, whether by the protagonists, the women who accompanied them, or the sons and daughters of men and women who were involved in the war and who now interrogate this heritage.



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Such works include Rodrigo Guedes de Carvalho's *Daqui a nada*, Norberto Vale Cardoso's *Impressão Digital*, Paulo Bandeira Faria's *As Sete Estradinhas de Catete*, Paulo Faria's *Estranha Forma de Guerra de Uso Comum* and Vasco Luís Curado's own *País Fantasma*. In spite of all this, I believe that the Colonial War has never before been transmitted to us as personally, as intimately and as brutally as in these short but incisive portraits by Vasco Luís Curado.

The collective drama of those who lived through the war on the front line and those who were abandoned after it is exposed in each agonizing turn of these testimonies. It is in the juxtaposition of the excess of individual memory and the failure of collective memory that these subjects come to recognize in the Colonial War they lived through that old lie of all wars of which the English poet of the First World War, Wilfred Owen, spoke: "The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*" (3). It is with precisely this question, asked by one of the veterans, that Vasco Luís Curado begins these 48 journeys through the dark legacies of the Colonial War.

"What was it for? Why did they send us to war?" "I was driven: it was a life's mission, I was a man of courage, a patriot, I felt honour and pride in going to the Colonies. I was driven by ideas of duty, the cohesion of the homeland, the collective, the vision of dignified and honourable death, an ethics of heroism.

"When I returned home, I was not the same person. How could I be?" (p.13)

The life stories follow a relatively identifiable and regular pattern: life prior to mobilization and war; stories from the front line told through striking episodes of real and symbolic violence; the imperfect return from the war and the war today that is still in the hearts and minds of these men, forty years later. It persists in ghastly recurring images, ghosts, ruins, perturbed dreams, resentment and remorse, in guilt and misunderstanding of the real motives of what they were involved in. It persists in the absence of reflection on the motives of the "enemy" struggle and in the incomprehension of everything that still presses down upon them today. We might think that this pattern of narration would at some point make the book predictable. On the contrary. The framework reveals itself as absolutely necessary as a safety net for the reader in a world of almost total barbarism by all, on (almost) all.

Many of the stories show us life for the majority in Portugal in the 1960s, during the era of mobilizing for the Colonial War. They bring forward the poverty, abandonment, illiteracy and lack of opportunities



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that made war or emigration seem the only ways to escape misery. In this context, escaping to the war seems hypothetical and remote, not a desertion in the political sense of the term. There is a vague notion of defending the homeland, the distant presence of family, girlfriend, wife or a war-time 'godmother'. In the hostile land of the forest, war is not only a mental thing, it is the training of the body for attack and defence, the mutilated bodies of friends never avenged and left to die. War is the dragging feet of wasted time, the alcohol that anesthetized everyone, the brutalization, lack of food, hunger, filthy conditions, attacks, madness. This war has a material and corporeal consistency, made up of fearful images.

'We came across four or five frightened black kids. They were on the run, terrified of us, the wolves coming to get them. The lieutenant told us to carry on. He threw a grenade into the middle of the children, who were blown to bits. We laughed heartily at that: little bits of children splattered on the floor.'

(First corporal - guide) (page 78)

'I turned down posts as a mechanic: I preferred to return to the woods, to fight, to search for comrades, to avenge the dead. I was full of anger and hate. I wanted to grow wings, blow the bush apart and avenge my men. From that moment, I started to consume everything I came across. The righteous paid the price for the sinner.

I became nervous, tetchy, always ready to attack, like a hunting dog.'

(First Sergeant, Paratrooper) (p.97)

In returning home from war these men lose hold of the collective they were part of: they are alone, thrown into a former life that has not waited for them. They bring violence with them: in the street, at home, with neighbours and at work. They are machinic and maladjusted, automated towards conflict: whether in failing to adapt to work or getting caught up in scuffles; whether in the temptation to kill and the will to die, or in domestic violence on women and children. The war becomes private, staying with them and with their families. Often, the house becomes the only refuge, but at other times, through stories of successive divorces and violence, it is proof of the impossibility of having a normal life. It is also the place for ungainly requests for compassion. On the other hand, meetings with other veterans, and the memories these bring back, are a site for re-finding meaning and shelter, while the announcement of the death of a former comrade scalds the raw nerve of the war. In these portraits by



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Vasco Luís Curado, the narrative emphasis is placed on the experiential dimension of individual subjects. Their experience and testimony convert them into accidental historical subjects and, consequently, into narrators of their own stories.

W.H.R. Rivers may have sensed the need to shift attention onto war veterans themselves, and to express newfound sensitivity to their discourse and writing. He may have been aware of the social and political function of war writing, but, even if he had sensed it, he would not have named as such the therapeutic aspect of exorcising trauma: the “clinical dimension” that literary criticism and psychiatry today attribute to literary and non-literary testimonies alike. We know today that revisiting the spaces of war or trauma, in reality or in fiction, can drain away an inner drama that is linked to feelings of guilt, remorse and pain. This drama impels the subject towards narration, which relieves him of the weight of experience by representing it in literature, in art or in speech.

This is the catalyst Vasco Luís Curado provides. Having been born almost at the end of the temporal, political and historical space that gave rise to the war and the episodes he narrates from it, Curado undertakes an act of compassion (4) in giving narrative form to lives that its protagonists had no longer been able to make sense of, or justify, either to themselves or to others. This form gives to each subject the possibility of undertaking an inner journey, and of converting his “declaration of war” into a form of communication and a claim to peace within a world at war. This catalysing gesture is post-memory, the movement that makes possible the construction of a memory about the Colonial War, shared by everyone and not only by the generation who happened to play the main historical role. A gesture from the generations that came after, that asks of us a democracy of memory.

(1) “[The Repression of War Experience](#)” was published in *The Lancet* on the 2nd February 1918.

(2) Rachid Mokhtari, *La guerre d’Algérie dans le roman français*, Chihab Editions, 2018.

(3) Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments* (edited by Jon Stallworthy), London, Chatto & Windus, The Hogarth Press and Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 140.

(4) See António Sousa Ribeiro, “[Pós-memória e compaixão – a razão das emoções](#)”, *Memoirs – Público*, 15th September, 2018, p. 15.



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