“Rebuilding the Jigsaw of Memory”: The Discourse of Portuguese Colonial War Veterans’ Blogs

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INTRODUCTION

Every year for the last nine years, a group of 100 to 200 men aged between 60 and 80, accompanied by their families, have met up in a hotel in the Portuguese spa town of Monte Real for a lunch reunion.¹ These men have in common a colonial war and a blog.

The war waged between the Portuguese state and African national liberation movements (1961–1974/75) ended over 40 years ago but is still remembered today by these men and by thousands of other ex-combatants who are willing to share their war memories in the public space through an online blog, called *Luís Graça e Camaradas da Guiné* [Luís Graça and the Guinea Comrades]. The blog was created in 2004 by its namesake, Luís Graça, a former combatant and sociology professor, and it is the

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largest Portuguese blog maintained by men who fought in the theater of operations of Guinea, today Guinea-Bissau.²

This chapter begins with the preliminary results of a broader netnographic investigation (Kozinets 2010, see also Hine 2015). These first reflections are based on personal in-depth interviews and a critical discourse analysis of the Luís Graça blog, with the aim of exploring its dynamics and the collective narratives that are developed within it. Focusing exclusively on the memories constructed by the men that fought on the side of the Portuguese Armed Forces, attention will be given to the ways in which these men construct a community of memories and to how colonial relations are revealed in their narratives and visual representations, e.g., digital photographs. Through this process, these mnemonic representations leave the circumscribed realm of individual memories to become collectivized, forming archives of vernacular memories (Bodnar 1994) shared by these ex-combatants. Finally, consideration will be given to how this process has contributed to increase our understanding of the memory and the public silence that still surrounds the conflict (Martins 2016, 305).³

COLONIAL WAR: THE MISTS OF MEMORY

The Colonial Wars, fought between Portugal and the liberation movements, represented for the Portuguese state the beginning of decolonization and the end of its empire in Africa. As in other decolonization contexts (e.g. the war in Algeria, cf. Stora 2005), the lack of public memory of the war derives from the difficulty in reconciling the colonial past. In Portugal, this difficulty is exacerbated by the ideological and military context that preceded and which gave rise to the 25 April 1974 military coup and following revolution.

As Miguel Cardina (2016, 68) explains, even during the war, there was a process of silencing the conflict on the part of the Portuguese dictatorial regime—the *Estado Novo* (1933–1974), led by Oliveira Salazar (1933–1968) and later Marcello Caetano (1968–1974). According to official rhetoric, the war in the colonies never existed. The dispatch of thousands of men to the African territories was justified as policing and anti-terrorism operations. The regime fueled the nationalist fervor of the people in defense of the integrity of the so-called “overseas territories” by disseminating propaganda photographs of the massacre of white farmers and black workers by members of the Union of Angolan Peoples (UPA) in

1961 in northern Angola. Jorge Cabral, one of the war veterans and a member of the blog that I interviewed, commented ironically:

Portugal was never at war. I remember being in the middle of Guinea, right in the middle of Guinea, and hearing Marcello Caetano on the radio – when Salazar died, I was already in Guinea – declaring that there was no war. There were some small skirmishes on the border. There was no war, there was no war. The soldiers... the wounded were hidden from view.

On 25 April 1974, after 13 years of war, the regime continued to present itself ideologically as a pluricontinental⁴ and multiracial nation, refusing to grant independence to the colonies and threatening to prolong the conflict indefinitely. So, realizing that it would only be possible to put an end to the war by overthrowing the regime, a group of officers that had taken part in the Colonial War (mostly in the theater of operations of Guinea-Bissau) launched a military coup that gave rise to the revolution. However, those same soldiers, as the new power, “[...] decree[d], right away on 10th May 1974, ‘an amnesty for the essentially military crimes practiced up until 25th April’ [*sic*] [...]” (Ribeiro 1999, 142), further restricting the possibility of any debate about war crimes committed during the conflict.

In the two decades that followed, between 1980 and the middle of the 1990s, the national media agenda was taken over by the process of consolidating a liberal democracy. Formal entry to the European community in 1986 and the desire to create a space of Portuguese influence in the ex-colonies, based on the notion of Lusophony, helped revitalize the Luso-tropicalist narrative (cf. de Almeida 2004; Cardão 2014; Peralta 2017, 26–64) about the exceptionality of the Portuguese contact in the world (Peralta 2017, 27; 59–60; see also Loff 2014), as a pioneer of the “discoveries,”⁵ an ideology already deep-rooted in the country thanks to the propaganda actions of the *Estado Novo*. This revitalization meant that the anti-colonial basis of the revolution was forgotten. To use a concept by Jay Winter (2010, 5), it was a strategic silence that led to the whitewashing of the colonial past, particularly the violence and racism. This silence was then countered by the creation of a linguistic community between “brother countries,” the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (*Comunidade de Países de Língua Portuguesa*, CPLP), in the image of the International Organization of Francophony (*Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*, OIF).

This lack of public memory of the war contrasts with the excess of personal memory (Ribeiro 2007, 45). For many years, the former combatants kept memories of their experiences in Africa to themselves or shared them only with a small private circle. In a way, the public silence both reinforced and was reinforced by the silence of the former combatants outside intimate circles. As Ângela Campos points out (2017, 168; see also Bourke 2006, 35), the public silence may have discouraged the ex-combatants from speaking about the war by reinforcing feelings of shame and guilt. And there is indeed a “relationship between memory and guilt – for colonialism, for persecutions and massacres. [...] because the dialectics between memory and silence in this continent [Europe] cannot avoid colonialism, totalitarisms and wars, and their sites within and outside Europe” (Passerini 2003, 250). Along the same lines, the social anthropologist Paul Connerton (2011, 46) speaks of a *humiliated silence*, “[...] the collusive silence brought on by a particular kind of collective shame there is detectable both a desire to forget and sometimes the actual effect of forgetting,” an assertion reinforced by Jorge Cabral: “There are people that forgot so completely that they never mentioned that they had been in the war.”

However, by the 1990s, a confluence of factors started to facilitate the creation and sharing of vernacular memories of the war (Cardina 2016, 69–70). Vernacular memories are here understood in accordance with the concept developed by Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering (2015, 9–12, 15, from Bodnar 1994, 14) as spaces of creation established in the interstices of individual and popular memories, serving to connect them. It is in these memories that the individual and popular memories are appropriated and creatively reinterpreted, through *mnemonic imagination*, to be transmitted within a community, establishing or strengthening bonds to unite its members.

Among other factors, the last decade of the past millennium witnessed the launch of a new phase in which the figure of the combatant was rehabilitated and commemorated through the construction of monuments in the public space, such as the Monument to the Combatants of Overseas [*Monumento aos Combatentes do Ultramar*], built in 1994 in Belém, Lisbon, and the organization of veterans’ meetings across the whole country. In addition, following the formal recognition of posttraumatic stress disorder in 1999 (Law No. 46/99, of 16 June), new associations were created to support veterans suffering from this condition, such as APOIAR and the Portuguese War Veterans Association (APVG).

As Joanna Bourke suggests in the context of the war in Vietnam, from this period onward there was an attempt, on the part of the war veterans, to give meaning to the violence experienced and committed: “to survive being a perpetrator may not be a matter of either ‘forgetting’ or ‘remembering’, but of finding a legitimate narrative that is both coherent and convincing” (Bourke 2006, 36). Underlying this is the idea that the ex-combatants were young men who had been compelled by the regime, through conscription, to fight in a war that they had not chosen and in which they suffered. It is a narrative of victimization as a reaction and response to what some consider an unjust condemnation in the postrevolutionary period, and the failure of the state to fulfill its obligations to provide economic and social protection. For Jorge Cabral, “they truly transformed the combatants into mass murderers, rapists. This is still with us today to some extent.”

THE VIRTUALIZED MEMORY OF WAR

The democratization of internet access in Portugal at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, for its part, enabled an individual discursive authority based on the experience of war (a tendency that had already been made possible with the publication of memoirs in authors’ own editions or by small publishers)⁶ and the possibility of connecting comrades that were geographically distant. The digital creation of these memories may be attributed to various factors. For instance, many former combatants were now reaching retirement age, a time when people often go through what is called a *life review process*, and the awareness of approaching death, associated with the need to transmit their testimony to future generations, may have impelled these men to tell their stories:

[...] Who was it for? I usually say, ‘we have a duty to leave our testimony’. People can pick it up or not, as they see fit. What they can’t do is to say they didn’t know. From the moment you write and put it down, it’s at their disposal. If they read it, if they assimilate it and take some initiative as a result of it or not, that’s their business. For now, our duty is done. (Interview with Helder Sousa)

[...] I had always promised myself that one day, when I retired, I would tell it all [...]. (Interview with Mário Beja Santos)

The internet is thus another potential space of enunciation for ex-combatants, with the advantage that its platforms are easy to access and allow the inscription in the public space of narratives that have no visibility in official discourse nor in traditional Portuguese media. Web 2.0 is particularly praised for offering greater agency to users since, among other things, it enables the creation and sharing of content *by* and *between* users (cf. Castells 2007, 257–258; Merrin 2014, 52, 78).

Most obviously whereas the broadcast era was dominated by professional products, the digital era has seen the expansion of personally produced content, an empowerment of individual creation that represents an epochal transformation of the structures of media communication. All professional content now exists in a competitive relationship with the individual's own content and peer-produced information. (Merrin 2014, 52)

Situated on the initial threshold of connectivity (van Dijck 2013), blogs saw an explosion in use and content production during the first years of the second millennium. Even though they were precarious and subject to rapid obsolescence (Taylor 2010) like other online platforms, they were one of the first virtual platforms to be used in a generalized way by ex-combatants to share memories of the war.

Some of these blogs migrated to new micro-blogging platforms, such as Facebook, while others were discontinued for various reasons or were simply lost through their inaccessibility via search engines like *Google*. However, it is still possible to access many of these contents. Those that are still functioning continue to be mnemonic archives and sites where veterans converge, forming what Jodi Dean (2010, 96; 113–119) calls *affective networks* of mnemonic creation. The blogs allow the user's subjective experience to be synchronized with that of others. This is, in short, a place of immediate exchange for veteran communities (van Dijck 2007, 72):

most Web 2.0 platforms started out as indeterminate services for the exchange of communicative or creative content among friends. These services often emanated from community-bound initiatives [...] who adopted a specific niche of online interactions and developed mediated routine practice. (van Dijck 2013, 6)

The importance of these platforms extends to the influence they exert via hypertext⁷ and cross-referencing on other platforms. One example is the great impact that these ex-combatants have had on the formation of narratives on Portuguese Wikipedia. This transit was formed from the sharing of narratives and visual representations, such as photographs, remediated from preexisting analogue mnemonic objects (van Dijck 2007; Hirsch 2012) virtualized and shared on the blog (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2000; van Dijck 2007, 70). Thus, the memory is (re)constructed from dispersed fragments, whether objects that have been digitalized or disordered memories that converge to become collectivized narratives. With the digitalization and sharing of these objects, this material connection with the past is no longer restricted to the private space of family archives but expands its reach, entering or enabling their entry into the social representations of war. Nevertheless, as all the contents of a blog are editable, the memory created is not a stable object, but has the capacity to become associated with dynamic processes and chains of interaction between platforms and nonvirtual spaces (Bond et al. 2017, 14).

Whereas the personal writing and production of memory (scrapbooks, diaries, photographic albums, etc.) of the past were intended for limited consumption, mediatization has delivered a new self-centred (an immediate) public or semi-public and semi-private, documentation and correspondence, in other words a social network memory. (Hoskins, “Mediatization of Memory” 30 *apud* Bond et al. 2017, 14–15)

As described in the next section, the blog is also an affective network whose aim seems to be to claim a space of public enunciation with great visibility and ease of access. In this space, ex-combatants can jointly construct an archive of shared experiences, which, though short-lived (most were there only for two years), tend to occupy a significant part, if not all, of their memories (e.g., Batista 2016). José van Dijck (2007, 56–61) explains that personal memories are formed affectively; meaning, the discourses of others play an important role in personal construction of past experiences and consequently on individual identities. It is in this inter-affective exchange that the narratives about the Colonial War are constructed in the *Blogipelago* (Dean 2010: 38).⁸

Though blogs have much in common with diary writing, they differ, among other things,⁹ in that blogs amplify the relations and dynamics existing in personal diaries. They have a greater visibility spectrum and

allow the immediate construction of forums for discussion and sharing. Access to blogs is free,¹⁰ available on any device with an internet connection. Similarly, collaborative writing and the entry-commentary format of blogs set up dynamics between ex-combatants, whether conflictual or not.

To analyze these dynamics, I employ the netnography method (cf. Kozinets 2010), which allows me to study the online sociability inherent to the construction of a mnemonic community within a blog. Based on the ethnographic framework of participant-observation, I undertook a preliminary discourse analysis to explore the meaning-making of the memory narratives constructed by the war veterans and carried out several contacts and personal interviews with the permanent members of Luís Graça blog. In both processes, the basis for this chapter were the field notes taken during the research.

As individuals select and share personal information on digital platforms, war veterans are also constructing and presenting part of their personal identity, projecting it to other users. In addition, digital performativity is also an element in the formation of communities of belonging, such as these groups sharing memories of the Colonial War (Kozinets 2010, 1–2). Both dimensions are explored in the following sections.

In blogs, various discourses are present simultaneously because “the past is as diverse as the people that remember it” (Antunes 2015, 19). This implies not essentializing or reifying veterans’ identities. Knowing the context in which their narratives were and are developed, and the possible intentions or motives of each person in enunciating them is fundamental for understanding the digital discourses of men that fought in the war. As Enzo Traverso (2016, 56) says, with regard to the importance of the broader social context:

Far from being immutable or frozen, memory changes permanently and transcends the recollections of a lived experience. Cultural practices, cultural industry, public policies, and even laws (sometimes penal laws) hugely shape and transform our representation of the past.

These men’s narratives give meaning to a youth that was lost fighting for an ideal of nation that was unsuccessful (cf. Ribeiro 2007, 53; Ribeiro and Vecchi 2012, 29). They also allow the war veterans an opportunity to reclaim a public space where they can demand their rights as citizens whose lives and bodies were marked by the violence of a war they did not choose, but in which they participated.

Finally, these vernacular memories should be understood on a continuum that connects physical localizations and face-to-face interactions with digital communities, and therefore it is important to analyze the social dynamics outside of the online blogs.

“(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE JIGSAW OF MEMORY”: WAR VETERANS IN THE BLOGIPELAGO

The blog *Luís Graça and Guinea Comrades* presents itself as “the biggest social network in Portuguese about the experience of this war.” Composed and edited by veterans that had fought in Guinea-Bissau between 1963 and 1975 on the colonial side, the term “social network” is quite accurate in the sense that they “promote interpersonal contact, whether between individual or groups” (van Dijck 2013, 8). The description emphasizes the community dimension of the platform, whose objective is “to help ex-combatants reconstruct the jigsaw puzzle of memory.”¹¹ Thus, with the aim of reuniting the various collaborators in a mnemonic exercise, the blog is constituted as a platform for contact between veterans with around 700 more or less active members from various points of the country. It was launched in April 2004 by Luís Graça:

Basically, the idea is this (...) we are a generation that (...) is using up its average life expectancy, aren't we? Seventy or so years, men (...) that think that history has been mistold aren't we? So, in some way, yes, we all want to tell our own *petit histoire*, don't we? Deep down, we just want to tell our little story, the day-to-day.... We talk about everything without taboo. From sexuality, deserters, the lies in the reports, the incompetence of officers. All that has been discussed. Food, heroes (...). A frank conversation, especially the concern that I've had of rescuing the letters that the men wrote from the war, before they disappear, before they end up in the flea market or rubbish bin.¹²

The ex-combatants join in the blog's construction to contribute to the formation of a collective narrative derived from the fragments of their individual memories. As Luís Graça puts it, “Many of us have different versions of the same event, I mean, one saw one thing, another saw something else. This is a jigsaw puzzle that we are putting together.” The conversations I had with these men during the course of the research have revealed that the multiplicity of ex-combatant narratives is the result of

different experiences as well as appropriations and recontextualizations of one another's narratives. That is to say, they are the product of an intersubjective exercise influenced by the relational dynamics established between comrades, in their reunions and associations, molded by past experiences and the socioeconomic needs of the moment.

The blog is today (I have no doubts) the best archive of genuine images taken by participants. Photographs operations, photographs places, photographs of civilians, photographs of soldiers, scenes of people socializing, and of the war itself. And afterwards, the repository of memories, memories that have to do with testimony, tales, narratives, interventions about a [...] text that was written for or against, with ideological aspects.

And so, the blog is a horizontal line where just about everything fits.
(Interview with Mário Beja Santos)

The various entries are not organized chronologically or according to a specific format. The blog's archives contain poems, photographs, descriptions of episodes from the war, memorials to the dead, announcements of social events, critiques of the lack of state support and recognition, or position statements in controversies related to different ways of representing or commemorating the Colonial War in the present. There is, in short, a process of co-historicity (Svetlana Boym 2010 *apud* Pogačar 2018, 40), in which the ex-combatants cooperate, using media devices, in the representation of the past. Past events are here decontextualized and transformed into individual affective narratives followed by the community (Pogačar 2018: 40). Consequently, as van Dijck put it, blogs are tools of personal bonding and identity formation. They connect the past, present, and future by constructing a personal identity from a subjectivity constituted through language and intersubjective exchange between various people. In this process, memory merges with imagination (van Dijck 2007, 55; Keightley and Pickering 2015).

Moreover, in this context of the Colonial War, personal legitimation is an important element of the narratives composed by ex-combatants. In fact, these men, having lived and fought during the colonial and dictatorial regime of the *Estado Novo*, can therefore be seen as embodying the colonial relations and racial hierarchy predominant during that time. Even those that consciously broke with that ideological framework feel the need to construct a narrative that enables them to incorporate a past where they fought on the side of the Portuguese colonial forces—that is, to say, on

“the wrong side of history.” This is a process of *composure* (Thomson 2015), in other words, a process of building a narrative that follows the expectations and needs of life history cohesion and acceptability that war veterans long for (see also, Dean 2010: 50–53, for a critical perspective on self-writing as a technology of the self deeply connected with a community).

Given the lack of a national narrative to frame them, the individual discourses of ex-combatants vary between the relative depoliticization of the conflict (fixing the narrative in tactic-military narratives or underlining their action in the name of ideals such as the fatherland) and indignation at the waste of a youth spent in a useless war that the regime forced them to fight.

The conclusion I reached was: ‘but the war is worse now.’ This was [19]70, ‘71, ‘72. It was worse in ‘72 than in ‘70 and I asked myself: ‘what have I come here to do if it’s worse?’ (Interview with Inácio Silva)

Reading the entries published on the blog, there are expressions of hope that their participation will promote the writing of a history of the Colonial War by historians. An “objective” and “factual” history. Indeed, some of them believe that it is too soon for History to be written, because only temporal distancing will bring political neutrality:

[...] the blog, at this moment, is an extremely valid source. (Interview with José Martins)

[...] there are many things [in the blog] that could also be used for research, tomorrow (...).¹³

So that scholars can study it, though it’s still early days. It’s still early. I think that it’s still too soon [...] a few more years need to go by. It’s still early to study the whole matter of the colonial war in any depth. But in ten years, twenty years’ time perhaps. (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

A good example of this commitment to facts and, perhaps, a certain aversion to the fallible mechanisms of memory, is the refusal of one of the blog editors to be interviewed on the grounds that this type of conversation always involves failed expectations, as memory is permeable to the passage of the years, which results in “historical imprecisions.”

On the other hand, the blog also has a cathartic dimension for veterans, which they call *blogotherapy*. For many, it is this dimension that moves them. In one way or another, the blog emerged, said Mário Beja Santos

(in interview), “because of a cathartic need of Luís Graça.” Luís Graça himself, in a report of 22 April 2010, claims:

We are a kind of self-help group. We usually speak of ‘blogotherapy of the war in Africa’ [...]. There is a therapeutic effect [...]. Many people who live in isolation, alone with their ghosts and memories, with no connections, no social support, they start socializing and verbalizing their memories, then they start putting it down on paper. And we publish them.¹⁴

These two dimensions are not mutually exclusive. For José Martins, for example, it was the need to understand the conflict and therefore his interest in history, which enabled him to initiate his cathartic process, a relation that can be explained by the creation of a distancing that allows the ex-combatants to deal with their experiences. Through a process of objectivization, they are able to relativize their war traumas.

When military service ended, I said ‘this is over’, but no, it had only just begun. And I started to get post-traumatic stress, though no one recognized it as such, so I had only one thing to do: get involved and begin to discover what had happened to begin to do catharsis. (Interview with José Martins)

The blog has a therapeutic effect by enabling externalization and contact with the experiences of others. It has two distinct aspects. The first is related to the writing process: it is through the (re)creation of memories that these men confront the wounds of the past and the silences in which their war memories were sealed when they were readapting to civilian life (“This *Tabanca* has the particularity of healing wounds that no one else wanted to treat”).¹⁵ The second concerns the contact that is established between comrades, a contact that occurs in the blog, but is also extended in the various reunions and social events that are organized throughout the year, all around the country.

THE *TABANCAS*¹⁶

The reunions are the most visible aspect of the transit between the digital and physical worlds. They are, basically, the physical manifestation of communities of belonging and shared memory which take place all over the country, culminating in the great annual national event in Monte Real.

Everything’s discussed in our reunions, there are no traumas there. I think the most traumatized men don’t even turn up to the reunions... [...] I think that it’s been good for the chaps that were in the wars, because it gives them a chance to externalize all the stuff that’s bottled up inside, doesn’t it? Because it’s a thing that a guy’s telling, if he notices that the person is bothered by it, that he’s not [liking it], he would have to be stupid to continue to massacre the poor chap. We have to speak to someone that accepts the conversation, don’t we? Or at least, someone that’s minimally interested, or else it’s better to shut up. (Interview with Eduardo Ribeiro)

In the words of Judith Butler (2009, 36), these are communities that have been formed in opposition to the “other” (in this case, anyone that has not been through the experience of war). The veterans can only find this community of affect and mutual comprehension together with each other. In other contexts, they tend to feel that they have been treated with ingratitude or forgotten about, and that their experiences are not recognized.

Even because I think that it’s the best therapy for whoever was Overseas [...] there’s no psychiatry that will treat it [...] give a guy half a dozen tablets so that he falls asleep on his feet. What can he do? He was never in combat [...] he could never put himself in his place [...] to know what he’s been through. He might have an idea of what he went through but going through it really – the only person who can do that is someone that has felt it in his skin. (Interview with Eduardo Ribeiro)

Now, I doubt that people understand what the war was. In war, like in love, you can’t understand it without having been through it. It’s really impossible to describe what the war was like. The effects of the war, the women in the war, the women that stayed here. The alcoholism that took hold. The post-traumatic stress. The domestic violence that is also very connected. (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

This feeling of belonging influences the capacity and direction of affect of the members, as the members sympathize with and take responsibility for one another’s suffering (Butler 2009, 36/46). The feeling of community is anchored in shared experiences; the war is considered to be unintelligible for those that have not experienced it, thus forming an essentialist silence (Winter 2010, 6).

[There's] a lot of informative importance. Now people understand what the war was through the blog... ah, I hesitate, I hesitate, I put hesitation marks, don't I? Now it serves as a connection serves as a connecting link, this yes. Mainly for people that are more fragile. 'It wasn't just me that suffered'. It makes them happier, doesn't it? When there are various people suffering, people are happier, 'ah, after all, it wasn't just me'. (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

In the words of Luís Graça, it is a "[...] blog where everyone addresses each other informally [*todos se tratam por tu*], and there are no military hierarchies." The motto that Luís Graça associates with the blog is also quite indicative of the idea that those who experienced the war cannot let others tell their story for them. This sense of community is expressed most insistently in what they consider to be a lack of state support for the combatants in the most vulnerable situations, a group that includes the Guinean soldiers enlisted into the Portuguese Armed Forces. This position explains the camaraderie and companionship that the ex-combatants from the Guinea theater of operations demonstrate toward their Guinean counterparts, despite the structural racism prevailing in Portuguese society.

There are still a lot of people. With stress, there are still a lot of people. Still today, some say, they can't hear a noise [...] there are still a lot of people. This was never treated. It never was, they didn't care [...] these people were completely abandoned, got rid of [...] Another thing I really cannot excuse is what they did to the African soldiers. For me, it was a horrible crime. How they abandoned them. Those poor sods swore to the flag, said they were Portuguese and then they were abandoned.... shot down [...]. (interview with Jorge Cabral)

In some of the entries, this solidarity with the Guinean colleagues shot in the aftermath of independence is clearly visible. Quoting only some examples, on October 31, 2010, a text was published, entitled "Guiné 63/74 – P7198: *O Soldado Africano Esquecido*/Forgotten African Soldier (1): What can we do for our former Guinean colleagues? (Carlos Silva/Luís Graça/Paulo Santiago)" (Fig. 1.). In another text, Armandino Alves claims (06/12/2009):

one thing is certain, we Portuguese, patriots and exempt (politically speaking) cannot hide away; it was the obligation of the overseeing body and the Portuguese Army to offer ALL those called up to provide COMPULSORY military service and who swore loyalty and fidelity to the national flag the chance to flee certain death!!¹⁷

Guiné 63/74 - P7198: O Soldado Africano Esquecido / *Forgotten African Soldier* (1): O que podemos fazer pelos nossos antigos camaradas guineenses ? (Carlos Silva / Luís Graça / Paulo Santiago)

Guiné > Saltinho > Pel Caç Nat 53 > 1971 > O Alf Mil Paulo Santiago, de bigode e barrete fula na cabeça, ladeado, à sua direita, pelo 1º Cabo Verdete, e à sua esquerda pelos Sold Samba Seidi, bazuqueiro, e Abdulai Baldé, um dos seus fiéis guarda-costas. O Paulo é autor, entre outras, da série *Memórias de um Comandante de Pelotão de Caçadores Nativos*, de que se publicaram até agora 17 postes, salvo erro. Tem, além disso, a experiência de instrutor de milícias, em Bambadinca.

Foto: © Paulo Santiago (2006) / Blogue Luís Graça & Camaradas da Guiné. Todos os direitos reservados.

Fig. 1 Print screen of the publication “Guiné 63/74 – P7198: O Soldado Africano Esquecido/Forgotten African Soldier (1): What can we do for our former Guinean colleagues? (Carlos Silva/Luís Graça/Paulo Santiago),” available at <https://blogueforanadaevaotres.blogspot.com/2010/10/guine-6374-p7198-o-soldado-africano.html>

Despite a certain condescension, there is a close relationship between members of the blog and the population of Guinea-Bissau. This is not only because of the relations that were established with the African soldiers following the Africanization of the war—the mass mobilization of

Africans to counter the scarcity of men from the metropole—but also because of the relations that were forged with the population at large.

The relation with the Guinean populations was maintained, in many cases, in the form of humanitarian aid, leisure trips or nostalgia tourism, and close relations with Guinean children adopted by Portuguese soldiers from the metropole. The photographs of people and landscapes taken during the war and nowadays are a constant feature of the blog.

FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY: NARRATIVES AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS ON THE BLOG

The digitalization and sharing of photographs play an important role in the task of creating a vernacular narrative about the war, because, in a context in which the violence of war is silenced, the photographs represent material proof of its existence. For although the photographs of the blog are mostly of banal scenes—day-to-day scenes, as Filipa Lowndes Vicente puts it in a work about colonial war photography, “soldiers resting, eating, smiling, enjoying themselves and posing for photographs” (2017, 204)—the constant reminder of the context in which they were taken leads towards what is absent, the war itself (Paulo de Medeiros *apud* Antunes 2017b, 220).

As mentioned above, this material connection to the past thus ceases to be the exclusive property of the private space of family archives and extends its reach, entering, or enabling the entry of these pictures into the social representations of the Colonial War.

Of the various themes recurring in the blog, I highlight two. The first concerns the celebration of the combatants. Here, the photographs give a face to the number of mobilized, dead, and crippled men. They humanize and subjectivize memory by binding the experience of war to specific individuals rather than to abstract numbers. These entries include reconstructions of episodes experienced and the memory of fallen comrades. The reconstruction of episodes is accompanied by photographs often taken by the person writing the entry. They show, above all, everyday scenes of the soldiers’ lives. However, despite this banality, there is an “invitation to interpret what they show and what they conceal” (Antunes 2017b, 223).

There are a lot of photographs. Some people took a lot. [...] There are people who really have a lot, truly a lot, and they appear there. In the blog, it becomes really like a document. (Interview with Eduardo Ribeiro)

The second is related to the colonial dimension of the narratives and visual representations. For this, I focus specifically on the soldiers’ representation of Guinean women, and the relationship that they describe as having had with them. In both, the relations of domination intrinsic to Portuguese colonization are clearly visible. It is worth noting that these racial hierarchies are not restricted to the relations they had with women, but they are easily discerned in the photographic representation of the bodies of Guinean women and the narratives that accompany them.

On this point, I agree with Catarina Martins’s analysis of the relationship between colonialism and the black female body, particularly its use as a concrete and rhetorical instrument for the exercise of material and symbolic power by the white man (2019, 1). Of the dozens of publications in which the theme of the female nude is central, I shall explore only two. The first is entitled “Guiné 63/74 – P1475: Histórias de Vitor Junqueira (7): A chacun, sa putain... Ou Fanta Baldé, a minha puta de estimação” [Guinea 63/74—P1475: Stories of Vitor Junqueira: To each, his whore... Or Fanta Baldé, my pet whore] (31/01/2007).

In this entry, Vítor Junqueira, a medical officer in Guinea, describes a relationship he had with a Guinean woman. Luís Graça calls the story “one of the most beautiful texts that a man can write about a woman in wartime.” It is illustrated with a postcard with “Portuguese Guinea” written on it and depicting a Guinean woman with the top part of her body unclothed; hence, the colonial possession of the territory of Guinea is metaphorically projected onto the female body of the Guinean woman. For Catarina Martins (2019, 2):

the African land that offers itself up to the colonizers is like a female body to be appropriated, virgin, nubile and fertile, due especially to the wild exuberance and sensual excess of nature. These attributes are in turn projected onto black women, like archetypal Eves in a *heart of darkness* that inexorably seduces and threatens, and thereby needs to be tamed.

The counterpoint to the white woman is obvious. A white woman would not be represented in the blog in the same terms as were used for the Guinean women (as “whore” [*puta*]). It is worth reproducing the almost anecdotal claim of a soldier, told in an interview by Jorge Cabral:

What did I know about Guinea? That they were niggers [*pretos*]. Now note, for example, the shepherd from Trás-os-Montes who arrived in Guinea and

saw the girls with their chests uncovered. One even said to me (excuse the expression), ‘ah mate, this is all whoredom [*putaria*]’. (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

Maria José Lobo Antunes refers in this respect to the “misunderstandings generated by nudity: the exposure of female bodies was taken by Portuguese soldiers to be an erotic invitation without restrictions” (Antunes 2017b, 222)—an invitation also to the unrestricted reproduction of images of their bodies and of descriptions of the lust that they aroused in the soldiers from the metropole. However, these entries are not exempt from criticism on the part of the readers of these stories. As a matter of fact, blogs, unlike other traditional mediums of communication such as newspapers, books, or television, allow and give space to the contestation of claims and social representations produced by the main producers,¹⁸ such as the following anonymous commentary on the entry, which reads:

Looking for images of Africa, I came across your blog. I am against war on principle, against the abuse and violence committed against other peoples, but I respect everyone that has experienced it first-hand. However, I was shocked and ashamed at the wanton lack of respect in this article. Treating the woman as a sexual object, as a whore, in the case of the African woman, revealing a total absence of consideration for a human being, for woman, clearly demonstrating the abuses of colonialism that did nothing other than exploit and mistreat other peoples. Most regrettable.

Similarly, in the book *Furriel não é nome de Pai*, written by a Portuguese journalist Catarina Gomes, about the children born from relationships between white men and Guinean women, and left in Guinea, we read about the same blog entry:

Whenever he manages to get onto the internet, Fernando continues to wander around blogs written by Portuguese ex-combatants, no longer to look for his father, but to observe ‘parents’. It disturbs him the way photos are posted of any young African woman of that time, it was enough that she had her breasts showing, to speak of all of them. Like the black and white postcard captioned “Portuguese Guinea”, which shows a native adolescent, bare breasted, with a crucifix around her neck and a bead belt marking her hips used by a war veteran to illustrate his text: “My pet whore”. “The woman in the photo is someone’s mother”, Fernando protests, “the woman in the text too”, and they are not the same person. In the blogs by the ex-combatants,

it is as if all African women are the same one. And they were all prostitutes. (Gomes 2018, 57)

In many cases, this exercise of power is unconscious, but in others it is not. In others, the colonial violence does not go unnoticed and is openly criticized in retrospect:

Ah... and there were people that had never been out of their villages before till that time. Trás-os-Montes, Minho... Beiras [...]. True holes. And so, for them, that was a completely different world, they were young, but at the same time... for them, the nigger was a monkey, so, that sense of inferiority [...] of the niggers, pal, that they'd never seen before but that they'd heard of [...] they're little animals round there. That generalized superiority, and I'm not even speaking of guys of political arrogance 'you're *turras*, you're terrorists', so it's not that [...] including those soldiers that had relations with the, with the, women from there were... there was always a sense of superiority [...] alike – I dunno – a boss and the maid, using the language [...] master and servant, boss and servant almost had the lord's right [*perna-da*], *jus primae noctis*], as they say. (Interview with Manuel Joaquim)

Criticism like this could have been present at the time or it could be the product of a certain evolution in the narratives created by some war veterans, an evolution subject to the social conditions and personal perceptions about what is and is not acceptable nowadays. As Virgínio Briote mentions, it was necessary to polish the accounts of his memoirs before publishing them in the blog:

Because I have some scenes there [in his diary], not of the war, of the war strictly speaking, with the guerrillas, but there are some scenes that are rather crude. [...] I, how could I put it, I describe what was, what I saw people doing and what I did myself... And also, the relationship with women there, so I write almost *ipsis verbis* just what our relations with them were like, and that was typically colonialist, I mean, clearly... Well, that, I don't know, if it would be interesting writing about it, but I wrote some things and put them on Luís Graça's blog, but before I did... before sending that to Luís Graça, I cleaned it up, right? (Interview with Virgínio Briote)

In the second example, “Guinea 61/74 – P18402 Photograph album of Virgílio Teixeira, ex-alf mil, SAM, CCS/BCAÇ 1933 (Nova Lamego e São Domingos, 1967/69) – Part XXIII: Women and lasses (5): Nova

Lamego, 1967,” inserted into a series of publications of the same kind, Virgílio Teixeira shows his photographs of Guinean women, many of them “*bajudas*” (young single women) with their breasts uncovered, being stared at by the Portuguese soldiers surrounding them. According to the author of these entries, the dozens of images in his archive are shared in order to demonstrate the ethnographic variety of women in Guinea. He is using the guise of ethnographic knowledge to dissimulate any sign of desire, while at the same time revealing domination over the bodies and will of these women, whose agency was erased before the supposed scientific authority of the white man:

Those women’s submission to the will of the photographer and the protagonist of these images (who would have had the initiative to have taken these shots?), indefinitely prolonged by the image that survives the circumstances that it represents, transforms these photographs into icons of colonial power – the power that could dispose of the lives and bodies of the populations that were under its control. (Antunes 2017b, 222)

This said, it is important to keep in mind the relative power that exists in the inscription of these narratives online. As the example above shows, there is a greater capacity of white men and ex-combatants of a particular class to inscribe their subjectivity in digital environments.

As Miguel Cardina points out: “the recognition of the pasts – and particularly the pasts of injustice and suffering – depends on the power that the social groups have or do not have to socially inscribe their narratives and challenge the dominant representations in society” (Cardina 2016, 33). So the limitations that certain groups face when discussing the capacity to inscribe their perspectives in the digital environment are noteworthy. This capacity depends on factors such as Internet access and basic computer knowledge, as well as minimal literacy levels. Some former combatants from middle and upper classes of Portuguese society have these requirements, but this is obviously not the case with all of them. Many of those from lower classes, often from rural areas, continue to be illiterate or semiliterate.

The vast majority of the ex-combatants that participate in blogs are or were officers and sergeants from Portugal—the so-called “militia officers and sergeants” mostly drafted through conscription:

Deep down it’s a bit elitist, isn’t it? Deep down, who have we got there? *Alferes* and *furriéis*. Not many real soldiers, are there? [...] It’s a bit elitist,

that is. There are people that don't even know what the internet is, aren't there? I once asked one chap: [...] 'have you got net?', I asked and he replied, 'yes, I have, I've got a boy and a girl.' (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

Although some Guineans participate in this blog, they are infinitely fewer in number than the veterans from the former metropole. There is only one permanent Guinean member, Cherno Baldé, who had not fought in the war himself but was one of the many Guinean children that fraternized with the troops during the conflict and formed bonds with them. He was attributed the role of specialist in ethnic-linguistic matters, and though he is a critical voice on the blog, he has little visibility given the thousands of publications by the other members.

In short, the first limitation of the blog is the reproduction of the hegemonic narratives that circulate in society—*mnemonic hegemony* (Molden 2016: 127)—and a lack of visibility of other more critical perspectives. Not having been formed in a vacuum, the narratives present in the entries are influenced by the various discourses circulating in society. The second is the fact that blogs are losing ground before the growing weight of the new social networks, which operate with a more self-centered rationale, as is the case with *Facebook* or *Twitter*. The third is the material, social, and economic constraints that restrict internet access to particular groups, meaning that certain communities of memory are unable to inscribe their perception of events into the digital space. This then perpetuates the cycles of exclusion and invisibility.

I'm starting now to see many people swerving to the right, I don't know why, with age. (Interview with Jorge Cabral)

At last, most of the men that I spoke to in the interviews assumed a left-wing position, critical of colonialism and of the war. However, some of those same men assured me that the blog was dominated above all by men of the right, nostalgic for the colonial and dictatorial past, or men that used a right-wing patriotic discourse to defend their actions in the war as fulfilling the duty of defending the fatherland.

The negative part that I think to see.... I see there are people who are still clinging to the past. The kind that are saying 'if it were now, I would go all over again'. Me, I wouldn't go. With what I know after all these years, I wouldn't go... I would scarper. (Interview with Virgínio Briote)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The public silence, on the one hand, and the enormous impact of the Colonial War on Portuguese society, on the other, enable us to understand the need, felt by thousands of veterans, to use the internet in general and blogs in particular as alternative ways of “telling their story.” Some pursue visibility, others public recognition (which they believe to be due to them), others want to transmit their testimony to the next generations—children and grandchildren or seek the therapeutic benefits they believe the blog could provide them—*blogotherapy*—after many years of silence. The camaraderie and support they find among each other are important components of blog sociability and key elements of this so-called *blogotherapy*.

At the same time, these platforms enable researchers to gain access to personal digitalized contents, such as photographs and vernacular narratives that cannot be analyzed in traditional media due to the logic of standardized production-consumption. Although unlike published texts, these platforms pose the challenge of a constantly changing and evolving environment. The blogs not only give space to the continuing construction and sharing of memories of the Colonial War, but also reflect the need that these men feel to give meaning to an experience that does not slot into the official narratives about the colonial past. In the same way, they enable us to understand the colonial relations established during the period of war on Guinean territory and the way they have developed into the present. However, as we have already noted, the descriptions of those relations are dominated by the colonial subjectivity of the white men who fought on the Portuguese side, and especially, by those who, through force of circumstance, have access to virtual media today, enabling them to inscribe their perceptions and representations of the past in the public space on line.

This said, it is not possible to capture those trajectories with simplifications, or better, it is not possible to essentialize or reify them. These men led a life ruled by contradictions, reflections, and rationalizations, incorporating diverse narratives into their worldview. Their life stories and their memories are the product of cross-referenced discourses, public silence, and the attempt to break it. The virtualization of their testimony challenges the public silence, while at the same time producing many other silences, and it contributes to a greater knowledge of the mechanisms that frame social memory and the forgetting of freedom struggles, but it is still but a drop in the immense ocean of mnemonic products being produced by these men.

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NOTES

1. The lunch reunions have taken place for 13 years, since 2006, but have only been in the same place (Monte Real) for the last 9.
2. There were three colonial wars/wars of liberation fought between the Portuguese state and the liberation movements of Angola (UPA/FNLA, MPLA, UNITA), Mozambique (FRELIMO), and Guiné-Bissau/Cape Verde (PAIGC) between 1961 and 1974–1975. The conflict began in Angola in 1961, spreading to Guinea in 1963 and to Mozambique in 1964.
3. Ten semistructured interviews were carried out over the course of a year (from June 2008 to May 2019) of the permanent members of the *Luís Graça and Guinea Comrades* blog that were available. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. They were carried out in Portuguese and all the excerpts transcribed in the present article have been translated into English. The blog contents have been analyzed using critical discourse analysis and content analysis.
4. Pluricontinentalism [*pluricontinentalismo*] was a geopolitical concept advocated by the dictatorial regime of *Estado Novo*. According to this concept, Portugal was a transcontinental country and a unitary nation-state, encompassing continental Portugal and its overseas provinces (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe). The aim was to defend the idea that Portugal was not a colonial empire, but a singular nation state spread across three continents, in order to bypass the article 73-b of the Declaration regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories (Charter of the United Nations, Chapter XI) and the UN resolution 1514(XV) “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to colonial countries and peoples.”
5. For a critique of the concept of “discoveries” [*descobrimientos*], see the article “A controvérsia sobre um Museu que ainda não existe. Descobertas ou Expansão?” *Expresso*, at: <https://expresso.pt/cultura/2018-04-12-A-controversia-sobre-um-Museu-que-ainda-nao-existe.-Descobertas-ou-Expansao-#gs.8o8v4w>.
6. Between 2000 and 2010, there was an increase of 530.9% in the number of internet subscribers in Portugal. Data from ANACOM and the

- Portuguese National Institute of Statistics, available at <https://www.por-data.pt/Portugal/Assinantes+do+acesso+à+Internet-2093>. The internet penetration rate in Portugal in 2000 was 16.43%, rising to 53.3% in 2010. More recent data suggest a penetration of 73.79% in 2017. Data from the International Telecommunication Union from Eurostat and the Portuguese National Institute of Statistics, available at <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>
7. Technological concept, characteristic of internet writing to refer to a network of texts or words interconnected by means of a link.
 8. As Jodi Dean “I favor the term ‘blogipelago’ over the more common ‘blogosphere.’ [...] The term ‘blogosphere’ tricks us into thinking community when we should be asking about the kinds of links, networks, flows, and solidarities that blogs hinder and encourage. ‘Blogipelago,’ like archipelago, reminds us of separateness, disconnection, and the immense effort it can take to move from one Island or network to another. It incites us to attend to the variety of uses, engagements, performances, and intensities blogging contributes and circulates” (Dean 2010: 38).
 9. There are other ways in which a diary differs from the blog. Apart from the belief that a diary is a private account rather than a public one, there are other differences in issues of access, durability, the techniques of writing, among others.
 10. Assuming you have already paid for the internet service.
 11. Blog available at: <https://blogueforanadaevaotres.blogspot.com>.
 12. Interview with Luís Graça carried out by Diana Andringa within the project CROME.
 13. Op. cit.
 14. In the Portuguese magazine *Visão*, article by João Dias Miguel (22nd April 2010), “Internet. A ‘blogoterapia’,” p. 78.
 15. Publication available at: <https://blogueforanadaevaotres.blogspot.com/2010/05/guine-6374-p6502-blogoterapia-150-rosa.html>.
 16. *Tabanca* is a term used to refer to a village in Guinea-Bissau. The term was appropriated by former combatants from the Portuguese colonial side who lived in those villages during their stay in Guinea. It symbolizes the community of veterans that were born and that developed affective bonds during that period that still last.
 17. Publication available at: <https://blogueforanadaevaotres.blogspot.com/2009/12/guine-6374-p5413-era-obrigacao-da.html>.
 18. There are certain restrictions. Commentaries can be deleted by the blog editor. In the end, it depends on the decisions and policies of the blog’s owners.

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