



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

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Olosapo, vyakuka, nd'uwalo wafundala, echi wavita vyalinga vyokaliye. (Umbundu)
Old stories, like worn clothes, become like new when you tell them. | 2020 | Yara Monteiro (courtesy of the artist and writer)
(road map of Angola 1967 and Angolan stamps, carbon paper, pen, marker)

OLD PAPERS

Yara Monteiro

My maternal grandfather died at home, surrounded by his family, looking up at the big map of Angola hanging on the wall by his bed. He had lived in Portugal for almost twenty years, but he never abandoned the country where he was born. In reality, none of us have. Not that the family ever considered returning, just that it was possible for us to be in two places at once. In the end, we are anywhere.

At home, his study became a place of memory. For a decade, nothing was touched. The sacred spring clean by the women of the family, which sought to reduce the stacks of magazines, newspapers and paperwork, was indefinitely suspended after his death.

Before, there was much discussion about how obstinately he kept hold of “old papers”: statements, news clippings, records, notes, photographs - paperwork from times in Gamba, Angola. No-one understood him. His attitude was immediately put down to a kind of mania derived from the trauma of the war, in which he lost everything. That was what made him live like this. “Let’s keep it,” he’d say. “It might be handy.”

Part of my childhood was spent playing in that office. I would put a pillow on the chair, sit down and spend hours fiddling with his papers, tapping away on the typewriter, exploring the books, files, and stacks of magazines. Whenever he left the study, he carried the distinctive smell of the room on his skin and in his hair: musk, tobacco, coffee and “old papers”. As I write these words, it comes back to me, effortlessly.

After, when time began to ease the mourning, the office started to be dismantled. It turned out that my grandfather had put together an archive of correspondence, official documents, news and magazine clippings, newspapers with historical relevance, his own writings, inventories, receipts, envelopes and commemorative stamps. Within it, it was possible to map the colonial history of Angola and Portugal, the liberation struggles, civil war and attempts at peace. The “old papers” told the story of our migration to Portugal, our difficulties surviving and adapting to such a different life, and countless records of our own internal conflicts. We also found the diplomatic pouch, but that is another story.

I write this because the “old papers” represent, for me, an archaeological heritage of life paths, memories and national events. For various reasons, I have become the guardian of these material memories. They invade my own study with their scent of the past. There are silences, gaps and unknowns. I often ask myself: what will be filed, and what left out? What story did you decide to save so that you would not be condemned to oblivion? I do not see the archive as an end in itself, it is a threshold to exploring the testimony that my grandfather wanted to leave to us.

To search through the archive of “old papers” is to enter the kingdom of Hades, to be part of that invisible land of souls and spectres where my own ancestors, and others I do not know, allow me to appropriate their stories, faces, gestures, affections and rivalries. They refuse to leave without their stories being told. I am always moved, and always surprised. The “old papers” prove – or disprove – the family memories that I’ve heard over and over again.

Some of the stories preserved in those papers have inspired my novel *Essa dama bate bué!*. In it I rewrite biographies, topographies and narratives. Perhaps trying, through imagination, without knowing it, to deconstruct traumas, to reconcile and articulate where I belong. Trying to make sense of my life, divided between two continents, and of the nostalgia and suffering felt by my grandfather. I follow by his side as he returns to the mystical *mulemba* and says: “What stays, stays here.” But fate wanted the past to travel with us, hidden among “old papers”.

Translated by Archie Davies

Yara Monteiro is a writer and visual artist born in 1979 in Angola. She came to Portugal at the age of two. She has a degree in Human Resources and has worked in the area for 15 years. She took a scriptwriting course at ACT - *Escola de Autores* (Lisbon) and a Contemporary Art course at Sotheby’s in London. In 2018 she published her first novel, *Essa Dama Bate Bué!*, an immersion in the historical and family networks that traverse Angola and Portugal, seen from the generations that follow.