



MEMOIRS - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 11 December 2021



Mythologies, by António Olé | Luanda's waterfront | 2014 | Nuno Simão Gonçalves (courtesy of the photographer)

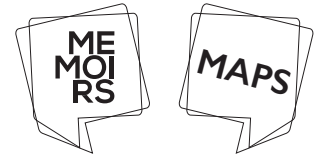
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“THERE WERE NO INNOCENT EYES” [1]

Hélia Santos

For Augusta Silva

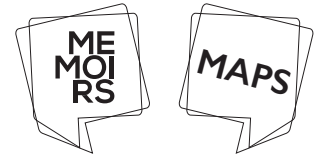
In this brief text, I outline a hypothesis that I discuss in my research work in the framework of the MEMOIRS project: On one side, the postmemory narrative, drawn from the remains of family memories, omits or ignores racial identities on the political board of colonialism; on the other, the gender dimension disappears or is outlined in a sepia collage.



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In the interviews that I analyzed, with descendants of families who lived the final phase of colonialism in Angola, the situation of women is painted in an impressionist way, with episodes limited to the use of lighter clothing, the conviviality between boys and girls (always mediated by siblings or cousins), the existence of mixed schools and the possibility of pursuing studies. Situations that may certainly be explained by the socio-demographic, political and geographical context in which one lived, but experienced and narrated as evidence of the ontologically different “way of being” “in Africa” (sic), which was perceived as a space of freedom, therefore, also for women. Moving forward in my analysis, I realized, at the intersection of the different interviews, that it would be a “freedom” little materialized in the memories, and mainly reserved to women belonging to the colonizing, urban and white social fabric of Angola. A freedom framed in a larger family narrative of mnemonic celebration of a nostalgic past. This narrative on “women’s freedom” and Angola requires a work of analysis of the microecology [2] of gender relations and the colonial management of sexualities, a work that I have not undertaken, nor do I consider to begin with this text, but to which I point in the development of my research. This is an urgent critical analysis work in Portugal, to which the book by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, *Africa in the Feminine* [3], gives a pioneer kick-off, by the testimonies she collected with white women who accompanied their husbands mobilized for the Colonial War in the former African colonies who confide to us: “Two contradictory words could summarize this time: happiness and anguish” [4].

Crossing the two social categories forgotten in postmemory, race and gender, it is easy to conclude that the condition of black women in the colonial space is a long and strident social silence, and so it remains in the memories of families. In the interviews, the experience of non-white women can only be “guessed” between silences, presences and waits. They are secondary characters in a family history where, after all, they will have been central according to the moral references of the time that defined that it was on women that the architecture of families was erected and it was to them that the management of a certain “normality” was entrusted. *Pedro* (participant in my study, born in 1973 in Angola, non-white) is moved when he recalls as a basic element of his personal formation the unwavering and daily presence of the (non-white) mother during his childhood in a small town in the central region of Portugal. However, Pedro admits to not knowing anything about his mother’s life in Angola, about her memories, about her experience of colonization and the breakdown of decolonization. This familiar experience arises through the noisy, restless, angry voice of the (white) father, as opposed to an unshakeable and silent presence of the mother. As Marianne Hirsch describes in her analysis of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*: “Women are not simply absent: they tend to function as translators and mediators, being carriers of history and their affective tissue, but not generating it themselves.”



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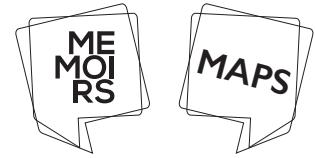
[5]

In the second generation, it is precisely in the artistic field - in the visual arts and literature - that we find the first voices of women. In the case I am dealing with, it is significant that in the three founding novels of what we might call “postmemory literature”, authored, precisely, by three female writers, we find familiar male characters at the heart of the memories of colonialism and its end: *Cadernos de Memórias Coloniais*, by Isabela Figueiredo [6], *O Retorno*, by Dulce Maria Cardoso [7], and *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida [8]. Colonialism is imagined as a male adventure: “Because that land, gentlemen, was my father’s. My father was all the Mozambican people.” [9]

If the initial literary postmemory seeks to understand, discuss or even annul the father’s narrative, recently two new writers bring the daughters/mothers relationship to the text scene, in a vain attempt to heal irrecoverable fractures between daughters(s) and mothers: *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, by Aida Gomes [10] and *Essa Dama Bate Bué* [11], by Yara Monteiro. In these two novels, the feelings, reflections and decisions of black women come to us through their inner conversation which the *boldness* of the writers allows us to access. If their experiences remain silent in their social, cultural, political, fictional context, their intense memories are the fuel for their action, “the concept of victim [thus] re-signified in the way a woman recovers the property and acting capacity of her usurped body.” [12] When finally, in the last chapter of *Essa Dama Bate Bué*, Vitória receives a letter from her mother Rosa in response to her attempt to contact her, she realizes that forty years later, her mother, a freedom fighter and a fighter in the post-independence civil war, refuses to face her past of fighting, rape, imprisonment, torture, betrayals, of which her daughter is the fruit. Vitória discovers that she is the *body* of a past of violence, a subtext she is discovering in Angolan society. The past is perennial, and its violence crosses every relationship: when she arrives in Angola to seek her mother, Vitória is welcomed by Juliana, a former companion, friend and, after all, the traitor who denounced her mother Rosa to the enemy, not before safeguarding (in a gesture of humanity, only seemingly contradictory) that Vitória is safe with her grandparents. Finally discovering her origin and the reasons for her mother’s disappearance, Vitória is suspended, waiting.

[Vitória]: - What do I do?

[Juliana]: - What you think is best for you. It may seem strange, but, here, we all love you. Wait, Vitória. Just wait. You belong to a people who is still waiting, who is waiting, always. [13]



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For Vitória, for her mother, for her “people”, *waiting* (for peace, for justice, for a future, for an identity, for a family, for a mother?) becomes eternal in a present time controlled by the violence of the past, where everyone relates as perpetrators and victims and witnesses, and witnesses and “implied subjects” [14]. Rosa, the mother, absent from the novel, whose letter sent to her daughter, the protagonist, is never presented to the reader, does not bring only the absent image of pain and violence, impossible to represent; she puts women at the center of the political struggle, far beyond the role of “absorption of trauma” in the family sphere, detected by Hirsch. Its absence is in itself, after all, a historical force and fundamental narrative if we want to understand the political subjects and the postcolonial African and European societies, heirs of this past that shapes our present.

The violence of colonialism continues to be forgotten, and, in general, to produce forgetfulness, in which the place of raped black women is particularly ignored, “excluded [...] even from the history of pain” [15]. As Hannah Arendt wrote: “no one questions or examines what is obvious to everyone” [16].

[1] - Figueiredo, Isabela. 2009. *Caderno de memórias coloniais*. Coimbra: Angelus Novus Editora, p. 28.

[2] - Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[3] - Ribeiro, Margarida Calafate. 2007. *África no feminino: as mulheres portuguesas e a Guerra Colonial*. Porto: Afrontamento, p. 66.

[4] - Iguualmente, têm surgido trabalhos de recolha de testemunhos de mulheres nas lutas de libertação, nomeadamente em Angola.

[5] - Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 12.

[6] - Figueiredo, Isabela. 2009. *Caderno de memórias coloniais*. Coimbra: Angelus Novus Editora.

[7] - Cardoso, Dulce Maria. 2011. *O retorno*. Lisboa: Tinta da China.

[8] - Almeida, Djaimilia Pereira de. 2018. *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*. Lisboa: Companhia das Letras. The author dialogues with male characters in the wake of colonialismo in the autobiographic essay *Esse Cabelo* (2015), an in *A Visão das Plantas* (2019).

[9] - Figueiredo, Isabela. 2009. *Caderno de memórias coloniais*. Coimbra: Angelus Novus Editora, p. 97.

[10] - Gomes, Aida. 2011. *Os pretos de pousaflores: romance*. Lisboa, Portugal: Publicações Dom Quixote.

[11] - Monteiro, Yara. 2018. *Essa dama bate bué!* Lisboa: Guerra & Paz. In [Newsletter Memoirs nº 107](#), the author underlines the importance of the archive of her grandfather as an inspiration for this book.

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[12] – Martins, Catarina (2019), “Corpos Nus de Mulheres Negras: poéticas da violência / poéticas da resistência”, in Ana Maria Veiga et al. (org.), *Mundos de Mulheres no Brasil*. Curitiba, Brasil: Editora CRV, p. 181 (175-184).

[13] – Monteiro, Yara. 2018. *Essa dama bate bué!* Lisboa: Guerra & Paz, p. 206.

[14] – The notion of “implied subject”, put forward by Michael Rothberg, is discussed by Miguel Cardina in [Newsletter *Memoirs* nº 82](#).

[15] – Martins 2019, p. 181.

[16] – Arendt, Hannah. 1970. *On violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

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Translated by António Sousa Ribeiro

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