

Voices From Lusophone Borderlands: The Angolan Identities Of António Agostinho Neto, Jorge Arrimar And José Eduardo Agualusa

There has been a common tendency among scholars interested in African literature in Portuguese, to remember first and foremost those writers who, in one way or another, have come to be associated with the nation-building process. There are a number of reasons why this should have been the case, but possibly the two most important are the following: to begin with, one has to bear in mind the ideologically revolutionary nature of the political regimes which emerged in the five former Portuguese African territories in 1975, and the highly political role ascribed to literature, both during the long colonial wars of the 1960s and early 70s, and in the decade following independence. This was underpinned by the creation of state sponsored writers' organizations in the newly independent nation states, inspired to a greater or lesser extent by Cuban and East European models. Secondly, the absence of a critical intelligentsia in the early years, either in the new countries or abroad, prepared to separate literary activity from political ideology, threatened to perpetuate a situation in which the role of the intellectual was perceived as being very much tied to the ideals of his (hardly ever her) country's political leaders. This was particularly the case in Angola, where a high proportion of the writers actually participated in the first independent government of the country, and I am not only thinking here of Agostinho Neto, acknowledged father of Angolan poetry as well as the first president of Angola, and therefore its founding political father, but also of the country's major

fiction writers, like Pepetela and Manuel Rui, not to mention the poet and playwright, Costa Andrade.

One of the unique features of Lusophone Africa in the question of the political use of literature was the fact that it did not begin with independence. During the almost two decades prior to independence, as the declining Portuguese regime had struggled to cling on to its colonies – even replacing the word ‘colony’ with the term ‘overseas province’ in order to fully integrate the overseas territories into one multi-continental and multi-racial nation - the essentially settler literature of Angola and to a lesser extent Mozambique, almost invariably reflected this national ideal. Indeed, it could be said that there were two competing literary views of Lusophone Africa, one – that of writers largely but not exclusively of Portuguese descent - which privileged a Luso-Tropical identity, deriving its rationale from the writings of the Brazilian social historian, Gilberto Freyre¹; the other – that of writers who were by no means only black African – which projected an Afro-Marxist one. We know how the latter developed because most of the best known writers to emerge from Angola and Mozambique over the last twenty-five years were at some stage schooled in utopian revolutionary ideology, even if they were later to diverge from it as the political framework within which they worked changed. But what is less well known is how the former tendency developed, and in many ways, the story of Portuguese-speaking Africa and its literature remains incomplete if the Luso-Tropical tendency is not also

¹ Freyre’s Luso-Tropicalist theories were based on what he perceived as the unique ability of the Portuguese to integrate in the tropics and assimilate other cultures. These were first developed in books such as *Aventura e Rotina: Sugestões de uma Viagem à Procura das Constantes Portuguesas de Carácter e Acção*, and *Um Brasileiro em Terras Portuguesas*. His theories became popular with the ideologues of the Salazar regime in the 1950s because they appeared to justify Portugal’s colonial presence in Africa.

followed through. With particular regard to the case of Angola, if the literature of its Afro-Marxist founding generation, began on the periphery to assume control of the centre, the Luso-Tropical ideal of the late colonial years was banished to the periphery, to live on and adjust to postcolonial realities in the work of writers who are no longer of the centre: political instability, both before and after 1975, left writers and intellectuals with stark choices in countries like Angola and Mozambique, much as it did in Portugal itself. Colonial wars were followed by civil wars, sudden decolonization led to widely felt insecurity and displacement, political repression continued from a beleaguered colonial regime to equally beleaguered postcolonial ones, and the inevitable consequence of this was the establishment of diasporas, and in their wake, a diasporic writing that is as varied in its expression of loss and of cultural memory, as it is of its historical and geographical setting.

It could, of course, be argued that the poetry of the early nativist and proto-nationalist African writers was largely diasporic in that it was written at a physical, though not emotional, distance from the places whose people and cultures it identified with and sought to evoke. It was certainly the case with Francisco José Tenreiro, the São Tomé poet who lived for most of his life in Lisbon between 1942 and 1967, and was the main exponent of a Negritude tendency in Portuguese. In a slightly different way, it was so with the ‘mestiço’ Angolan, Mário António, exponent of an emerging Angolan poetic consciousness in the late 1940s, who took voluntary exile in Portugal during the 1960s to the disgust of some of his compatriots, and whose collections of poetry such as *Rosto da Europa* (Face of Europe) (1968) and *Coração Transplantado* (Transplanted heart) (1970), seek to

reconcile his identity as an African with the Europe he observed and experienced as a newcomer. Finally, the poetry of Agostinho Neto himself was written while he was in exile from his homeland, but the exile here is more diffuse: there is the internal exile felt as an assimilated African who, to some extent, has lost his cultural roots, and there is the ‘trans-oceanic’ exile, that which took him away from Africa to study in Portugal, where he also became a political activist. All three, however, belonged to a generation of poets who, if they were exiles in the physical and emotional sense, were not exiles of history, given that they were writing during the 1940s and 50s, when European colonialism in Africa was on the wane. Something different occurs with subsequent generations of writers from Africa – the young exiles of independence - and yet, as we shall see, this difference lies in the individual writer’s perception of identity as a process rather than a fixed state: a process of becoming rather than a state of being. In this particular context, it is worth remembering Ashcroft’s words on post-coloniality. According to him, many African theorists since the political independence of their countries, have merely reversed the colonial Manichean binary, thus preserving the old boundary between self and other. True post-colonial transformation must break down the borderline, and forge a path towards what he terms ‘horizontality’:

“It is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes realized, for whereas the boundary is about restrictions, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining of post-colonial space” (183).

If, as we shall see, the above applies to Agostinho Neto in his poetry written in the cause of Angolan freedom from colonial rule, it can also describe the way in which writers like Jorge Arrimar and José Eduardo Agualusa, both white Angolans who left the country of their birth at independence, come to terms with their post-colonial identities. By this, I mean that it is not their varying political views that need necessarily define their writing (in the case of the latter two this is anyway not clear), but the similar borderlands that they all inhabit. In short, their differences can be measured in literary and poetic terms rather than in terms of political ideology.

Agostinho Neto was born in 1922 in the district of Ikolo e Bengo, some 60 kms from Luanda, the son of a protestant pastor and a teacher. Educated at the 'Liceu' in Luanda, he belonged to a generation of 'assimilado' African and nativist white and 'mestiço' intellectuals, who began to search for their Angolan African roots in a cultural movement launched in Luanda in 1948 around the literary review, *Mensagem* (Message), and with the apt slogan, 'Vamos descobrir Angola' (Lets discover Angola). For many, including Neto himself, who won a scholarship to study in Portugal, this led inevitably to clandestine political activity and subsequent participation in the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), the main nationalist movement, which Neto helped to co-found in 1956, and ended up leading from 1962. His poetry, which was written almost exclusively between 1945 and 1960, after which Neto the guerrilla fighter and politician took over, was only published as a collection in Portuguese in 1974, under the title, *Sagrada Esperança*

(Sacred Hope)². Its arrangement suggests a narrative based on the poet's intellectual, ideological and emotional development. At the same time, this evolution towards a sense of horizontality, is achieved through a struggle taking place in Neto's borderland, between colonialism and its alienated victims (one side of the border) and an ancestral African culture that has been crushed but not exterminated (the other). The breaching of the border leads to a process of synthesis, in which the culturally negative is infused with the culturally positive. There is a profound difference, for example, between the starkly negative atmosphere evoked in poems like 'Partida para o contrato' (Departure for forced labour), with its image of what is in effect a slave ship disappearing over a horizon shrouded in darkness, and the increasing air of hopelessness, underpinned by references to the lack of light and of hope in the predicament of the exiled contract worker, separated from his family and his homeland, and the no less stark, but ultimately more upbeat later poems, such as 'Para além da poesia' (Beyond poetry), 'O caminho das estrelas' (The path of the stars), and 'Mãos esculturais' (Sculptural hands), in which initial negative images give way to, or become subsumed into, evocations of the open world of the possible, the utopia where all borders have been abolished. Compare, for example, the closed nature of the horizon in the first poem ('Partida para o contrato'), and the open ended quality of the last one ('Mãos esculturais'):

Além no horizonte repentinos
o sol e o barco
se afogam

² The English translation of Neto's poems, by Marga Holness, was first published by the Tanzania Publishing House, Dar es Salaam, in 1974. The translations of poems by Neto quoted in this paper are taken from that 1974 edition.

no mar
escurecendo
o céu escurecendo a terra
e a alma da mulher (37)

(Far on the horizon suddenly/the sun and the ship/are drowned/in the sea
darkening/the sky darkening the earth/and the woman's soul)

* * *

Além África dos atrasos seculares
em corações tristes

Eu vejo
as mãos esculturais
dum povo eternizado nos mitos
inventados nas terras áridas da dominação
as mãos esculturais dum povo que constrói
sob o peso do que fabrica para se destruir

.....

Além deste cansaço em outros continentes
a África viva
sinto-a nas mãos esculturais dos fortes que são povo
e rosas e pão
e futuro. (94-5)

(Beyond Africa of centuries-old backwardness/in sad hearts/I see the
sculptural hands/of a people eternalised in myths/invented in the arid lands of
domination/sculptural hands of a people who construct/under the weight of what they
make to destroy themselves//Beyond this tiredness in other continents/Africa alive/I
feel it in the sculptural hands of the strong who are people/and roses and bread/and
future)

If the function of poetry is to convey a revolutionary political message, to even
explicitly herald, in poems like 'O izar da bandeira' (The hoisting of the flag)

national independence, some of Neto's poems convey a sense of loss, including a loss of place, which poetry itself has contributed to. It is already visible in the bitterly ironic comment on the false and fundamentally useless friendship demonstrated by poets towards the oppressed, which rounds off the poem, 'Velho negro' (Old black man) ('Velho farrapo/negro/perdido no tempo/e dividido no espaço/... E os poetas dizem que são seus irmãos'- 52. – Old/black rag/lost in time/and divided in space!//And the poets say they are his brothers.) The limitations of poetry are also suggested in the already mentioned 'Para além da poesia', in which the poem ends by being metaphorically consumed in the purifying flames of a revolutionary future. Poetry, in the traditional, European sense, Neto suggests, is alien to a continent whose remedies lie in action, which is why the poetry of Africa is the reflection of its people's existence and struggle:

No céu o reflexo do fogo
e as silhuetas dos homens negros batucando
de braços erguidos
No ar a melodia quente das marimbas

Poesia africana

E na estrada os carregadores
no quarto a mulatinha
na cama o homem insone

Os braseiros consumindo
consumindo
a terra quente dos horizontes em fogo. (54-5)

(In the sky the reflection of fire/and silhouettes of black men dancing the *batuque*/arms raised/In the air the hot melody of the marimbas/African poetry/And

on the road the porters/in the room the mulatto girl/in the bed the sleepless man/Braziers consuming/consuming/the hot earth of horizons on fire)

Loss of a sense of place, of cultural roots, is, for Neto and his generation, a necessary sacrifice. It is first suggested in the opening poem, 'Adeus à hora da largada' (Farewell at the hour of parting), in effect a farewell to Mother Africa, reiterated in 'Um aniversário' (A birthday), in which the poet's graduation as a doctor is evoked as a necessary stage in the struggle for freedom. But it is the poem 'Mussunda amigo' (Friend Mussunda) addressed to an uneducated companion of his youth, in which Neto most poignantly laments the gulf that life has created between them, before asserting their common existence and aspirations as Angolans:

A ti Mussunda amigo
a ti devo a vida

E escrevo versos que não entendes
compreendes a minha angústia?

Para aqui estou eu
Mussunda amigo
escrevendo versos que não entendes

Não era isto
que nós queríamos, bem sei

Mas no espírito e na inteligência
nós somos! (80)

(To you friend Mussunda/to you I owe my life/And I write poems you cannot follow/do you understand my anguish?/Here am I/friend Mussunda/writing poems you cannot follow/It was not this/we wanted, I know/But in spirit and intelligence/we are!)

Neto's borderland is really based on a network of social and cultural complexities that compete and struggle with each other. His personal memories are not so much tied to a place but to a process of growing awareness ('consciencialização') that had its roots in the Luanda of the 1940s, and developed from a consciousness of oppression through pan-Africanism and into a sense of Angolan nationalism based on broadly Marxist principles. At the same time, his poetry is diasporic, or diasporist, in the sense that it envisages a return, in the words of James Clifford, "to an original place – a land commonly articulated in visions of nature, divinity, mother earth, and the ancestors" (251). Once this process of consciousness had been achieved, poetry was no longer necessary. However, Neto's cultural roots, finally, lie in a cause and a particular historical moment, more than they lie in traditional Angolan native culture, which was largely foreign to him anyway, as a man brought up to express himself in Portuguese.

At about the time that Neto was studying in Portugal and involved in clandestine politics, Jorge Arrimar was born in Chibia, in the southern district of Huila into a family of continental Portuguese and Madeiran origins, which had been in Angola for some six generations. By the time the father of Angolan poetry and of the nation was preparing to fly into Luanda to replace the departing Portuguese administration, on 11th November 1975, Arrimar had left, along with hundreds of thousands of other Portuguese. In Portugal, he was to complete a history degree begun at the University of Luanda, before moving to the Azores as a teacher, from where he left for Macau in 1985 to take up a position in the local historical archive. Arrimar's poetry reflects another type of borderland. In the early 1970s, he had

begun writing poetry, which demonstrated a strong sense of identification with the pastoral peoples of his native region, as well as an ethnographic knowledge of their myths and history. Like Neto, he has to reconcile his past with his future, but he cannot do so in the same way because history is not on his side. Indeed, in one of his earlier poems, he is conscious of the colour of his skin that condemns him to exile, not as a slave to the plantations of the New World, but as a captive of his nation's slave trading past: "A minha pele é da cor/Das velas dos negreiros.../Sobre ela pesa a culpa/De séculos de escravidão..." (1993: 16) (My skin is the colour/of the slaveships' sails...//The guilt of centuries of slavery/weights upon it).

Irrespective of historical guilt, there is a sense too that Arrimar feels himself to be a member of a lost generation (rather than Neto's sense of belonging to a generation that has been awaited): while he can never return to Angola, he can envisage others, of a younger generation, who might one day return to the land of their or their parents' birth. Until that time, interestingly, Arrimar sees poetry in fundamentally the same terms as Neto, namely as a necessary precursor to such a hoped for eventuality. In the introduction to the second edition of his collection, *20 Poemas de Savana* (20 poems of the savannah), he wrote the following:

"In Macau – and also in Portugal – there are other young Angolans, some of them the children of those who used to meet in the misty islands of the Azores, born and/or raised outside Angola, and who have always heard their parents and older friends tell tales of that African country. With them, they learnt to eat and enjoy dishes like moamba and m'zonguê, to dance to its strong rhythms and to love its poetry. These lacerated but still live roots are the indestructible link with the future,

which may lead them one day to return to Angola and contribute to its reconstruction and rejuvenation. Poetry can also be the grist for this future that is being forged in the present” (1994: 17).

Similarly, poetry plays a role in Arrimar’s own struggle to breach a border and express his personal journey. Undoubtedly it was his stay in Macau, the longest period he spent in any one place after leaving Angola, that enabled him to reconcile past and future. Here, he encountered a place that was at once different and familiar, a place where the prevailing culture was a novelty to him, but where certain aspects of its appearance and way of life, not to mention its political status as Portugal’s last remaining overseas territory, reminded him of his homeland. Like the Angola he grew up in, it too had its days numbered, except that its return to China was to be negotiated over a long, stable transition period, rather than as a result of a sudden revolutionary upheaval, as occurred with the independence of Portugal’s African territories.

Arrimar’s Macau sequence of poems is broadly concentrated over three collections of poems: *Murilaonde* (1990), *Fonte do Lilau* (Lilau fountain)(1990), and *Secretos Sinais* (Secret signs) (1992). The first follows the narrative of his life from an Angola invested with new hopes (such as evidenced in the poem, ‘Libertação’) through to exile in the Azores and eventually Macau. His first poems written here in the mid 1980s, however, contemplate the possibility of return to his native land. The poem ‘Vontade de voltar’ (Desire to return), for example, with its image of a closed horizon, is Arrimar’s counterpoint to Neto’s poem to the departing contract worker into exile:

A vontade de voltar é forte
e vem da Chibia, onde a chuva molha
as ruas vazias dos meus passos
e o vento a bramir
rasga o horizonte fechado
dos meus sonhos por cumprir... (1990a: 49)

(The desire to return is strong/and comes from Chibia, where the rain moistens/the streets empty of my footsteps/ and the howling wind/rips the closed horizon/of my dreams still awaiting fulfilment...)

Indeed, the memory of Africa dominates this entire first collection, even when the poet is conscious of his cultural surroundings (such as in the poem ‘Exílio’). It is only in his second book, whose title renders homage to his land of exile, that he begins to identify with his new environment, while at the same time remaining conscious of the fact that he does not belong, either in terms of geography or history, place or time³. It is this tension between seeking a home and not feeling at home that underlies *Fonte do Lilau* and will only be resolved later. In a poem like ‘Manhãs opalinas’ (Translucent mornings), he seeks to observe the outside world by adopting the guise – the eyes – of a local:

Na quietude das manhãs opalinas
um junco com asas de morcego
desaparece mansamente
na superfície clara dos meus olhos
rasgados em amêndoa...

³ This progression is reflected in the titles of the collections: ‘Murilaonde’ is a tree common to the poet’s native region of Southern Angola, while the ‘Pátio do Lilau’ is a square in the heart of the old Portuguese quarter of Macau. Legend has it that if one drinks the water from its fountain, one is destined to return to the city.

(In the quiet of translucent mornings/a junk with bats' wings/disappears
silently/on the clear surface of my/almond slanted eyes...)

At the same time, he seeks to escape from the onward march of history into the
timeless world of myth, associated with Buddhist contemplation and votive
offerings:

Na quietude das manhãs opalinas
eu abraço o templo da tranquilidade
sobre uma esteira de bambu
enquanto o nevoeiro fumegante
de um tempo que não corre
embala o meu sonho vão
de aflorar a eternidade... (1990b: 17)

(In the quiet of translucent mornings/I embrace the temple of tranquillity/upon
a bamboo mat/while the smoky fog/of an unflowing time/lulls me in my vain
dream/of touching eternity...)

Other poems such as 'Malaca', 'Velha Goa' (Old Goa) and
'Caravela'(Caravel) reflect not only an acquaintance with other parts of Portugal's
long abandoned Asian empire, gained during his stay in Macau, but equally an
attempt to evoke a distant, heroic past ("a histórica labuta/de um povo/redescobrimo
o horizonte" – 36 – the historic struggle/of a people/rediscovering the horizon). This
historical musing, coupled with poems such as 'Macaense' (Macanese), which
laments the passing of the Creole world of Eurasian Macau, or 'Noutros tempos' (In
other times), in which he conjures up a vision of the old Macau of 'uma vida/que não

vivi' (a life/I didn't live), both express his consciousness of being an orphan of empire, an exile from a lost world, that of the myths of history that once explained and justified his presence in Africa. The conundrum Arrimar faces in *Fonte do Lilau*, is that he is aware that his identification with his surroundings cannot go beyond the superficial, that which he can see. Once his imagination delves into the past to seek out memory, his sense of loss becomes intense.

The contemplative and at times 'saudosista' (nostalgic) limitations of *Fonte do Lilau* are superseded in his next collection, *Secretos Sinais*. The first sign of change occurs in the poem 'Fonte' (Source), for here the outside world has been absorbed into the sphere of his emotions. His is no longer the observing eye, fancying itself oriental, but the welcoming heart, with its suggestion of love and surrender:

A fonte,
 encontrei-a eu
no lilau do meu peito,
 o aveludado leito
onde me entreguei
 a Macau (1992: 19)

(The source,/I found it myself/in the Lilau of my breast,/the velvet bed/where I gave myself/to Macau)

The introduction of a passive listener in the form of 'tu', the beloved, who is at the same time perhaps the personal embodiment of the city, serves to break down the boundaries that define identity, enabling the poet to breach the border between himself and the 'other'. Images of sexual love then blend into images of movement, in which references to oceanic space become increasingly evident:

Só as pedras são imunes
À aventura da nudez
dos amantes
perdidos na volúpia
das fronteiras abolidas

ao gemido dos corpos
navegando à deriva
no sabor a sal
de um oceano em carne-viva (1992: 101)

(Only the stones are immune/from the lovers' adventure/of nudity/lost in the voluptuousness/of abolished frontiers//from the murmur of their bodies/sailing adrift/in the salt laden taste/of an ocean cut to the quick)

The increasing presence of maritime imagery in the last section of *Secretos Sinais* signals Arrimar's development away from concern with place, and more significantly, roots in a place, to a realization that his roots are in the fluidity that continual movement allows. Moreover as Arrimar sheds the notion of physical parameters, he replaces them, in a poem like 'Aliança' (Alliance), with the process of writing itself:

Escrevo nas constelações
o espaço abolido
no flanco de um naufrágio
sem barco e sem mar
a liberdade de uma aliança
entre mim e o reflexo
da lua a pratear
na tempestade
estrelas de bonança... (1992: 121)

(I write in the constellations/the abolished space/on the flank of a shipwreck/without ship and without sea/the freedom of an alliance/between me and

the reflection/of the moon casting its silvery glitter/in the storm/upon the fair weather stars...)

By the end of the collection, the poet has divested himself of all the shackles that bind him to the past, and the association of ideas that a consciousness of roots and of the myths of history inevitably entails. In poems like ‘Silêncio’, he seems to be reaching the state envisaged by Pessoa in the Caeiro paradigm of pure existence, of silence liberated from the enslavement of words, while in ‘Viagem’ (Journey), a potent statement on the condition of displacement and the eternal exile, he has jettisoned the idea of nostalgia (“Viajo/sem a nostalgia/de quem parte/para não regressar”- 129 – I travel/without the nostalgia/of one who leaves/in order not to return). Finally, in ‘Procura’ (Quest), he seeks an ultimate union with the cosmos, in which all origins are abolished and all destinations are one (or none) across an uncharted oceanic space. He has achieved the strived for ‘horizontality’:

Procuras sobre a superfície
de um oceano virgem

Unir todos os olhares
na dimensão dos horizontes...

Emergir em todos os lugares
de todas as fontes... (1992: 149)

(You seek upon the surface/of a virgin ocean/To unite all gazes/in the dimension of horizons.../To emerge in all the places/of all the sources...)

How, then, can we reconcile the work of these two Angolan poets? We must perhaps begin by asking ourselves what drives people to write poetry, within a limited time span, and then to stop. For as already mentioned, Neto’s poetic

production was limited to a period of little more than ten years, while Arrimar's poetic journey lasts for only a little longer⁴. For both, poetry would appear to have formed part of their process of reintegration into the world, in the sense that it seems to have responded to the need felt to tell the story of their disempowerment and to work out this problem through a poetic medium. In this sense, Arrimar's feeling of alienation and his attempts to breach the borderline are no less worthy than those of Neto for his being, historically, on the wrong side. Their attempts to break out of the restrictions that history has placed upon them both lead them to the use of the same metaphor – namely that of the horizon. However, it is interesting that Neto's horizon is a terrestrial one. It is solid and relates to the land that he and his generation must reclaim for the oppressed Angolans. Arrimar's horizon changes from one dominated by the land – the savannah – to one that is oceanic, and significantly, it re-integrates him into an ancestral Portuguese literary tradition that comes through from Camões to Pessoa and beyond, and which he deploys to now express his freedom from roots. However, this does not make Arrimar any less Angolan. If any thing, while Neto's poetry expresses the drama of colonization, Arrimar's reflects that of decolonization, the sudden uprooting of Luso-Tropical Angola and its concomitant dream of a Creole society based on miscegenation and cultural mixture. It is this sense of identity that our third writer, José Eduardo Agualusa, has sought to work out in his own post-colonial journey.

⁴ Agostinho Neto's only other book of poetry, *A Renúncia Impossível* (1987), contains poems written over the same period as those in *Sagrada Esperança*. Jorge Arrimar continued to publish into the late 1990s, co-authoring a bi-lingual collection with the Chinese poet, Manuel Yao: *Confluências* (1997). In 1999, he organised, along with Yao, the *Antologia de Poetas de Macau*. Interestingly, Arrimar's later poems begin to evoke the Azores, to where he returned.

Agualusa was born in the southern city of Huambo in 1960 into a family with links to Portugal and Brazil, as well as to Angola, which he left in 1977, the year in which the Neto government encountered its first major crisis in the form of an attempted coup against it, from a radical clique within the MPLA⁵. Unlike Arrimar, he has maintained consistent contact with the country of his birth: he is a member of the Angolan Writers' Union, and his first novel, *A Conjura* (The conspiracy) (1989) won a prize there. A number of his other works of fiction focus on Angola, notably the novel, *Estação das Chuvas* (Rainy season) (1996), set in Luanda at the time of the 1977 uprising, which was a literary indictment of government reprisals against the real and imagined opponents of the regime. If Angola is an ever-present factor in Agualusa's writing, as well as in his work as a journalist for the Lisbon daily, *Público*, and for the African service of Portuguese State Television, the author himself divides his time between Portugal and Rio de Janeiro, where he has settled. Indeed, the social and historical setting for two of his prize-winning novels, the already mentioned *A Conjura*, and *Nação Crioula* (Creole nation) (1997), is the Creole society of Luanda at the end of the nineteenth century. In the first, he explores early manifestations of anti-colonial sentiment in Angola among the small 'mestiço' bohemian elite of intellectuals and artists, which aspired to follow the lead of Brazil by declaring independence from Portugal under a 'Creole' flag. The second is set in Luanda and Bahia during the struggle for the abolition of slavery, and explores the

⁵ The uprising of the *sans culottes* within the MPLA on 27th May 1977, was led by a former guerrilla commander, Nito Alves, against the perceived white and 'mestiço' leadership. It was rapidly put down, but

close triangular links between Portugal, Angola and Brazil, as well as exploiting intertextually themes and figures from their respective literatures. Agualusa's identification with Angola is therefore essentially the one that was forged on the coast out of the contact between Portuguese traders and the local indigenous peoples, and to some extent he is attracted to similar Creole residues in other parts of the former Portuguese Empire, which he has visited. However, he does not, like Arrimar, go through a phase of regret at the passing of a particular type of society. What intrigues him is the fact that these Creole communities were what differentiated Portuguese colonialism from other European variants, and these differences still survive today in territories once ruled by Portugal. At the same time, perhaps what appeals to Agualusa in these mixed societies is the interstitial space they occupy, blurring borderlines, creating ambiguities and contradictions (and sometimes self-contradictions), which suggest that they are in continual gestation, or better, possess an endless capacity for re-invention. In some ways they reflect Agualusa's own desire to flee from essentialist categorization of identity.

His collection of short stories, *Fronteiras Perdidas* (Lost frontiers) (1999), aptly subtitled 'contos para viajar' (tales for travelling), focuses on different types of borderline environment he has encountered during the course of his travels. In several tales, Agualusa's border is the tenuous line that divides (or joins) reality and fantasy, truth and fiction, and the intrusion of the latter in the former. The incongruities that this produces in everyday incidents in Africa and countries like

was followed by a massive wave of repression, in which an estimated 20000 people were killed. It left lasting resentment and created a rift in the Angolan intelligentsia.

Brazil recall the tales of Mia Couto, Agualusa's Mozambican contemporary. The tale, for example, of the laughing lizard that induces a crisis of guilt in the driver of a jeep in the middle of war-torn Angola, or the story of the hijacker of a lift in the Northeast of Brazil, who demands to be taken to Cuba in it, or indeed, that of the Portuguese taxi driver who offers to sell his passengers transcripts of his conversations with the Messiah, all explore our dependence on fantasy to explain or compensate for our mundane existence. Sometimes the border reflects the incongruities of racial identity, such as in 'A pobre pintora negra que era um branco rico' (The poor black woman painter who was a rich white man), which takes place among a group of 'white' Africans sitting round a dinner table in a restaurant in Cape Town, and explores issues of inverted racism in South Africa in the early Mandela years, immediately after the end of apartheid, and the lost 'white' frontier, curiously marginalized within a continent where it is still a privileged minority. In some particularly poignant tales, the border is between past and present, and more specifically the issue of memory among displaced peoples. Agualusa suggests that while memory is what preserves the past in the present, it too is subject to fluctuations and loss, which in turn have an effect on individual identity, rendering it meaningless. 'Não há mais lugar de origem' (There's no longer any place of origin), ranges across the recollections of the author himself: Raquel, an Angolan 'mestiça', who rants and raves in a mixture of English and German in her disturbed sleep in a room in Frankfurt, and keeps a collection of old records, 'merengue' music that no one plays anymore in Luanda. Her old nickname, 'Fronteira Perdida', given to her because of her uncertain racial origins, not only sums up her predicament, but that of

many of the characters in these stories, not least Raquel's flatmates, two Brazilian women living in Frankfurt, who sing the words of a song unknown in Brazil: "Não há mais lugar de origem/a origem é existir/não me diga de onde eu sou/eu sou, não sou, eu estou aqui" (65) (There's no longer any place of origin/origin is existing/don't tell me where I'm from/I am, I'm not, I am here). It is a tale of loss, even the loss of nostalgia, the main buttress of memory, and recalls Arrimar's mixture of lamentation and cry of liberation: "Viajo/sem a nostalgia de quem parte/para não regressar./A minha tarefa é partir/quando nasci para ficar..." (1992: 129) (I travel/without the nostalgia of one who leaves/in order not to return./My task is to leave/when I was born to stay...).

In two of Agualusa's tales, the idea of the lost frontier is encapsulated in the central metaphor of a physical border, defined by the seashore, as in 'Um hotel entre palmeiras' (A hotel among palm trees), or by a river, separating one international entity from another. In 'Lugar de morança' (A place to bide one's time), the narrator is travelling through the Casamance area of Senegal, which abuts the riverine border with Guinea-Bissau, and where the population speaks Portuguese Creole. It is therefore an interstitial space of shifting cultural values and uncertain political identity that defies the arbitrary nature of a border drawn up by two distant colonial powers, and whose only reminder is an ancient signpost marked 'Portugal 30 kms' and some buildings that speak to the narrator of another age. The theme recurs in rather more explicit form in 'Plácido Domingo contempla o rio, em Corumbá' (Plácido Domingo contemplates the river, in Corumbá). Here, the narrator is travelling across the Brazilian interior to the once thriving border town of Corumbá

on the banks of the Paraguay River, separating Brazil from Bolivia. He is going to meet a character of his invention, an elderly Angolan exile named Plácido Domingo, a fiction living in the shadow (on the frontier?) of an international household name. The narrator is on a quest to establish why this man, a supposed hero from the anti-colonial war, Comandante Maciel, had disappeared after independence, and it is here that we encounter yet another borderland: a quest for the truth in the labyrinthine memories of a former spy. For in his meeting with the old man, he learns that the guerrilla hero was in fact a colonialist infiltrator, in the pay of the Portuguese secret police. Nor was it so much that his cover was blown in 1974, when the Portuguese dictatorship fell, but that his world was lost. With the sudden departure of his sponsors (the embodiment of one half of his personality), his transformation into the Marxist ideologue he had always pretended to be was complete: he no longer had a rear base to retreat to. Domingo's chameleon identity had been lost, and the isolated frontier territory of his present exile, with his weekly visits to the Bolivian town on the other side of the river, are merely a surrogate for his previous life.

It is Plácido Domingo who reappears in Agualusa's more recent novel, *Um Estranho em Goa* (A stranger in Goa) (2000), set in another Creole environment of Portuguese making. But this is the 'real life' Domingo who has read the already published short story about himself, while Agualusa plays with his readers' perceptions of where fiction stops and reality begins. Domingo, this time, is an Angolan independence fighter, who was sent on a mission to Zaire at independence where he was due to be murdered for knowing too much about the collaboration between the Portuguese secret police and certain political leaders of the new country

during the years of the colonial war. Domingo had escaped his assignation with death and settled in Goa. Like his doubly fictional namesake in Corumbá, he is a man who has lost his birthright. Like his interviewer, the narrator Agualusa, he is a man who was once an Angolan, but who now dresses like an Indian, while at the most feeling himself Goan, but not Portuguese, a man who lives like a colonial, with a lone African servant, in a rambling house with a veranda, the guardian of certain cultural values from the past, but who has adapted to the borderland of Goa, with its still conflicting loyalties and shifting identities. In a sense, it is the only home he can inhabit.

It is time now to try and draw these considerations on different literary treatments of post-coloniality to a conclusion. Literary criticism of the work of African writers in Portuguese has been dominated, both in Portugal and in the African countries themselves by concerns with the expression of ‘angolanidade’, ‘moçambicanidade’, ‘caboverdianidade’, and so on. The presupposition has been that there are certain features of the literary expression of these countries that define their identity as being in some way authentically of their national territory. During the 1980s and early 90s, debates raged, sometimes quite heatedly, on who had a claim to be an Angolan or a Mozambican writer, which invariably centred on issues of birth, upbringing, and in particular of political loyalty. Seen through this type of narrow prism, it is clear that Neto would be the only writer of those considered here to qualify. Nowadays the focus has shifted. In part, this is due to the migration and movement of writers and the internationalization of literature in the Western world, which has also affected those writing in Portuguese. But perhaps just as important is

the growing realization that identity is essentially subjective, a construction of the imagination and prone to be exploited by certain sectors of the political elite in order to preserve social order: we are all pressured to buy into this imagined community. But the counterpoint to this is the awareness that precisely because identity is subjective, it is prone to fluctuation, re-interpretation and fragmentation into plurality. Identities do not consist of a set of harmonious qualities or characteristics, but are areas of contention, which means too that they contain great potential for creativity. In this context, it is worth perhaps recalling the words of Madan Sarup:

“Identity (...) may perhaps best seen as a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash. These writings consist of many quotations from the innumerable centres of culture, ideological state apparatus and practices: parents, family, schools, the workplace, the media, the political parties, the state. Human subjects have the capacity to ‘work’ on these differences within an individual, who is never a unified member of a single unified group. It is these very differences that create the space which the human subject exercises a measure of interpretative freedom” (25).

Such are the borderlands that our writers here have inhabited or inhabit. Within them, it could be said that they contain their own diaspora, their own potential for hybridity. Neto, the author of the ‘narrative’ of Angolan liberation harboured within him the Portuguese ‘doutor’ (graduate), who had to consciously seek to identify with his illiterate compatriots, the romantic, prophetic poet, influenced no doubt by Castro Alves as much as Césaire, contained within him the guerrilla leader who was openly conscious of the limitations of poetry in the achievement of political

ends. Arrimar's Angolan memories (essentially rural and southern, and full of an ethnographic interest absent in Neto) become ever more deeply buried under the weight of new experiences, new identities. Arrimar's solution to displacement is to write an anti-narrative: if the traditional view of identity is that it is a story built up on a sequence of causes and effects, Arrimar, by abolishing his origins, in effect abolishes the narrative of his identity. And yet, in his very poetry, he reveals a Portuguese literary, cultural and historic underbelly, by his use of maritime imagery. Something similar occurs with Agualusa, with the difference perhaps that his links with the land of his birth have remained more constant, and he has become an interpreter of modern Angola for the outside world, much as Mia Couto has with regard to Mozambique. And yet his stories of displaced people are also a self-exploration. In seeking clues as to Plácido Domingo's life, he is attempting to unfold a mystery, but by so doing, he is also creating a narrative and therefore an identity. However, because the narrative is inconclusive, the notion of identity is equally so. In his writing, he evokes the cultural 'comings-and-goings' and flux of that part of the Portuguese colonial experience, and which is still very much a feature of the coastal culture of Angola, the hybrid Creole world that even Neto himself belonged to, an inter-cultural world that now revealed its Portuguese or more generally European dimension, now its African, a pragmatic and inclusive culture, a treasure to be cherished in a world where fundamentalism and crude nationalism offer a more sinister and less creative alternative.

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