


ARTICLE

## African Literatures in the Portuguese Language: Singularities

Nazir Ahmed Can 

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain  
Email: [Nazir.Ahmed.Can@uab.cat](mailto:Nazir.Ahmed.Can@uab.cat)

### Abstract

This article reflects on some textual and institutional elements that distinguish literary life in Portuguese-speaking African countries. These elements concern, firstly, the peculiarities of the Portuguese empire. Combining precarity, epistemological backwardness, and violence in equal proportion, it inspired an artistic response that was consolidated even before the independences. Secondly, they relate to the type of decolonization produced in these territories. Contrary to the majority of other African contexts, their independence was not negotiated, but conquered through armed struggle. Thirdly, there are the thematic and formal aspects: the “animal,” the “dead,” and an internationalist geographical imaginary play a structuring role in the literary fields. Thus, this article demonstrates how these contexts, unique to African literatures, can also offer new data for the analysis of cultural goods in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** African literatures in the Portuguese language; African literature and empire; African literature and revolution; African literature and geography

This article identifies and reflects on some literary and institutional elements that, since the mid-twentieth century, have made the literary life distinct in the five Portuguese-speaking African territories: Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe. I am aware that each one of these countries deserves a “particularized approach.”<sup>1</sup> The heterogeneity of historical, social, cultural, political, and aesthetic paths that characterizes each one is what makes the detail necessary. However, given that the study of African literatures has developed in a divided linguistic context (“Francophone

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfredo Margarido, “Les difficultés des histoires des littératures des pays africains de langue portugaise,” in *Les Littératures africaines de langue portugaise: à la recherche de l'identité individuelle et nationale*, ed. Benjamin Abdala Jr. (Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1985), 514.

studies,” “Lusophone studies,” “Hispanophone studies,” “postcolonial studies”—the latter with an interlinguistic horizon, but created mostly at US universities and consolidated in English with a focus on Anglophone contexts—it seems relevant to identify some common traits that allow us to evaluate the “group particularization” of Lusophone literature almost fifty years after the independences. Some highlighted elements in this text might be noticed alone in other different linguistic traditions—specifically those of thematic nature. But, in the case of the Lusophone tradition, these elements play a structural role whose effects are relevant in the five countries under scrutiny.

First, these traits refer to the peculiarities of the Portuguese empire and its peculiar mode of decolonization. As a result of this historical process, writers have assumed a specific role in the transformations of the last seven decades. Regarding representation, I will emphasize the importance of the “animal” and the “dead” as literary tropes. In addition, I will highlight the impact of the international geography, that is, the opening on the level of representation to other African and transcontinental contexts in the evolution of this literary community.

## Literature and Empire

In his classic studies *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said demonstrated that territorial possessions—geography—are what is at stake in colonial works. The pace of the transformations validates the hypothesis of the Palestinian theorist: if in 1880 Western powers dominated 55 percent of the globe, in 1914 they controlled 85 percent of it. Hence, if we follow Said’s argument, imperialism enlisted not just soldiers and cannons, repression, and torture, but also ideals and shapes, images, and representations.<sup>2</sup> Disseminated since the eighteenth century, and with a greater mass impact from the nineteenth century onward, an imaginary that situated Africa as the core of fascination as well as abjection took hold throughout the two main British and French empires. This reinforced the thesis that natural characteristics determine the superiority or inferiority of human beings. However, Edward Said never analysed Portuguese Orientalism because, by his own admission, he didn’t know the artistic and literary production of this linguistic universe.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to Mary Louise Pratt, who, in *Imperial Eyes*, analyzed mainly narratives written in Spanish and English.<sup>4</sup>

But the reason behind this absence is more profound than personal unfamiliarity or reduced circulation of the Portuguese literature in the world. Although the sea is the main *topos* of the country of Luís de Camões and Fernando Pessoa, the “Other” only plays a relevant role in the Portuguese literary field in the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> While in the French universe

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 40.

<sup>3</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, “Capelas imperfeitas: configurações literárias da identidade portuguesa,” in *Entre ser e estar: raízes, percursos e discursos da identidade*, eds. Maria Irene Ramalho and António Sousa Ribeiro (Porto: Afrontamento, 2002), 307–48.

tropical landscapes had been present in metropolitan literature from the seventeenth century until the avant-garde aesthetics of the twentieth century, in the Portuguese perspective enclosure reigns supreme.<sup>6</sup> Not even neorealism, an artistic movement run by members and sympathizers of the Portuguese Communist Party, integrated the colonial issue in its aesthetic and ideological enterprise.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, the great Orientalist work of the Portuguese language of the twentieth century is *Aventura e Rotina* (*Adventure and Routine*—1953), by Gilberto Freyre.<sup>8</sup> This book is the result of a two-year trip to the Portuguese colonies in Africa and Asia. The Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, who sponsored the trip, soon after adopted the premises of “Lusotropicalism” defended by Gilberto Freyre. In general terms, according to the Brazilian sociologist, Portugal had a historical right over these territories because it is the empire most familiar with the tropical world. To verify this, in addition to a set of subjective comparisons with English imperialism, Freyre affirms that Portuguese colonialism invented the “mulatto” and the phenomenon of miscegenation. With this and other texts, the sociologist expresses his explicit support for Portuguese empire and attributes it a scientific status. Naturally, Gilberto Freyre was not the only prominent Orientalist of the Lusitanian empire. Some recent critical works demonstrate the impact of the literary space for the construction of a network of complicities with the imperial logic.<sup>9</sup> But due to his claim to interdisciplinarity and the breadth of spaces represented in his work, the content of the images created and the repercussion of his reflection in the formation of a line of thinking about the “Brazilian,” the “Portuguese,” the “African,” the “Indian,” or the “Chinese” peoples, we could state that Gilberto Freyre is the main Orientalist author of the Portuguese language.<sup>10</sup> So, two distinctive elements should already be pointed out: 1) differently from authors from French and British empires, the author rooted

<sup>6</sup> Regarding France, a fundamental reference is Fernando Giobellina Brumana, *O sonho dogon: nas origens da etnologia francesa* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 2011). See also Bernard Mouralis, *Les contre-littératures* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1975). As for enclosure, see Nazir Ahmed Can and Rita Chaves, “Empire and Literature: From the Schism of Race to the Seism of the ‘Other,’” in *Racism and Racial Surveillance. Modernity Matters*, eds. Sheila Khan, Nazir Ahmed Can, and Helena Machado (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 16–40.

<sup>7</sup> Rita Chaves, “Henrique Galvão entre os descompassos do Império Lusitano,” *Sinais Sociais* 9 (2014): 128.

<sup>8</sup> Gilberto Freyre, *Aventura e Rotina: sugestões de uma viagem à procura das constantes portuguesas de caráter e ação* (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1953).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Catarina Apolinário de Almeida and Marta Pacheco Pinto, eds., *Portuguese Orientalism: The Interplay of Power, Representation and Dialogue in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Brighton, Chicago, and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2021); Everton V. Machado, “Camões et l’orientalisme,” *Revue Asie du Centre de Recherches sur l’Extrême-Orient de Paris-Sorbonne* 3 (2018): 1–12; Duarte Drummond Braga, *As Índias espirituais: Fernando Pessoa e o orientalismo português* (Lisboa: Tinta-da-China, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> The author also inspired critical reactions from scholars from different areas and from different continents, just to name two, see Fele Buanga (Mário Pinto de Andrade), “Qu’est-ce que le ‘lusotropicalismo?’”, *Présence Africaine* 4 (1955): 24–35; Cláudia Castelo, “O modo português de estar no mundo”: o luso-tropicalismo e a ideologia colonial portuguesa: 1933–1961 (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1999); José Luís Cabaço, *Moçambique: Identidades, colonialismo e libertação* (São Paulo: Anpocs, 2009).

in Portugal has rarely enrolled the Other in their poetics; 2) the Orientalist record gained full meaning only in the twentieth century through the intervention of a Brazilian scientist rather than a Portuguese writer.

Within all imperialisms, colonization produces the most extreme historical experience of material and mental expropriation through the falsification of the colonized self by the colonizing Other. It is also an open-air concentration system where the exception is the norm.<sup>11</sup> For Hannah Arendt, this project was reinforced in the early decades of the twentieth century, when national identity was transformed into a racial identity, national history into a racial history, and national unity into a racial unity.<sup>12</sup> All of these elements confirm a type of complicity between imperial powers. However, we can once again consider distinctive elements that result from both the material might and the rhetorical performance of each European metropolis: 1) even though the Portuguese empire actively participated in this enterprise, it presents less significant numbers in terms of territorial occupation and in terms of the knowledge accumulated on the occupied spaces; 2) Portugal was one of the protagonists of early Western expansion in the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the Portuguese presence in Africa was marked by a good dose of imitation (especially of the French justification discourse), material dependency (on England), and improvisation (as confirmed by successive laws created throughout the twentieth century to ease international pressures and simultaneously maintain control over the territories and the local population).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the illiteracy rate in Portugal was approximately 80 percent. This fact alone contradicts one of the main premises of imperial discourse: the transferral of civilizational values to the people of the “Ultramarine territories.” With the arrival of the *Estado Novo*, in 1926, this anomalous imperialism adopts an openly fascist orientation. The authorities’ discourse starts to emphasize the values of *portugalidade*, that is, the “Portuguese way of living,” family, and religion. In a similar vein, the idea of racial purity shaped the *habitus* of the Portuguese empire.<sup>13</sup> After World War II, in response to the international pressure favoring the liberation of the African peoples, the *Estado Novo* started instead to value the hybrid nature of the Portuguese settler, their familiarity with the tropics, their historical right to the land, and their ability to create new worlds in the world. This happened with the support of the theory of Gilberto Freyre, as mentioned previously. Following this logic, the *mulatto* confirms the hypothesis and justifies the permanency in the dominated territory. In this imaginary, the *mulatto* results exclusively from the crossing between the White man and the Black woman.

<sup>11</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961); Achille Mbembe, *De la Postcolonie: essai sur l’imagination politique dans l’Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Khartala, 2000). Elikia M’bokolo, “Afrique centrale: le temps des massacres,” *Le Livre noir du colonialisme, XVI-XXI: de l’extermination à la repentance*, ed. Marc Ferro (Paris: Hachette Poche, 2006), 577–601.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 88.

Hence, hybridity, one of the keywords in 1990s postcolonial studies, was in fact a crucial discursive tool of the Portuguese empire in the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, this celebration was in itself an ideological falsification of facts on the ground. Although public discourse praised miscegenation, Portuguese colonialism practiced its own version of apartheid, even without the support of the legal apparatus: for Eduardo Mondlane, who presents data on the number of mulatto people in Portuguese colonies, throughout the twentieth century the Portuguese colonies had the lowest miscegenation rate in Africa. In Mozambique, for instance, this rate was lower than 1 percent of the total population.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it is worth highlighting that Portugal was, among the former colonial powers, the one that dedicated the least effort to the systematization of the local languages. Regarding the Portuguese language itself, the country built a deficit structure. In 1975, some of the African countries with the highest illiteracy rate were Angola (85 percent), Guinea-Bissau (90 percent), Mozambique (91 percent) and Saint Tomé and Príncipe (98 percent).<sup>16</sup>

Elaborated mainly by public servants who lived in the colonies, Portuguese colonial literature in Africa emerged almost one century later than its French and British counterparts. It therefore presents a set of images that had already been overcome by the colonizing eyes of other imperial metropolises. According to Rita Chaves, the propagandist dimension and the unusual nature of most premises<sup>17</sup> are symptoms of the time-lag of Portuguese colonialism: the African experience demonstrates that the cordiality of the Portuguese colonizer is a fallacy. The fragility of the metropolis gave rise, on the contrary, to a fierce colonialism.<sup>18</sup> The precariousness is confirmed with the late emergence, in the twentieth century, of initiatives that institutionalized the praise of the empire: expositions and conferences; new school textbooks; creation of the *Agência-Geral do Ultramar* (General Agency of the Ultramarine Provinces); and the *Junta de Investigação do Ultramar* (Ultramarine Research Board); among

<sup>14</sup> In the Anglophone postcolonial field, hybridity figured prominently; see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995); Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Creolization in Africa," in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 202–05.

<sup>15</sup> Eduardo Mondlane, *Lutar por Moçambique* (Maputo: Centro de Estudos Africanos at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Based on these facts, it is easier to understand the remarkable quantity of White or mixed race authors established on the literary field. After all, their schools, homes, and social networks favored the contact with books and other modern goods. In addition, one can understand the almost complete absence of literary texts written in the local languages, even today, in contrast to what happens in several African countries.

<sup>17</sup> One of the most talented writers of the Portuguese colonial literature is Henrique Galvão. In 1947, with *Antropófagos*, the author seeks to validate his thesis that Africans are cannibals. This work would be republished in 1974. On this work, see João de Pina-Cabral, "Galvão na terra dos canibais: a constituição emocional do poder colonial," in *Trânsitos coloniais: diálogos críticos luso-brasileiros*, eds. Cristiana Bastos, Miguel Vale de Almeida, and Bela Feldman-Bianco (Campinas: Editora da Unicamp, 2002), 101–24.

<sup>18</sup> Rita Chaves, *Angola e Moçambique: experiência colonial e territórios literários* (São Paulo: Ateliê, 2005).

others.<sup>19</sup> Lacking the aesthetic sophistication of Joseph Conrad and other authors analyzed by Said or Pratt, Portuguese colonial literature confirms the irreversible detachment of the Europeans from the Africans. White characters are exclusively the protagonists. The Black character is animalized and a mere extension of nature. Regarding the representation of the space, a similar mismatch is observed: Africa is the metonymy of the “bush.”<sup>20</sup> The strategy of geographic standardization reinforced the erasure of the Other and validated the hypothesis of a continent without history which the Portuguese hero had to wake from its slumber.

Consequently, Portuguese participation in the production of stereotypical representations of Africa legitimizing colonialism is as belated as it is virulent. The African writers would respond in kind by articulating the same elements—characters in African time and space—but with inverted coordinates and values.

### Literature and Nation

National African literatures written in Portuguese emerged alongside the production of colonial literature. This is different from the situation in most parts of Africa or Latin America. The five literatures under discussion were in other words national well before the emergence of their respective nations. In addition, it could even be claimed that they anticipated the travails of the post-independence period. Although *published* mostly after 1975, when the independences were formalized, many of the most significant works had been written already in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the temporal mismatch between creation and publication, it should also be noted that they were produced under spatial constraints: in exile, in various spaces of exception (such as prison, the concentration camp, and the battlefield). In these places unfavorable to creation, the writers started from a common concern (of political nature) and supported one another in different formal strategies (of artistic nature). In other words, the ideological unity is accompanied by the diversity on the plane of expression. In these works, African history is no longer read as an undifferentiated mass, marked by absence and chaos, as was typical in the colonial aesthetic. The temporality inscribed in the fiction and poetry integrates the

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, see Paulo de Medeiros, “Casas Assombradas,” in *Fantasmas e fantasias imperiais no imaginário português contemporâneo*, eds. Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Ana Paula Ferreira (Porto: Campo das Letras, 2003), 127–49.

<sup>20</sup> Francisco Noa, *Império, mito e miopia: Moçambique como invenção literária* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> The appearance of important publishings connected to the press is not unrelated to this movement; the magazine *Mensagem* (1951–1953), of Angola, and *Msafo* (1952) of Mozambique, thus join the magazine *Claridade* (1936–1960) and of the bulletin *Mensagem* (published irregularly between 1948 and 1964) of *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* (CEI). CEI was founded in 1944 by *Estado Novo* as a species of symbolic currency. In face of the pressures that were coming with the end of the Second World War, this space was aimed to renew the caution of the empire on matters of the upbringing of the people from the colonies. Unintentionally, nonetheless, the Portuguese authorities made a basic mistake: joining in one space a group of young intellectuals from the dominated territories. From this space some important works from the Portuguese language literary collection appear as well.

period as well prior to the arrival of the first Europeans, becoming a target of symbolic pluralization and invention. Embracing the complexity of the characters and stories, previously unrepresented spaces were foregrounded (such as Angolan *musseques*, for example) or already familiar literary spaces were evaluated from another perspective (such as the island of Mozambique). In relation to privileged historic environments, it is striking to note how authors reappropriate different forms of political struggle across the globe.

Accordingly, cosmopolitanism<sup>22</sup> turns out to be a key characteristic of these literatures. Between the 1940s and 1960s, the international space (Brazil, Cuba, United States, Haiti, among others) is invoked with a political purpose: Agostinho Neto (“Voz de Sangue” [Voice of Blood]), Viriato da Cruz (“O dia da Humanidade” [The Day of Humanity]), Alda do Espírito Santo (“Em torno da minha baía” [Around My Bay]), Jorge Barbosa (“Você, Brasil” [You, Brazil]), Francisco José Tenreiro (“Epopeia” [Epic]), Noémia de Sousa (“Deixa passar o meu povo” [Let My People Go]), Craveirinha (“África” [Africa]), and Virgílio de Lemos (“Cantemos com os poetas do Haiti” [Let’s Sing with the Poets of Haiti]),<sup>23</sup> for example, promoted an open dialogue with international currents of thought or movements. Among these movements, Anglophone Pan-Africanism, Francophone “négritude,” Cuban “Negritismo,” and Brazilian regionalism stand out.<sup>24</sup> The voices of Harlem, Salvador da Bahia, Havana, Porto Príncipe, and many others, inscribed in poetry or fiction, brought attention to the restoration of Black populations in the history of humanity. This way, the unfair situation of those living in the Portuguese colonies was foregrounded and stood out as remarkable from an international perspective. On one hand, the colonized territories from the metropolis inherited a peripheral condition marked by the dependence on external models. However, relevant movements like Négritude or Pan-Africanism were born neither in the metropolis nor in the colonies, but in a constant intellectual traffic between these spaces. This is why, on the other hand, it becomes possible to reappropriate the foreign repertoire to their own ends.

Together with the change in the tone in the representation of time and space, local populations were no longer presented as a uniform collective. Instead, their diversity was openly exhibited. Accordingly, African characters cease to be figures in the background, as was typical of the colonial writings, and take on major role. In this process, animals also become surprisingly prominent. Through them, a crucial feature of oral cultures in general (not just African) is recovered: allegorically, the animal figure infers the destiny of a people. Simultaneously, its presence inverts one of the main imperial myths: while in the colonial literature the human being is animalized, in the African literatures the animal is humanized. The importance that is attributed to the animal in some of the foundational narratives of Cape Verde (“O galo cantou na baía” [“The Cock

<sup>22</sup> On this subject, see Pires Laranjeira, *A Négritude africana de Língua portuguesa* (Porto: Afrontamento, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> My translation.

<sup>24</sup> For an in-depth look at this issue, particularly with regard to the Mozambican, Angolan, and also South African contexts, see Stefan Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature. Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).



Sang in the Bay,"] a tale by Manuel Lopes, published in 1939), Angola ("A estória da galinha e do ovo" [*The Tale of the Chicken and the Egg*,] by Luandino Vieira, in 1963) and Mozambique ("Nós matámos o cão-tinhoso" [*We Killed Mangy Dog*,<sup>25</sup>] by Luís Bernardo Honwana, in 1964) demonstrates—not just in the titles of the works—how the authors rewrote history by way of the animal figure. After the independences, the symbolic exchanges between the animal and the human being continued to work as the driving force of artistic creation: the destiny of the pig Carnaval da Vitória that tragically intersects with the paradoxes of the young Angolan nation, in *Quem me dera ser onda* ["I Wish I Were a Wave"] (1982), by Manuel Rui; the geographical and historical mobility favored by the dog in *O Cão e os Caluandas* ["The Dog and the Luandans"] (1985) and the tortoise in *Parábola do Cágado Velho* ["The Parable of the Old Tortoise"] (1996), by Pepetela; or the fight between the snake (water and the feminine principle) and the lion (fire and the masculine principle), spirits that, in addition to representing the two great imaginaries of Mozambique (from the north and south, respectively), invade the body of the protagonist, in *As Duas Sombras do Rio* ["The Two Shadows of the River"]<sup>26</sup> (2003), by João Paulo Borges Coelho. These are only some examples that restore the union between human beings and animals.<sup>27</sup>

Something similar happened with the manifestation of "death," the main protagonist of the African literatures in the Portuguese language from a qualitative point of view (due to its ability to interfere in the life of the community) and from a quantitative point of view (because he appears in practically all fiction narratives). That is, in different ways, death played a crucial role in the most important fiction works of the last century. This emphasis arises from a double motivation.

On one hand, the presence of death is unavoidable in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and successive wars. Some of the main authors of African literature in the Portuguese language have experienced conflicts that lasted more than half of their own lifetime. Pepetela, for instance, was born in 1941 and participated actively in the liberation war that lasted almost fifteen years (1961–1974). After Angolan independence, the protracted civil war ensued (1975–2002). Something similar happened in Mozambique: although the main national authors did not participate directly in the armed conflicts, they lived with its tension between 1964 and 1974. Subsequently, they endured the civil war between 1977 and 1992. In Guinea-Bissau, the war of liberation (1963–1974) and the successive coup

<sup>25</sup> Except for the titles by Luandino Vieira and Luís Bernardo Honwana (already published in English), the translation is ours.

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

<sup>27</sup> This transition of imaginary regimes is explored in more detail in the following texts: Nazir Ahmed Can, *O campo literário moçambicano: tradução do espaço e formas de insílio* (São Paulo: Kapulana Editora, 2020), 20–21; Nazir Ahmed Can, "From Trump to Mangy-Dog: Notes on Beasts, Humans and other (In)versions," *Memoirs* 87 (2020): 5–11; Nazir Ahmed Can, "Literatura colonial portuguesa e a metáfora morta do mundo sem tradução: o caso de 'Zambeziã,' de Emílio de San Bruno," *Portuguese Cultural Studies* 7 (2021): 27–42; Nazir Ahmed Can and Rita Chaves, "Empire and Literature: From the Schism of Race to the Seism of the 'Other,'" in *Racism and Racial Surveillance: Modernity Matters*, eds. Sheila Khan, Nazir Ahmed Can and Helena Machado (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 16–40.



d'état after independence turned this, too, into another space where literary production occurred alongside death on a massive scale.

The authors use the image of the dead to approach a characteristic cultural dimension of the local communities. The poet José Craveirinha, in an essay that celebrates Mozambican dance, provides a clue to this obsession among writers. In this book, the author analyzes the opposition between two spheres: the telluric communion of the African dance (“the feet in a continuous relationship with the ground, aiming for the ground and not upward”) and the ethereal essence of the European dance (“above all in the most universal, the ballet, marked by the flight, the lift, running away from the ground”).<sup>28</sup> As is well known, in several African cultures the dead who are to be celebrated are found in the ground and not in the sky.<sup>29</sup> The poetry of several authors of this period, Craveirinha, in particular,<sup>30</sup> show how the communication with the dead and, by extension, with the holy is fundamentally telluric. Aware of the dangers of the essentialism, Craveirinha also recalls that in most traditional African communities’ life is not the opposite of death. The boundary between these dimensions is porous and, for several reasons, the dead occupy a decisive space in the life of the living. Numerous works of fiction bear this out.

These are some examples from Angola that stand out: *O Segredo da Morta* [“The Secret of Death”] (1929), by António de Assis Júnior; *Terra Morta* [“Dead Earth”] (1949), by Castro Soromenho; “Quinaxixe” [“Quinaxixe”] (1965), by Arnaldo Santos; *Nós, os do Makulusu* [We, the People from Makulusu] (1974), by Luandino Vieira; “Náusea” [“Nausea”] (1980), by Agostinho Neto; *1 Morto e os Vivos* [“1 Dead and the Living”] (1992), by Manuel Rui; *Os papéis do inglês* [“The Papers of the English”] (2005), by Ruy Duarte de Carvalho; *Os vivos, o morto e o peixe frito* [“The Living, the Dead and the Fried Fish”] (2009), by Ondjaki. From Mozambique, worth those mentioning include “Nós matámos o cão-tinhoso” [We Killed Mangy Dog and Other Stories] (1964), by Luís Bernardo Honwana; *Ualalapi* [Ualalapi: Fragments from the End of Empire] (1987), by Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa; *Ninguém matou Suhura* [“Nobody Killed Suhura”] (1988), by Lília Momplé; *Terra Sonâmbula* [Sleepwalking Land] (1992), by Mia Couto; *A noiva de Kebera* [“Kebera’s Bride”] (1994), by Aldino Muianga; *Palestra para um morto* [“Lecture for a Dead Person”] (1999), by Suleiman Cassamo; *Crónica da Rua 513.2* [“Chronicle of Street 513.2”] (2006), by João Paulo Borges Coelho. From Cape Verde, we could highlight *Flagelados do Vento Leste* [“Scourged by the East Wind”] (1959), by Manuel Lopes; *A Casa dos Mastros* [“The House of Masts”] (1989), by Orlanda Amarílis; *O testamento do Sr. Napumoceno da Silva Araújo* [The Last Will and Testament of Senhor da Silva] (1989) and *O Fiel Defunto* [“The Faithful Deceased”] (2018), by Germano Almeida;

<sup>28</sup> José Craveirinha, *O folclore moçambicano e as suas tendências* (Maputo: Alcance, 2009), 42. My translation.

<sup>29</sup> There is a vast bibliography on the impact of death on traditional African societies, especially in the field of anthropology. For a synthesis of studies that focus on the notion of death in the African context in recent centuries, as well as its current relationship with the concepts of urbanization, globalization, and new technology, see Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan, “Death and Dying in the History of Africa since 1800,” *Journal of African History* 49, no. 3 (2008), 341–59.

<sup>30</sup> As can be seen already in Craveirinha’s early poem “Xigubo,” from his first book *Xigubo* (1964).

*O Novíssimo Testamento* ["The Brand New Testament"] (2009) and *Biografia do Língua* ["Biography of Língua"] (2014), by Mário Lúcio Sousa; In São Tomé e Príncipe *A Estufa* ["The Greenhouse"] (1964), by Luís Cajão, or *O testamento de Cristina* ["Christina's Will"] (1995), by Sacramento Neto, are all works that reiterate the importance of this topic. Finally, also in the main novel from Guinea-Bissau, *A última tragédia* [*The Ultimate Tragedy*]<sup>31</sup> (1995), by Abdulai Sila, we can see how death fosters the life of the main characters.

These emphases on the animal and the dead correspond to two basic premises that intertwine the historical and the cultural: they deal with the *condemned of the land*—those who were animalized in colonial times and became victims or witnesses of successive wars. There is also a proximity here to the *land of the condemned*, where hitherto unsystematized spheres of knowledge interact and are creatively reappropriated in the literary field. The inscription of the animal, on one hand, and the dead, on the other, are as old as literature itself (written or oral). But the peculiarity of African literature lies in two elements: the division between humans and animals and between the living and the dead, enshrined in the last centuries in Western contexts, is rejected by writers. On the other hand, the animal and the dead are two of the great protagonists of oral histories preserved and reconfigured on the African continent. By making use of this material, the authors transform the oral heritage into a full intertext of their productions. Due to its importance, orality became not only a theme, but also a method for many African writers. In the Lusophone case, we could present the following hypothesis: due to the recurrence of the inclusion, the symbolic interdependence, and the verisimilitude, this production contributed to an effective paradigm shift. It would be hard to find in different literary fields such a stressed and diversified (thus, structural) and collective representation of the dead, the animal, and so many other telluric signs related to the oral imaginary.

## Postcolonial Geographies

Despite the common interests of these literatures synthesized previously, the differences become significant if we consider the various types of colonialism and revolutionary transformations. There was never an armed conflict in Cape Verde, for example. Hence, there is little attention to war in this literary space. By contrast, the literatures of Angola and Mozambique engage closely with the experience of war and political failure.

The urban entrenchment of the leaders of FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* [Liberation Front of Mozambique]) right after independence, generated a specific dynamic in the country's literature. The new elite, coming mainly from a rural background, proclaimed the need for a literature anchored in the idea of explicit opposition to the imperial powers and the appeal to the making of the *Homem Novo* (New Man). That expectation constrained the activity

<sup>31</sup> Except for the titles of the works by Luandino Vieira, Luís Bernardo Honwana, Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, Mia Couto, Germano Almeida, and Abdulai Silva (already published in English), the translation is ours.

of authors and the consolidation of artistic forms that need, as it is known, an ample playing field to flourish. As an example, after *Portagem* [Toll]<sup>32</sup> (1966), by Orlando Mendes, more than twenty years passed until the appearance of a second national novel (par excellence an urban literary genre): *Ualalapi* (1987), by Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa. The belated creation of the National Association of Mozambican Writers, seven years after independence, is another revealing signal of the tension between the literary and the political fields. In Angola, the path was a completely different one. Actively participating in the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola]), writers and other urban intellectuals—Black, White, and mixed—were always sensitive to the role of Luanda (that has always been the literary capital)<sup>33</sup> and the literature in the rebuilding of the territory. The first published editions, right after independence, appeared in unrealistic print runs if we consider the illiteracy rates of the excolony.<sup>34</sup> This confirms the enthusiasm and the role that the literature would play in the new nation. Unsurprisingly, the Association of Angolan Writers was inaugurated two months after the officialization of the national independence. Not least symbolic is the fact that the first president of the republic, Agostinho Neto, had been one of the most recognized poets of the anticolonial period. These and other differences notwithstanding, it is important to note a new fact that unites the two literary fields of Angola and Mozambique: the weight of geographical belonging in literary production and reception.

Unlike what happened in the well-known Francophone and Anglophone contexts, the most important names of the African literatures in the Portuguese language live in Africa.<sup>35</sup> In addition, they share characteristics that put them in an exceptional place in their societies: they lived during both periods (the colonial and the postcolonial), they deal with an art (the novel or the written poetry) and live in an environment (the city) that put them at odds with the cultural practices of the people they write about. At the same time, they maintain the cosmopolitan tendency that first was manifested during the anticolonial struggle, even if its purpose is different now. In fact, geography becomes in the postcolonial times an object of a broader process of opening. National spaces that previously were absent in the literature are now represented in the most recognized works.

In Angola, Luanda remains the center of political and literary activity. In the socialist period (also marked by the civil war and by the US embargo on the Soviet bloc and its allies), the authors focused on the flaws of the new order. Irony

<sup>32</sup> My translation.

<sup>33</sup> On Luanda's impact on the literary field, see Tania Macêdo, *Luanda, cidade e literatura* (Luanda: Nzila, 2008); Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Francisco Noa, eds., *Memória, Cidade e Literatura: De S. Paulo de Assunção de Luanda a Luanda, de Lourenço Marques a Maputo* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> It is estimated, for example, that 30,000 copies of the novel *Mayombe*, by Pepetela, were printed shortly after independence. I am very grateful to Rita Chaves for this information. In this regard, see also the article by Marcello Stella published in this special section of *PLI*.

<sup>35</sup> Luís Carlos Patraquim, Ana Paula Tavares José Luandino Vieira, currently residents of Portugal, are the exceptions.

and disenchantment are combined in works such as *Quem me dera ser onda* (“I Wish I Were a Wave”) (1982), by Manuel Rui, *O cão e os caluandas* (“The Dog and the Luandans”) (1985), by Pepetela or *Maio, mês de Maria* (“May, Month of Mary”<sup>36</sup>) (1997), by Boaventura Cardoso. With Ondjaki (*Transparent City*) the hungry Luanda emerges, the city of oil that is engulfed by the most voracious capitalism in our contemporary times. In this novel, the author sees in the literary “Luuanda” of anticolonial authors (Luandino Vieira, Arnaldo Santos, Viriato da Cruz, and others) as the emblematic counterpoint to the new city without a sense of direction. Finally, names such as Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, Ana Paula Tavares, João Melo, José Eduardo Agualusa or, once again, Pepetela and Ondjaki situate most narratives in countries so far not explored by the national prose. From Brazil to Cuba, through Namibia, Mexico, Congo, Nigeria, Morocco, China, India, the Czech Republic, the United States, Argentina, Spain, Hungary, Portugal, Soviet Union, and so on, they tend to be international territories visited by narrators and characters. Joined by a dialogue with its respective literary traditions, this movement makes, perhaps, Angolan literature more cosmopolitan than any other in current African contexts. For its depth and strong sense of purpose, the most significant displacement is that of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho. The writer, anthropologist, and filmmaker finds in the Namibian desert and its surroundings the suitable spaces to rethink the history of the country and the impact of the occidental expansion in the world. In addition, he offers a remarkable reading of the “invention” of Brazil in *Desmedida—Crónica do Brasil (Disproportion—Chronicle of Brazil)*<sup>37</sup> (2010) identifying the differences and confluences of historical paths of the countries in the Southern Hemisphere with a colonial past.

In Mozambique, most novelists privileged the spaces far from the city and, therefore, far from their own surroundings. The rural environments (especially Mia Couto and Paulina Chiziane), suburban (Aldino Muianga), remote, and not always identified (Suleiman Cassamo) are among the most preferred places in the literary field. On the other hand, a movement to “outside” characterizes many contemporary texts: João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *O Olho de Hertzog* (*The Eye of Hertzog*), which involves France, Germany and South Africa in its Mozambican narrative,<sup>38</sup> or the same author’s *O Museu da Revolução* (“The Museum of the Revolution”), partially acquainted in Japan; Mia Couto’s *O outro pé da sereia* (“The Mermaid’s Other Foot”<sup>39</sup>), which includes Goa, India; or even the poetry of José Craveirinha (especially in *Villa Borghese*), Luís Carlos Patraquim (who evokes the

<sup>36</sup> My translation.

<sup>37</sup> My translation.

<sup>38</sup> Focusing on this novel, Stefan Helgesson states: “Mozambique emerges here not primarily as a Portuguese colonial space but as a site of multiple entanglements between interests: transnational and local, European and African, South African and Mozambican, British and German, colonial and proto-nationalist. In such a way, and differently from previous Mozambican literature, *O Olho de Hertzog* performs a complex act of worlding that exceeds the bounded colonial/national space of Mozambique, but resists synthesis” (92). Stefan Helgesson, “João Paulo Borges Coelho, João Albasini and the Worlding of Mozambican Literature,” *1616: Anuário de literatura comparada* 3 (2013): 92.

<sup>39</sup> My translation.

atmosphere of the Indian Ocean in his works), or Néelson Saúte (who reevaluates the Spanish civil war in different poems). These are all examples of a reiterated dynamic since the twentieth century. It is worth mentioning that João Paulo Borges Coelho manages to produce, across his oeuvre, a new cartography in the fictional world of Mozambique: the villages that surround the Zambezi River (in *As duas sombras do rio* ["The Two Shadows of the River"], 2003), Mucojo and Beira (in *As visitas do Dr. Valdez* ["The Visits of Dr. Valdez"], in 2004, and *Ponta Gea* ["Ponta Gea"], in 2017), the coast of Mozambique (in the two volumes of *Índicos Índicios* ["Traces of the Indian Ocean"], 2005), Maputo (in *Crónica da Rua 513.2*, 2006), Inhambane (in *Hinyambaan*, 2008), spaces in which the reference is exclusively fictional (*Campo de Trânsito* ["Field of Transit"], 2007, *Cidade dos Espelhos* ["City of Mirrors"], 2011, and *Água—uma novela rural* ["Water—A Rural Story"], 2016), some international environments (in the already mentioned *O Olho de Hertzog*, 2010, and *Museu da Revolução*, 2022) or Moatize (in *Rainhas da Noite* ["Queens of the Night"<sup>40</sup>], 2013).

Significant differences between the works of Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and João Paulo Borges Coelho notwithstanding, there is a fact that unites both authors: the allure of the "new geography" helps them to amplify the aesthetic code in their respective production fields. Both are active scholars in anthropology and history, respectively. These are two fields of inquiry that maintain a deep relationship with each other—and with geography. With the support of methods from their academic fields, they manage to interpret the nation neither as an exclusive result of the Portuguese empire (following a fatalistic logic) nor as a *sui generis* phenomenon (following an essentialist logic),<sup>41</sup> but according to the exchanges and clashes that are stimulated at a transcontinental scale. For this reason, narrators examine not only "the world in Africa" but also "Africa in the world."<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to identify how the African literatures in Portuguese differ from the main tendencies in the continent's literary production. As can be seen, the literatures of the five countries were produced, in a first phase, in various spaces of exception. In these unfavorable places to writing, the authors elaborated a discourse that was simultaneously cohesive (in the ideological field) and diversified (in the aesthetic field). Even before the independences, they efficiently combined the digressive (promoting the local history) and anticipatory (foreseeing the obstacles of the postcolonial times) tone. Therefore, the difference in the focus between these literatures and the

<sup>40</sup> My translation.

<sup>41</sup> As stated by João Paulo Borges Coelho himself in an interview; see Rita Chaves, "Entrevista a João Paulo Borges Coelho," *Via Atlântica* 16 (2009): 165.

<sup>42</sup> Nazir Ahmed Can, *João Paulo Borges Coelho: ficção, memória, cesura* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Folha Seca, 2021); Sandra Sousa and Nazir Ahmed Can, "African Literatures: The Urgency and Impasses of Interlinguistic Comparativism," in *The Africas in the World and the World in the Africas: African Literatures and Comparativism*, eds. Sandra Sousa and Nazir Ahmed Can (Holden, MA: Quod Manet, 2022).

Portuguese colonial narratives is radical: while the colonial text was filtered through the narrators' strategic blindness and merely depicted their relationship (of discomfort and heroism) with the environment, which presented the continent in crudely homogenizing terms and silenced the local populations, the national writers knew how to represent the space and its relationship with human diversity and, at the same time, artistically link it with all ranges of contradictions imposed by history. The imagery of the animal and the death, transversal characters in the last seven decades, confirm the ties between history and nature, culture, and revolution in these spaces of creation. The opening to the world, from the inscription of the international geography, throughout the same time, proves the cosmopolitan propensity of this literary community that lives, mainly, in the African continent.

The joint analysis of these factors allowed us to reflect on some distinctive elements that make the African literatures in the Portuguese language one of the most fertile and demanding fields to the critical exercise today.

**Competing interests.** None.

**Author biography.** Lecturer Professor in Portuguese Language and Translation at the Department of Translation, Interpreting and East Asian Studies—Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB/Serra Hünter Programme), Nazir Ahmed Can is also, in this institution, vice dean of the Faculty of Translation and Interpretation, director of the chair José Saramago and coordinator of the area of Portuguese. Can has a PhD in theory of literature and comparative literature from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; he was an associate professor of African literatures at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, a visiting professor at the University of Salamanca, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of São Paulo, and a visiting predoctoral researcher at University of Liverpool. He is the author of the books *João Paulo Borges Coelho: ficção, memória, cesura* (Folha Seca, 2021), *O campo literário moçambicano. Tradução do espaço e formas de inslío* (Kapulana, 2020), and *Discurso e poder nos romances de João Paulo Borges Coelho* (Alcance, 2014), and coeditor, among others, of *The Africas in the World and the World in the Africas: African Literatures and Comparativism* (Quod Manet, 2022) *Racism and Racial Surveillance. Modernity Matters* (Routledge, 2022), *Geografias literárias de língua portuguesa no século XXI* (Tab Edizioni, 2021), and *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros* (Colibri, 2017).

---

**Cite this article:** Can, Nazir Ahmed. 2023. "African Literatures in the Portuguese Language: Singularities." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 148–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.2>