
POSTMEMORY AS A FORM OF CIVIC COURAGE.

WATCHWORD: RESIST, RESIST, RESIST

Sheila Khan

Abstract

This paper aims to claim the duty of postmemory, in order to think better about the loneliness of memory and to explicit the value of the documentary, as the space and time for a reflection able to welcome and embody those absences that the studies on coloniality and postcoloniality in Portuguese were still not able to satisfy. Taking the challenge posed by the thematic dossier on “Colonial imaginaries: propaganda, militancy and ‘resistance’ in cinema”, this essay intends to resist these lonelinesses and absences, moving from two documentaries – *A hospitalidade ao fantasma: Memórias dos deficientes das forças armadas* (2014), by Bruno Sena Martins, and *Portugal híbrido, Portugal europeu: Gentes do ‘sul’ mesmo aqui ao lado* (2011), by the author of this paper.

Keywords

Memory; postmemory; resistance; loneliness; civic courage

I am saying things I never told,

I never told this!

Bruno Sena Martins, 2014¹

On January 21 this year, my attention was caught by the usual weekly chronicle written by António Lobo Antunes and published in the magazine *Visão*. This not for being a chronicle by the writer and columnist Lobo Antunes, but simply because of the humble way it revealed the loneliness of his many memories: the colonial war, those who were there with him – on both sides of the fence –, the silences stuck on his tongue, the silences of his other fellows also stuck on their tongues and, finally, the loneliness of the present time. As a reader and as a researcher, I felt puzzled because I could feel the same loneliness. Isn't it strange? Isn't it strange that my generation, the “post”-empire and “post”-colonization generation, the generation of the multicultural Portuguese postcoloniality, feels so stuck looking at and thinking about this chronicle? I am not a representative element of a generation, and I am surely mistaken in insisting on this idea from a solitary stage, since I have to recognize the efforts and the attempts of such authors who tried, through their works, to retrieve a solidarity between those who lived certain traumatic experiences and those who wish to understand them, or at least, to give a sense of historical consistency and continuity across generations² (Antunes, 2015; Borland, 2009;

¹ Excerpt from the documentary *A hospitalidade ao fantasma: Memórias dos deficientes das forças armadas* (2014), directed by the anthropologist Bruno Sena Martins, as part of the research project *Vidas Marcadas pela História: a Guerra Colonial Portuguesa e os Deficientes das Forças Armadas*.

² I would like to highlight the work of Maria José Lobo Antunes, which resulted from her doctoral thesis on the veterans of the colonial war, namely her study on the BART 3835, the Artillery Battalion where her father, the

Cabral, Souto & Elísio, 2016; Fuica, 2014); claiming, therefore, a place for orphaned and silent voices, unspoken words, hidden images, which, through the magic hand of technology, have become public images, new possibilities for thinking and sharing a community of memories. But still, will this be enough? Have we done all we could to settle down so many silences? In an essay on memory, identity and representation, António Sousa Ribeiro opened space for a reflection, which deserves a close reading, about the value of memory and postmemory in the study of those experiences which painfully marked Humanity. Referring to the Holocaust, Sousa Ribeiro observed:

The issues that have remained and will remain open, the questions that will perhaps never get a satisfactory answer – and which, therefore, sharply delimit the boundaries of theory –, are not about verifying facts, nor just interpreting history; they are, instead, about memory and postmemory, *i.e.*, about a relationship with the past which is structured starting from the present involvement of real subjects. Imre Kertész, asking himself, in a fundamental essay dated 1998, “Who owns Auschwitz?”, gave right away a very clear answer: it belongs less to the generation of the victims, from whose hands, increasingly weakened by the age, it is slowly escaping, than to the next generation and to those that will come after.. “as long as these generation would claim it” (...). (Ribeiro, 2010, p.14)

Inspiring in the strength of this reflection of Sousa Ribeiro, I move towards the notion of civic courage, which the generation coming “after” the empire, after the colonial and liberation war and Carnation revolution, should practise in order to open the windows of understanding and dialogue between past and present. In fact, together with a “duty of memory” (Levi, 2011), there should necessarily be a duty of postmemory, rescuing, dignifying and cherishing all the heritage of experiences and narratives of those men and women who never found their ‘time’ of trust for sharing. Observing and practising this duty of postmemory means going towards the silences, creating a prudent ‘hospitality’ for welcoming those narratives that, without it, would eventually fade away, fall into oblivion and disappear without leaving even a hint of witness about their existence.

If the duty of memory is an active, ethical and moral act, committed with the time of those human experiences which are traumatic and injured from the past (Levi, 2011), in turn, the duty of postmemory is the healthy relationship with that past, the unembarrassed way of touching and understanding that those ‘wounds’ are ours, too; they will be also part of our biographies. We could add, to the fundamental question asked by the recently deceased Imre Kertész – another survivor of a concentrationary experience – “Who owns Auschwitz?” (Ribeiro, 2010, p.14), other questions which still need to be asked: “who owns the colonial war?”, “who owns the national liberation war of the former

writer António Lobo Antunes, served as a doctor. The result of that study was the book *Regressos quase perfeitos* (Tinta-da-China, 2015). More recently, I must also remark a very detailed and historically precious work, a collection of love letters between the African leader Amílcar Cabral and Maria Helena (Cabral’s girlfriend and first wife), a volume organized by Iva Cabral – a historian and Amílcar Cabral’s daughter – Márcia Souto and Filinto Elísio, published by Rosa de Porcelana (2016).

Portuguese colonies?”; “who owns the memories yet to be told, the silenced narratives?” The duty of postmemory should try to address these questions and should not be afraid to take its role of responsible for the survival and maintenance of those memories, as an effort for historical awareness (Khan, 2015) and civic courage.

Born in 1971, the anthropologist and author of the book *Regressos quase imperfeitos* (2015), Maria José Lobo Antunes, expressed well, in an interview, this need for vigilance over a past that, for legitimacy and emotional, familiar and historical proximity, is also ours:

- Which are the “memories” of war? Since when have you heard talking about war at home?
- Since always. It was not about war, it was about Africa, about my mother, my father and me having been in Angola, about me being a baby in the middle of military. The memories I inherited are memories from a distant past that was never told to me as a bad thing, it was all good. (Gomes, 2015)

Mapping the guidelines of her text, this study starts from watching over the different pasts we inherited, and claiming for these the notions of civic courage and duty of postmemory, and aims to, on the one hand, think critically about this past in the present time, and, on the other hand, resist the permanence of the loneliness of memory. Doing this, it takes the opportunity to contextualize, validate and justify the role of documentary as an important tool for allowing a reflection able to welcome and embody those absences that the studies about coloniality and postcoloniality in Portuguese were still not able to satisfy (Khan, 2015, p. 201).

This essay intends to answer, moving from two documentaries – “*A hospitalidade ao fantasma: Memórias dos deficientes das forças armadas*” (2014), by Bruno Sena Martins, and “*Portugal híbrido, Portugal europeu: Gentes do ‘sul’ mesmo aqui ao lado*” (2011), by the author of this paper³ –, to two relevant questions: firstly, to what extent the documentary breaks and gives the shape of resistance to the existence of an archaic romanticism with colonial and nostalgic bias? Secondly, is postmemory able to contribute to a decolonization of the colonial imageries and ensure a degree of ‘hospitality’ to those memories which are still silent?

‘HOSPITALITY’ FOR THE SILENT MEMORIES: DOCUMENTARY I

I have lived and grown up surrounded by people who came out from many former African colonies. These people’s memories are also my memories because their transmission and sharing is concrete and visible in the way I try to understand what is beyond the silences. Despite the shared memories, there was still a trace of some incompleteness, something remaining intact or missing in their stories. Reading the interview to

³ The documentary *Portugal híbrido, Portugal europeu*, was conceived as a tool for data collection, analysis and reflection for my postdoctoral project, resulting into the book *Portugal a lápis de cor: A sul de uma pós-colonialidade* (2015).

Maria José Lobo Antunes about her study and her – very close to her research – memories, I could not help but sympathize with what she felt about how her parents and relatives shared their memories. Being of the same generation, I felt, like she did, that what I was being told was seething with an economy of words, or as the author of *Regressos quase imperfeitos* (2015) said, I was faced with “a world of restraint in which one can guess between the words, everything that is not there” (Gomes, 2015). There was always something missing, an anchor, a pillar, some kind of commitment between who was there in Africa and came out from there and the generation who was already raised in the land of metropolis. This reflection of mine is not autobiographical; it is, above all, contextual, calling for the human and emotive landscape that I witnessed, that I have been lurking in many of the conversations I heard among family members and among family and friends. I remember that in these more intimate moments of their memory, which is also my memory, “everything” was there: the food, the beach, the heat, the life between the cement city and the suburbs of the colonial city, the dresses, the cinemas, the ice-creams, the weddings, the children, and then the departure, the arrival in Portugal, and starting everything over again, without ever bending before the nostalgia of the “home” left behind (Khan, 2009).

After that, the colonial war then came to the surface. But nobody spoke about the war, it became some kind of familiar “mist”, an opaque memory, which was always among us but that nobody saw or could touch; a stubborn and unpleasant memory of the war: the memory of someone so close, a constant nightmare of being chased by a lion, in the middle of the forest. The memory of the war turned into a graceful way to play with the traumatic experience coming from the panic, from the fear; from all this, to soothe the nightmare, resulted a communion of laughter about the lion, who was, no doubt, the silent, but living metaphor of the colonial war. If the colonial war took the shape of a lion, it also represented for those who had never been ‘there’, in that ‘war’, the place of some kind of a strange and barely understandable testimony. The lion and the nightmare, I realized years later, were the transfigured deaths of young friends, frozen in time; young people who interrupted their lives for a war – a trick of History – they did not understand; a war that took a whole generation to the dreadful and barbaric concert of shattered bodies, cold sweats and terrifying moments. It snatched without compassion an important part of life and the lives of many young people, of men and women, who can no longer speak, share and describe the horror of death!⁴

When I read the chronicle by the writer Lobo Antunes on the colonial war, there the lion came chasing someone very close to me, and these are the words of the writer that muted me, brought to my mind so much stupefaction about the silences surrounding memories without hospitality:

I can't forget. The others also can't and we talk about the most difficult things only among us. I haven't even put them on paper for a matter of

⁴ Despite portraying the experience of the Holocaust, one of the survivors of an extermination camp, David Rousset, in *O universo concentracionário* (2016), declared such a complicity and tenderness to those who failed to pass the barrier of the horrific deaths and of the concentrationary experience.

modesty, but especially because it is a burden which is only ours, it is impossible to share with those who didn't live it. So, Angola became a secret I have never put in any book, I have just gone around it, no more than some episodes here and there, but I have never referred the dark and horrible experiences which I only dare to mention with those who lived them with me, by my side and me by their side. And yet, the reader cannot imagine how much we would like to count, to tell, to release them from us. We will be buried with them, and it hurts being buried with them without bearing witness, but I can't. Who would understand them?. (Antunes, 2016, p. 9)

In an article on colonial violence and witnessing, Bruno Sena Martins (2015) reflected about this reality of the loneliness of memory, a topic which still needs to be fully examined, not only by research, but also by the way we face those memories and the instruments and options we take for approaching them as scholars and as a generation with the duty of postmemory. If cinema has taken a prominent role in evoking a past yet to think and reflect, and in somehow breaking few social and cultural prejudices, I assume that it still does not seem to be enough for recovering and rescuing from a dead place those experiences without a destiny and a recipient. In his documentary, *A hospitalidade ao fantasma* (2014), Bruno Sena Martins started an approximation path, which I defined duty of postmemory, *i.e.*, the act of moving towards unhealed memories from the past that need, on the one hand, a sense of understanding and humanity and, on the other hand, a trustworthy desire to listen and dialogue with veterans and disabled military. The humus of the documentary does not focus on the aesthetic and filmic composition of the images, but on the possibility of creating a place of trust between generations, building a stage where not only testimonies, but also witnesses are welcome, who can simultaneously and at that very specific moment, give voice and comfort to their memories and to their lives brutally marked by those war experiences.

In this documentary many veterans, whose lives have been crushed, destroyed and torn apart by the colonial war, were interviewed, but the most touching part is not just seeing and listening to their suppressed voices and to the unbelievable force that the past has on their present. The most heartbreaking thing is the absence of interlocutors expressed and 'denounced' by these veterans, who would be very important for them to feel listened, respected and considered as compelling witnesses for a better understanding of the historical archaeology of the process of forgetting they were condemned by the public memory of postcolonial Portugal. One of the people interviewed confessed: "I can't explain this, for a long time, maybe in a defensive way, I forgot the war and it was kept hidden in a very high attic or a very low basement of my mind, for a long time" (Martins, 2014, excerpt from the documentary).

Bruno Sena Martins, by giving voice, along the documentary, to several veterans, created with them a kind of human chain, the right framework and context for the fixation of a common ground between those who share and can give their witness and who listens and collects those records, to create and feel with them a human archive of

experiences and memories. For many of those veterans, the war, as one of them confessed, “still didn’t get out..., still didn’t get out of here. Well, it turned silence into my greatest enemy” (Martins, 2014, excerpt from the documentary); but the war got out and leaked into this documentary work, allowing those men to “count, tell” and “release” their silences.

To what extent can we say and mention the word resistance to explain the past better? I believe that the act of resisting is the most fruitful for thinking about a past marked by so much noise and distance, and guided by the historical trajectory of the Portuguese society that wanted to forget, put into a ‘shelf’ of memory, their life experience, not only of the Overseas, but also of the colonial war. In other words: resistance to oblivion, to our History’s amnesia, to moving away from our memories. According to Eduardo Lourenço (2001), we do not only suffer from an excess of identity, but often, and for reasons which are very fraudulent to our national identity, from an excess of amnesia, because of our inability to translate our losses into a simple word: mourning. And to this extent, this ‘resistance’ must be performed in another, more approximate, less mediatic way and with a more discrete character, for those who need to make sense out of a time which still remains unexplained, lacking a fair and worthy inclusion in the historicity of the Portuguese society.

I have to acknowledge the value of cinema in these processes of deconstruction and of critical and dialogical revision of the past. However, I reserve the humble right to consider that still there is a certain colonial and nostalgic tone, namely with the emergence of the so-called “returnees literature”, and, on the other hand, with the media coverage granted to films on this colonial and imperial past; I refer to *Tabu* by Miguel Gomes, and more recently, to Ivo Ferreira’s, *Cartas da Guerra*, based on the book *D’Este Viver Aqui Neste Papel Descrito* (2005), by António Lobo Antunes. And what I see is still a quest for a certain colonial and nostalgic bias of looking at the past, in the way cinema fictionalizes the reality, while trying to critically think, analyse and interpret it. I think we should not put aside, belittle or even disqualify these contributions, but instead, we should choose the working tools⁵ with which it would be reasonable to treat, with a greater realism and fluidity, the embargoed memories, for later arranging them according to the criteria of the one who shares and the one who listens, so that other generations could have a structured, contextualized and flexible view of this encounter of complicit memories, in its dialogue between past, present and future.

In my opinion, documentary is the moment of a catharsis, of the creation of an emotional and historical trust, of a commitment to respectability and complicity; a way of arranging narratives that were once scattered into hidden and ashamed memories (Khan, 2011). In *A Hospitalidade ao fantasma*, there is not just a researcher doing his job, we see neither victims, nor heroes. Instead, we listen without fictions to real voices, to

⁵ Even though this article does not aim to inquire about other registers and tools for memory, studying war letters (Antunes, 2005) or the love letters between Amílcar Cabral and Maria Helena (Cabral et al., 2016), would offer valuable data to analyse such a crucial past in order for us to think our historicity, both on the Portuguese and African side.

words that do not hide in scripts, in novels, to lives that are “marked” by the evil gears of the History of Men. We see men from yesterday and today, who want and need to settle down their fears and anxieties, for their memories to be able to live with the integrity they deserve; for their memories to gain a sense of belonging and participation.

PEOPLE FROM THE ‘SOUTH’ JUST NEXT DOOR: DOCUMENTARY II

“*Gentes do ‘Sul’ mesmo aqui a lado*” (Khan, 2011), is a documentary that served as basis for the analysis of a reality that I wanted to know and to examine, and that accompanied me during my development as a person and as a researcher. People from the ‘South’ are the silences and absences that I have always found while trying to understand what was this ‘post’-colonial Portugal, this Portugal that received, after the Carnation Revolution and the decolonization of its former colonies, thousands of people that the official History ironically decided to classify as ‘returnees’: people coming from the former Overseas. In this huge human contingent there were the so-called ‘returnees’, and the Others, the Africans, all those who renounced their countries’ nationality and, as such, opted for the Portuguese one. For me, Africa had always been a heavenly place because this was how I was inculcated for many years; how could I revoke, refuse this nostalgia always present in the moments of homely sharing of memories from my family members? A good curry is an indisputable dish; good music can only shake the rhythms of our bodies, and the photos feed in us the nostalgia for something we have not had, but also spreads the seed of a certain belief persuading us that what we did not live is also ours, because it is part of our family archive. Some Memory Studies scholars, especially, of Holocaust Studies, would call this indirect experience a postmemory event (Hirsch, 2008), although a postmemory with its incomplete and intermittent spaces of memory.

At one point I realized that Africa and the life stories of those who I decided to study were marked by a very present criterion: they had to survive, start their lives again. Basically, it was necessary to forget in order to start from an alleged starting point, which would be this *hybrid and European Portugal, with people from the ‘South’ just next door*. “*Portugal híbrido, Portugal europeu*” is a documentary in which I tried to understand and reflect critically the effects of Portuguese colonialism on the human, cultural and social experiences and trajectories of those who lived in the former Portuguese colonies. I started from a polyphonic meeting with people coming from Mozambique, researchers, thinkers, writers, and journalists who thought with me on the Portuguese postcoloniality, based on the following topics: a) narratives of life and identity in colonial times; b) the encounter between the human reality of the overseas experience and the sociocultural, political and economic reality of the metropolis after April 25 revolution, c) the historical consciousness of Portugal through its “other-people” and the way Portugal has represented itself (Ribeiro, 2012), both as a nation celebrating its lusotropicalist epic, and as a European nation; and finally, d) the various portraits of Portuguese postcoloniality.

This documentary was a journey in which I deconstructed many of my ‘myths’ and, during its realization, I broke many of the silences and walls of deliberate forgetfulness

that those ‘survivors’ of the colonial and overseas experience were reinforcing in their versions of life and identity in the postcolonial Portuguese society. It is curious to find that there is a common thread connecting the veterans of the colonial war and those people coming from the Overseas: at no time of my documentary they felt that their memories had been accompanied, welcomed and treated as authorities of memory (Ribeiro, 2010). Those people were, and still are today, the living and undeniable faces of a historically intertwined path across countries, people, cultures and identities; but they also are the silent and forgotten voices, just next door. Those people, in a “defensive way” (Martins, 2014, 2015), have hid in their attics and basements of memory, what they felt when they departed from Mozambique, the perception they had of Portugal – the great colonial metropolis – and what they think about their lives in this Portugal, which claims to be multicultural and European. I invited one of the people I interviewed to talk about her memory and identity. I asked her:

- “What do you feel, today, when you look back?” to which she replied:
- “This is a very complicated question. I still feel a very strong connection to Africa, but also, I can’t forget I have lived for 56 years under the Portuguese flag. And so, I feel like I have two nationalities”.
- “Have you ever felt an immigrant in Portugal?”
- “Sometimes yes, because I was almost forced to leave the country where I was born”. (excerpt from the documentary, Khan, 2011)

At this point of our conversation, the interviewee was moved to tears; this person I have always interacted with, a person with a stable life in Portugal, without major professional or material problems, revealed to be assailed by her memories, memories she too wanted to forget, or, as in the chronicle of Lobo Antunes, memories she did not want to count, tell, release, because the country of her other nationality – the Portuguese one – was unwilling or unable to understand them; therefore, along her life in the postcolonial Portugal, she has been concealing and disguising those memories, for the need to survive and build a stable family life. Continuing our interview:

- “Is this something that hurts you, even today?”
 - “Whenever I speak about this, tears always come to my eyes. I think we should have never abandoned our land”.
- (excerpt from the documentary, Khan, 2011)

This documentary was not just a vector I used for the need of completing my research project (Khan, 2015). Gradually, and with a sense of ethical responsibility, I understood the relevance of my study, not only as a space of sharing and trust, but, mainly, as a way of giving shape and claiming visibility for what has always been treated as absent and erased from our public memories, but has definitely been present as a driving force for this archive of images, voices, testimonies and witnesses. When returning to “*Portugal híbrido, Portugal europeu*”, I feel that through my role of researcher I did not just compile a story with several voices, with different biographical and cultural itineraries;

I believe I went further to find that, despite having touched just the tip of the iceberg, it was nevertheless a step forward to understand that, for many of the people I interviewed, talking about their experiences represented a unique and unexpected moment, in which they could transform their hidden silences, fears and sorrows into an important and valuable testimony, in order to understand what is today this postcolonial Portugal. As Bruno Sena Martins observed in an article on colonial violence and witnessing:

The loneliness of the witnesses, (...), results from how the experiences – after all, so common – of those whose biographies were marked by the ineluctability of war, became “extraordinary” through its silencing. More than the reliability, what stands out here is the lack of interlocutors who would validate the violence imposed by War. The possibility of sharing trauma and violence is, thus, an essential element for the redefinition of the subject, isolated by the excess of memory. (Martins, 2015, p. 113)

In fact, it is this possibility of witnessing that embodies and materializes the life experiences of those people into a source that we should compile, guard and treat with fairness and patience, to exercise in thinking what the Portuguese postcoloniality is now. Nevertheless, no less important should be the presence of a public space prepared for the witness – and for their testimony – where to listen and prepare peacefully the ‘ground’ for a work of lucid interpretation of these memories, as elements of participation to both Portuguese and Mozambican historicity. As pointed out by António Sousa Ribeiro in his study on memory, identity and translation: “it is not only the hostility of the surrounding environment, it is also another equally important issue: lived experience is difficult to articulate immediately. A necessarily long and hard work of regaining the possibility to express memory is needed” (Ribeiro, 2010, p. 16).

Protect yourself from them, from memories,
from their idleness, from their conspiracies;
use sluggish colours, more-than-perfect shades:
pink for the tears, blue for the broken dreams.

Manuel António Pina (2011), p. 31, *How to draw a house*

AS A CONCLUSION: FOLLOWING THE PATHS OF MEMORIES AND POSTMEMORIES

The notion of postmemory has taken a predominant role in the studies about the Holocaust and the several Latin American dictatorships and, in Portugal, it has been gaining the attention of researchers in works related to the colonial war (Ribeiro, 2012), and the perception of this war by the younger generations, namely, the studies focused on the experiences of the children of the veterans of the colonial war (Ribeiro & Ribeiro, 2013). Marianne Hirsch introduced the notion of postmemory, defining it as follows: “‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before. These experiences were

transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 103). I do not disagree with this definition, however, I cannot entirely advocate it without first notice that postmemories are not only traumatic experiences. This pessimistic and negative perspective of sharing “traumatic” memories should not claim the monopoly on postmemory. Postmemory also takes other more romanticized and nostalgic approaches. Saying this may seem spurious, but the truth is that my generation has grown up with the most exotic and nostalgic side of Africa, and all the imaginaries about it have been modelled on what our relatives, family members and friends sought to share and transmit. This is not all. Postmemory stands beyond these two extreme sides, it is also the active place of a claim of memories, both from those who wish to share and “release” their most erratic and hidden experiences, and from those who – like Bruno Sena Martins and me – patiently sought to listen, compile and build a visual and historical archive, with a certain ethical and moral commitment.

In this sense, postmemory cannot be assumed as a stage, an ‘achievement’ resulting passively and spontaneously from the sharing of memories between generations. Postmemory cannot be thought as something guaranteed in advance by the coexistence of an infinite variety of human experiences. In my opinion, postmemory only exists and will remain alive and active if it would claim for itself a duty of postmemory towards the silent memories of those who look for their interlocutors. Postmemory only exists effectively in a joint effort of communion of memories, in establishing a space where it is possible to create bonds of trust, of moral and civic responsibility, of curiosity, of desire to rescue and break silences; and healthfully resist forgetfulness. Otherwise, we would always fall in a hole filled with many lonelinesses: of those who do not speak and do not recount and, thus, will be denied a sense of participation and historical and moral legitimacy; and of those who will be deprived of the sense of belonging to a memory which is also theirs: that would give them the content and the essence for thinking better, with peace and justice, about the right places of past, present and future. Therefore, the watchword should be: resist, resist, resist. //

VIDEOGRAPHIE

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