

## ON HOW POST-COLONIAL FICTION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO A DISCUSSION OF HISTORICAL REPARATION: AN INTERPRETATION OF *AS TELEFONES* (2020) BY DJAIMILIA PEREIRA DE ALMEIDA

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### ABSTRACT

Post-colonial Portuguese literature published since 1974 has obscured the trauma of the colonised. In the context of Portuguese prose fiction published since the beginning of the second decade of the present millennium, authors of African descent follow on from the generation that brought about the African liberations. However, due to the years of political and economic instability that followed in the former colonies, these writers became part of the African-heritage diaspora that has grown up in Portugal. As such, they form the visible face of the post-colonial cultural entanglement that was produced by colonialism. Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, the author of *As Telefones* (The Telephones, 2020), the novel that is the focus of this article, provides an example of African-heritage writing and lived experience that has points of reference in Portuguese and Angolan cultures alike. This article argues that Portuguese prose fiction by authors of African descent destabilises cartographical imaginaries to reflect on the cultural complexity of the lived experience of people of African descent, contributing to a polyphony that has been absent from collective memory in the public space, and consequently creating possibilities for historical reparation. This article maintains that, on the one hand, *As Telefones* decolonises the experience of loss that literature published after 1974 has associated not only with the memory and experience of the coloniser's body, but also and significantly, with the feeling of *saudade* (nostalgia or longing) that is so central to Portuguese culture; on the other, it argues that the narrative focus on the telephone as the sole means of transmission of post-memory introduces a rupture in Portuguese literary convention — in which writing is a privileged witness — by endorsing the orality that feeds into the origins of African literatures.

### KEYWORDS

African-descendant, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, border thinking, the decolonial project, historical reparation

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## COMO A FICÇÃO PÓS-COLONIAL PODE CONTRIBUIR PARA UMA DISCUSSÃO SOBRE REPARAÇÃO HISTÓRICA: LEITURA DE *AS TELEFONES* (2020) DE DJAIMILIA PEREIRA DE ALMEIDA

### RESUMO

A literatura pós-colonial portuguesa publicada depois de 1974 deixou na obscuridade o trauma do colonizado. Os autores afrodescendentes das narrativas portuguesas publicadas

desde o início da segunda década deste milénio são herdeiros da geração que fez as libertações africanas, mas que, devido aos anos subsequentes de instabilidades políticas e económicas, fazem parte da diáspora afrodescendente que cresceu em Portugal, constituindo a face visível do emaranhado cultural pós-colonial que o colonialismo produziu. Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, autora de *As Telefones* (2020), que se analisa no presente artigo, é um exemplo de uma autoria e vivência afrodescendente que tanto deve às referências culturais portuguesas como à cultura angolana. Assim, argumenta-se que as narrativas de autoria portuguesa afrodescendente desestabilizam imaginários cartográficos para refletir sobre a complexidade cultural da vivência afrodescendente, contribuindo para uma polifonia ausente sobre a memória coletiva no espaço público e consequente possibilidade de reparação histórica. Sustenta-se, por um lado, que *As Telefones* descoloniza a experiência da perda que a literatura publicada depois de 1974 associou à memória e experiência do corpo do colonizador, mas também, e muito significativamente, ao sentimento de saudade, central na cultura portuguesa; por outro lado, defende que a centralidade narrativa do telefone como único meio de transmissão de pós-memória introduz um corte na convenção literária portuguesa que privilegia a escrita como testemunho, validando a oralidade, muito tributária para a génese das literaturas africanas.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

afrodescendência, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, pensamento de fronteira, projeto decolonial, reparação histórica

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The ruins of you... the ruins of us... the ruins of me... the ruins of time past displayed in the window of the present... the ruins built up in the cities of stolen peoples... the ruins of Atlantic expropriation... the ruins of a tangible imaginary... the ruins of dehumanising pain. (luZGomeS in Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 111)

Thinking about post-coloniality in Portugal, and within the framework of contemporary post-colonial Europe, will only result in a productive effort if recognition of the colonial legacy is discussed broadly in the public space by all those who are implicated in the history of Portuguese colonialism, thus ensuring that collective memory represents the experience of colonisers and colonised alike and as such contributes to historical reparation in the present. Michael Rothberg (2009, p. 3) proposes multidirectional memory as an operative concept to discuss how collective memory can be represented in the public space, distinguishing it from the concept of competitive memory. Competitive memory manifests itself as a battle for the recognition of a particular narrative of collective memory that excludes any and all alternative narratives. Multidirectional memory, by contrast, is a concept that implies cross-referencing and negotiation during the process of the articulation of memory in the public space. This concept allows for a dialogic interaction that guarantees the participation of different demographic groups with diverse experiences. Memory is an act freed from the homogeneous space-time of a nation, for in any case this dimension is never really homogeneous. Homogeneity is the visible expression of the absence of polyphony that must pre-exist in any discussion of this kind because collective memory is a fluid concept. Since 25 April 1974, the representation of post-colonial memory in the Portuguese public space has been regulated by this type of homogeneity that excludes the memory of the colonised from discussion in the public space. The revolution and the

democratic regime that followed did not succeed in causing a rupture in the subordination of the memory of colonialism to that of maritime expansion, which represented the era of prosperity and the pinnacle of Portuguese history consolidated during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship. Only very shortly will the first memorial to the slave trade be installed in Lisbon: the project was proposed by Djass – Associação de Afrodescendentes (Association for People of African Descent), and the funding approved by Lisbon Municipal Council as part of the 2017 participatory budget. Yet the memory of the maritime expansion and of the economic and political power that Portugal garnered from 1400 onwards is consolidated throughout the capital city — as it is, moreover, all over the country — with the representation of the peak and decline of the Portuguese empire being especially concentrated in the Belém district. As a consequence of this disparity, the representation of a particular memory of this historical period and above all, the representation of memory in the public space, exclude the experience of a significant portion of the Portuguese population.

Portuguese literature published after 1974 has contributed primarily to a reflection on the experience of the coloniser, the fall of the Portuguese empire, and the traumatic consequences of that fall as they were felt in the country once it was forced to readjust to its actual geographical size. Scholarly analyses such as “No Longer Alone and Proud” by Ellen Sapega (1997), “Lusotropicalist Entanglements” by Ana Paula Ferreira (2014), and more recently, *Orfãos do Império* (Orphans of the Empire) by Patrícia Martinho Ferreira (2021) reveal how the literature produced since 1974 has compensated for the absence of a broader political discussion of the revolution, decolonisation, and the Portuguese colonial operation. However, the experience of African minorities has scarcely been approached in literary terms and is very rarely represented in Portuguese fiction. It is worth pointing out, for example, that representations of the memory and trauma of combat, and, more recently, of the experience of the *retornado* (returned coloniser) are more present in Portuguese literature than, for example, representations of the deserter or draft evader. On the other hand, the traumatic memory of colonised peoples has been especially neglected throughout these years. It is the memory of an African other from a history that is also Portuguese. The very recent emergence of Black Portuguese literature has contributed to endowing the discussion of post-colonial Portugal in the public space with a polyphony that had otherwise been absent. In the process, hegemonic perspectives on the colonial past and the way in which the present relates to the past have been destabilised. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the number of fictional narratives that approach the post-colonial country and are written by Afro-Portuguese authors such as Kalaf Epalanga, Yara Monteiro and Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, among others, has been slowly but progressively increasing. The fact that Almeida’s *Esse Cabelo* (*That Hair*, 2019; originally published in Portuguese in 2015) and, especially, *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (Luanda, Lisbon, Paradise, 2018) have received numerous awards is the more visible face of a growing — if still incipient — recognition of the emergence of this literature that is so fundamental to ensuring that other voices may be expressed and heard. As Sheila Khan (2015, p. 18) argues in *Portugal a Lápis de Cor* (Portugal in Crayon), post-colonial times are the times when we must listen to those other voices, with their own narratives and knowledge, that form a legitimate part of the historical jigsaw of post-colonial Portugal. These are the voices of the

former imperial global south that have been silenced, devalued, and forgotten; the voices that “lived the rhetoric of Portuguese coloniality, its imperial vision as a civilising centre and harbinger of progress and development” (Khan, 2015, p. 18).

The multiculturalism of post-colonial times has served above all as a buzzword for promoting tourism and the economy of the country. However, such multiculturalism has been scarcely present in the form of real reflection to rethink the (in)visibility and integration of the new voices that are the heirs to the colonial empire, and puts into perspective, for example and in the case of literature, the effects of a literary corpus that is constructed around an imaginary geography that places Portugal at the centre of the map. To be of African descent implies feelings of belonging that result from a condition that is first and foremost, in the words of Inocência Mata (2014), “a dynamic process conditioned by a multiplicity of (historical, social, collective) factors, but also by life histories” (p. 62). In his long critique of orientalism and imperialism, Edward Said (1993) argues that we need to think about new, post-colonial topographies that challenge the cartographic stability generated in colonial times. He asserts that “just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography” (Said, 1993, p. 6). I would like to use the words of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida and Yara Monteiro to demonstrate how being of African descent is a condition perceived as other by the Portuguese, White, Eurocentric subject, but inhabited as a complexity that comprises the diversity inside oneself, enriching the experience of the subject of African descent forced to invent the terms of his or her identity. While Almeida declares that, although she was born in Angola and raised in Portugal, “a person like me is always an African girl in Lisbon” (Lucas, 2015, para. 10), Monteiro emphasises that “my roots are African, they are Angolan, but my wings are European, they are Portuguese” (Wieser, 2020, 00:02:43). In this article, I argue that the prose fiction produced by contemporary authors of African descent introduces the possibility of a necessary rupture in the stability of the cartographical imaginary that underlies the concept of a national literature, in order that post-colonial literature by authors of African descent may reflect in those authors’ own voices and by their own hand on the complexities produced by colonialism. These new narratives are constructed from the perspective of those who “live on the border, sense on the border, and think on the border”, and experience dislocation and (un)belonging (Mignolo, 2017, p. 19). Although they write in Portuguese, “different memories and, above all, different conceptions and a different ‘sensitivity’ of the world” inhabit their bodies (Mignolo, 2017, p. 20).

*As Telefones* (The Telephones) by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2020) is a first-person prose narrative that explores the affective relationship between a mother and her daughter who live in different cities on different continents: Solange, the daughter, grew up in Lisbon under the care of her maternal aunt, having arrived there in the first years of Angolan independence while her mother, Filomena, remained in Luanda. The underlying argument of this article, which develops around the metaphorical possibilities generated by the image of the telephone, is founded on two complementary statements. On the one hand, as a narrative of two lives deprived of the consistency and physicality of an in-person relationship, *As Telefones* decolonises the experience of loss and interior emptiness that literature published after 1974 has tended to associate with the memory and corporeal experience of

Colonial War veterans and returned colonisers, and also, very significantly, with the feeling of nostalgia or longing (*saudade*) that is so emblematic within Portuguese culture. On the other, the narrative focus on the telephone conversation as the only means of transmitting memory and knowledge from mother to daughter introduces a break with western and Portuguese literary conventions, which tend to take writing as a privileged form of bearing witness. It also introduces the oral tradition that inflects Angolan literature — and indeed, other African literatures that have emerged since independence — as a testimonial basis for Portuguese literature of the post-colonial diaspora (Chaves, 1999). In his article on *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, Paulo de Medeiros (2020, p. 147) proposes reading Almeida's prizewinning novel beyond the limits of a national or linguistic literary tradition, and he identifies it as a successor of José Luandino Vieira's *Luuanda*. The experience of post-colonial trauma that is generated by loss, (un)belonging, and dislocation must be heard and dealt with in multiple voices in order to decolonise that experience from competitive memory and introduce ruptures in the limitations of a national literary tradition that is sustained by a hegemonic geographical imaginary. It is precisely this post-colonial literature by authors of African descent — a literature written by those other voices to which Khan refers — that will feed a discussion of historical reparation in post-colonial times, which in turn might sustain a process of counter-hegemonic historicization.

## 1. DISLOCATION, SAUDADE, AND HER MOTHER

As *Telefones* comprises long monologues by Solange and her mother Filomena over the phone, which are presented alternately in the form of separate chapters. A third-person narrator appears five times over the course of the narrative. It interrupts these monologues to record Solange's visit to Luanda to spend time with her mother during the holidays, Filomena's trip to Lisbon to be with her daughter, and the heartache and profound yearning of both for a mother-daughter relationship that unfolds primarily over the phone, over many years, starting from the moment when Solange is sent to her aunt's house in Lisbon.

This is a narrative that develops around the impact of migration on family relations and, more specifically, on how children grow up when they are separated prematurely from their mothers. The absence of statistics clearly identifying the Portuguese population of African descent makes it impossible to determine the number of families that are separated between Portugal and the various African countries where Portuguese is an official language. According to data released by the Observatório das Migrações (n.d.), in 2017 around 17% of the foreign population resident in Portugal was originally from Portuguese-speaking African countries (Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola), making this the second largest group of foreign-born residents, surpassed in numbers only by Brazilians. However, and bearing in mind the absence of statistics, we can only guess at the real reach of the emotional and psychological impact on the family unit of separations imposed by displacement. In the history of African and African-heritage family separations, those which are the consequence of migration prompted by political and economic instability in the process of the African liberations constitute a type of contemporary prolongation of the traumatic separations that resulted from the forced

transatlantic dislocation and enslavement of peoples that lie at the core of Portuguese and European colonial history. In *As Telefones*, and in the words of an omniscient narrator, Filomena and Solange represent “continents separated by the waters that unite them” (Almeida, 2020, p. 41). Their story of forced separation is, after all, the same history that unites the two continents of Europe and Africa, and on a smaller scale, unites Portugal and Angola, which are further reduced in the narrative to the Lisbon-Luanda axis.

The telephone, or rather the phone conversation as the ultimate link between those who stay and those who leave, is not a new literary trope in the work of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, although it is only in *As Telefones* that it constitutes the narrative focus. In *Esse Cabelo* (Almeida, 2015), the telephone conversation is the only frequent point of contact between the protagonist Mila and her mother. Indeed, this is one of several aspects in common between the experiences of this character and Solange in *As Telefones*. In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (Almeida, 2018), Cartola is unable to return to Luanda for lack of financial resources and thus is obliged to survive with his son, Aquiles, on the outskirts of Lisbon, maintaining contact with his bedridden wife Glória in Luanda only by means of letters and occasional phone calls. These narratives explore different aspects of the Angolan diaspora and its integration in Portugal. In *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, the character of Cartola is developed around the promises of citizenship and integration that the Portuguese colonial power offered to assimilated Africans, but which proved to be lamentably misleading once the empire collapsed. By contrast, Mila in *Esse Cabelo*, and Cartola’s son Aquiles are — along with Solange — the children of the empire who try primarily and in some way to reconcile within themselves their lived experiences in Lisbon with their Angolan roots. As such, they are the protagonists of narratives that trace a decolonial literary project based on exploring sensibilities related to the border-space that these protagonists must forge between Angola and Portugal. Such sensibilities are expressed in Portuguese and use European Portuguese grammar, but the memories are different, and new forms of expression must thus be created from the starting point of those which already exist.

In *Órfãos do Império*, P. Ferreira (2021) identifies the notion of orphanhood as a recurrent trope in literature — and especially in post-colonial Portuguese literature — that is used to express the traumatic state resulting from the loss of the parent figure, which is associated with a “journey of discovery of one’s roots and identity and, in many cases, this path that traverses memories” (p. 31). P. Ferreira (2021) identifies orphanhood in *Esse Cabelo* as a “dimension of loss” and, consequently, as a condition that “is not literal, but metaphorical” (p. 238). This orphanhood is only superficially similar to that experienced by the protagonists of works by António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge, among other authors analysed by this scholar. This concept of orphanhood is particularly productive for an analysis of Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida’s prose, because while in *Esse Cabelo* this condition is indeed superficial, in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* it is the foundation of the character of Aquiles, who is physically distanced from his mother and whose father becomes progressively senile and isolated. Aquiles is the child of the Angolan diaspora who is not recognised by the post-colonial city as a fully integrated citizen. His life is suspended in an old colonial metropole that is still adrift between what it was and what it desires to be: “there’s no hurry to have a house or a father or a mother” (Almeida, 2018, p. 170).

It would be easy to think that this notion of orphanhood has no place in *As Telefones*; yet a similar sensation of loss and abandonment unites Mila, Aquiles, and Solange. In this narrative, the feeling of loss is explored as a limitation imposed by migration on Solange's right to recognise herself physically as belonging to an ancestral family line; in short, her right to a body in which she may recognise the characteristics of her mother with whom she cannot be — the features of an ancestry with which she has little intimacy and the traces of similarity between bodies that are obliged by the circumstances of migration to mature without reference to one another. This circumstance is defined in Solange's words as "our situation" (Almeida, 2020, p. 34): the sense of longing between mother and daughter. The absence of the right to recognise the genealogy of her body is prefigured in the title. It generates a certain strangeness through the gendered marking of the feminine definite article that identifies Solange and Filomena but is in obvious grammatical disagreement with the masculine noun that follows. *As Telefones* suggests that which they both become during the years of physical separation — a mother and daughter whose bond is strengthened and renewed solely during the time that they have available to speak on the phone. The impossibility of their knowing the bodies in which they may recognise one another, and which grow older with time is repeated in the narrative as Solange's continual lament: "I don't know your body, Filomena. I don't know my body" is repeated as "I don't know your body. I don't know my body" and "I don't know my body because I don't know yours". This line is further reformulated in various ways that repeat the image of an existence without a physical body: "with the passing of the years, the phone call stopped being an event and, for one another, we stopped being people", or "they were no longer Solange and Filomena, but two ghosts". There is even a variation on the mutilated body to which the telephone is linked as "an extension of the skin", a diasporic cyborg body: "and us, with it, handsets of flesh, telephonic humanity, machines with our hearts in our mouths, names in a soon-to-be-antique directory" (Almeida, 2020, pp. 9, 14, 19, 49, 78, 24, 25).

In Portuguese literature and the arts, the human body has constituted the visual centre of the experience of the trauma of war, loss, and even nostalgia for the end of the colonial empire. From *Jaz Morto e Arrefece o Menino de Sua Mãe* (Mother's Little Boy Lies Dead and Cold), a sculpture by Clara Menéres (1973), to various novels by António Lobo Antunes and Lídia Jorge, to the more recent *O Retorno* (*The Return*; 2012) by Dulce Maria Cardoso, the dead, mutilated, or traumatised bodies of soldiers, the bodies that grieve for them, and the bodies of the returned colonisers who arrive with no protection, "only the clothes they are wearing", unite to give form to the individual and collective trauma of loss. However, the generation of young people of African descent who grew up during independence, away from the countries where they were born, does not belong to the same time as the generation of those grieving bodies. That is the time of their parents, although it continues to echo in the memories that endure for the next generation and emerge in the form of post-memory — a concept which this article uses in the sense given to it by Marianne Hirsch (2012) in *The Generation of Postmemory*. In other words, post-memory denotes the relationship that the inheriting generation establishes, through

the stories, images, and behaviours with which they have grown up, with the trauma of the generation that experienced it in fact (p. 5). The suffering caused by displacement prolongs the suffering caused by colonialism and the war, because it is another battle and another trauma that is reconfigured as the physical absence of contact between bodies. Post-memory of the war for liberation emerges through the voice of Solange in the form of subtle metaphors that invoke the memory of nostalgia for the body that is absent in war, of bodily combat, and of the mutilated body, in order to explore from a historically (dis)continuous perspective a certain continuity in the experience of violence towards African bodies. In this case, it means the violent absence of the displaced body, and the violence of the battle that must be undergone to deal with the sense of longing and suffering caused by that non-presence: “you are my friend and I am your war penpal, anxious to see you again, to smell you, to touch you, to feel your hair” and “the still-intact booths look like futurist armadillos or, going back in time, like the army on the verge of a massacre, shield against shield, helmet against helmet, belligerently tense, but as harmless as if it were encased in glass” (Almeida, 2020, pp. 13, 9). The post-memory of a historically contextualised fact is manifested as a different sensibility that, although it has the reference point of the historically marked trauma of violence against the Black African body, expresses continuity in the violence against the Black body of African descent. To return to Mignolo’s (2017) words, cited above, the grammar is the same, but the memory and sensibility of the world for the new generation are different.

In *As Telefones*, the visual centrality of the traumatised body gains new significance through the visual centrality of the absence of the longing body — a body in which the subject recognises their historical-genealogical reference points; this absence runs in parallel with both the historical evolution of the telephone from the fixed line to the mobile phone, and a story of longing caused by separation in which the disappearance of the fixed line also does away with “the notion that there existed a link between those talking” (Almeida, 2020, p. 31). Rooted in the absence of a visualisation of the physical body is the importance of sensing as a way of experiencing the world that gains decolonial literary and artistic form in the face of the hegemonic perspective of the literary and artistic forms generated by the colonial experience. By addressing the diaspora through the lens of the experience of longing for the absent body, the narrative of *As Telefones* redeems the representation of this experience, exploring it in the light of the experience of the African diaspora and Portuguese-African heritage, which is also an experience of trauma. It also creates connections with literary representations of emigration and the Portuguese diaspora, of longing by and for absent bodies, of the smells and sounds that mark the nostalgia of that absence, and which are very present in Portuguese literature published after 25 April 1974, such as *A Floresta em Bremerhaven* (The Forest in Bremerhaven, 1975) by Olga Gonçalves, or *Gente Feliz Com Lágrimas* (Happy People in Tears, 1988) by João de Melo. In other words, it reconfigures the experience of psychological and emotional orphanhood for the person of African descent, starting from terms that are explored within the scope of themes that are particularly dear to Portuguese literature and culture: the themes of *saudade* and emigration, within which lies the question of hyphenated



identities, an expression that I employ here in the same sense as P. Ferreira (2021, p. 230). In *As Telefones*, while the word *saudade* is never explicitly spoken, the sentiment of nostalgia for the absent body is nevertheless explored in depth.

By focusing the experience of longing on the absence of the character of the mother who remained in Angola, Almeida's narrative is equally a post-colonial successor of the sacralisation of the mother-figure that shaped early Angolan literature, starting in particular with the *Vamos Descobrir Angola* (Let's Discover Angola) cultural movement in 1948, and which is present in the poetry of Agostinho Neto, Viriato da Cruz, and Alda Lara through the evocation of mother-Africa. Having grown up in Lisbon, Solange combines European and African characteristics; she is that figure that Almeida calls the "African girl in Lisbon". Although her Portuguese accent is "completely Lisbon", her facial features are unequivocally Angolan, as Filomena observes: "you don't have my nose at all, you look like a little Agostinho Neto" (Almeida, 2020, pp. 30, 65). Although Solange is a married woman with children, lives on the periphery struggling financially, and works in an office (the narrative never identifies her job), the story of this Black woman is articulated only through brief, sporadic references that are clearly devalued in relation to the central situation of the physically absent mother. This is a story of longing that places Solange on a par with the experience of the white Portuguese emigrant. In *Esse Cabelo* (Almeida, 2015), Mila's post-colonial reflection on her identity unravels synecdochically from the starting point of a part of her body — her curly hair. In contrast, in *As Telefones*, Solange feels the impossibility of recognising various parts of her body based on the similarities that she might observe with her mother's body, exacerbated through her feelings of longing for her mother, a story resembling so many other bodies of African descent. This impossibility is a truth that is compared to "a story with no beginning", which is a (dis)continuous story of the various forms of violence perpetrated on Black bodies (Almeida, 2020, p. 19). The maternal relationship and the umbilical cord that unite mother and daughter are not explored in terms of a desire to return to Angola and a return that might place on parallel planes of meaning the return to mother-Africa with the return to the biological mother: Solange does not feel at home in Luanda, regardless of the affective ties that bind her with Filomena. Just like Mila and Aquiles, Solange belongs to the "generations of lunatics" (Almeida, 2015, p. 16) who are forced to reconcile their hyphenated identity<sup>1</sup>. This identity is literarily explored through the experience of estrangement when the sporadic return to her place of origin shows her what it means to be "crushed by life" and reveals to her that "it seems less like coming home" (Almeida, 2020, p. 56)<sup>2</sup>. This is what being Portuguese of African descent means: it is the consciousness that the desire to return to the figure of the mother will always be merely the formulation of a desire for a spiritual return to that which is ancestral. In *As Telefones*, that desire is encapsulated in the line from a Black spiritual chant written in Lingala and Portuguese — "Bobe Yo, Bobele Yo,

<sup>1</sup> "I come from generations of lunatics, which is perhaps a sign that what takes place inside the heads of my ancestors is more important than what goes on around them" (Almeida, 2015, p. 16).

<sup>2</sup> *Essa Dama Bate Bué!* (This Woman Kicks Ass!), by Yara Monteiro (2018) bears the same feeling of estrangement when the protagonist Vitória — who is also a woman of African descent who has been raised in Lisbon — arrives in Luanda for the first time: "it is my first time there. I lack the spontaneity of someone returning to their homeland" (p. 28).

only you, only you” — that is repeated over the course of the narrative and signals its end. It is also the formulation of the knowledge that summarises what it means to belong to both Portugal and Angola, and which defines Solange’s existence: “meanwhile, in another time zone, I go into the office feeling grateful and blessed for having her in my life, and for us being similar after all: fat, perfect Black women” (Almeida, 2020, p. 90).

It is worth highlighting that *As Telefones* also makes incompleteness visible by leaving several page numbers unprinted, although this is, in fact, a paginated narration<sup>3</sup>. The reader observes that the leaves are paginated in sequence from nine to 90, but, on several pages the number is not visible; as such, the reader is obliged to undertake an exercise similar to that undertaken by Solange in relation to her own story — those “breadcrumbs on the table, crumbled by the hand of memory: our history” (Almeida, 2020, p. 43) — to make visible, corporeal even, the sequence of a narrative that has suffered cuts that figure only spectrally. The reconstruction of the sequence of pages becomes a metaphor for the reconstruction of links absent and lost in the process of identity-related (un)belonging within a decolonial project that is based in the affective experience of the diasporic body.

The figure of Filomena develops from the figure of the assimilated person of the Portuguese colonial empire, although it is rather less well explored in this respect than the character of Cartola in *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* (Almeida, 2018). In childhood, she is the assimilated Black girl who grows up emulating the tastes of the colonisers:

our white neighbours at that time only used to eat fruit cake. Fruit cake and iced coffee with lemon. So much so that your mother, small as I was, thought of nothing but eating fruit cake with iced lemon coffee. I played on my own with my dolls all day long, fruit cake here, lemon coffee there, a sip here, a sip there. (Almeida, 2020, p. 44)

After Angolan independence and as an adult, Filomena continues to admire that which exists in Portugal: “I could fancy a latte, it is latte, isn’t it? There’s nothing like a Portuguese coffee, and this one eh?” (Almeida, 2020, p. 74). She is proud of her own mother for being “a really beautiful, light-skinned Black woman” (Almeida, 2020, p. 85) and considers that the best she can desire for her daughter is that she does not privilege her African roots; as such, Filomena reveals a devaluing of those roots that was cultivated during the Portuguese colonial period, and persists to some extent in the post-colonial Angolan present:

go to bed now, kid, but mark my words, no son-in-law of mine is going to be Black, I won’t be having any of those dummies out there who don’t even know what a motorway is, isn’t it a motorway that you call it over there?, it’s not escalator, it’s motorway, that would be the last straw. (Almeida, 2020, p. 39)

Filomena is not Cartola because she does not live on the outskirts of Lisbon and she remained living in Luanda. Nor is she even close to Glória, Cartola’s wife, who falls asleep

<sup>3</sup> In an email from Relógio d’Água dated 4 August 2021, the publishers confirmed to me that the decision not to number several pages of the narrative was agreed with the author of the novel. (A. Carvalho, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

with her “nose glued to the perfumed letter” from her husband (Almeida, 2018, p. 211) but is impeded from leaving Luanda and thus is imprisoned by her memories of the past and yearning for a future in Lisbon with her husband that never true. Unlike Glória, Filomena takes a trip to see the Niagara Falls, and she follows the news about Barack and Michelle Obama. She is a character who has inherited the cultural effects of Portuguese colonialism. Although she is proud of the independence of her country (“we will never forget the heroes of 4th February”; Almeida, 2020, p. 65) and has achieved a certain level of economic stability, she continued to see Portugal and the West as models of development. She bitterly regrets that Solange’s life and home are a far cry from the level of comfort that she desired for her daughter when she sent her to Lisbon decades earlier. Deeply devoted to her faith, Filomena is a loyal member of the evangelical churches that expanded in Angola, in particular after transitioning to a multi-party political system and a market economy, especially among evangelical movements influenced by ancestral African religious rites. Filomena attends the services at Mamã Claudette’s place, and goes into a trance in a shack during an evangelical service that combines religious chants with the clapping of hands and the sound of drums. In Lisbon, on the few occasions she visits Solange, Filomena does not recognise in the capital city the colonial White metropole that in fact it never was, and she sees it as a city on the map of Angolans in transit who prosper at the expense of the Angola’s capitalist economy that is configured as a neo-colonial project focused on profit from the extraction markets that perpetuate the social inequalities generated in colonial times:

Lisbon is looking good, yes sir, congratulations. I mean, it has developed, it is no longer that really beautiful, old city, you know: (...) the Tower of Belém, the Rossio, you haven’t taken me for a steak sandwich yet... Oh, that’s right, child, I’m not going to forget my steak sandwich. These Angolans who come to Lisbon, all they want are steak sandwiches, they’re fancy, steak sandwiches and that, what is that thing...? Kebabs! Today I am going to drink a nice little red wine, oh yes I am... I’m kidding, your mother doesn’t drink. (...) So many Black people in the street, there are loads of Africans here, gosh, but this has changed... No, sir, I really don’t know Lisbon at all (Almeida, 2020, p. 83)<sup>4</sup>

It is this “stubborn mother, gannet of a mother” who helps her daughter during the few times that she comes to Lisbon, leaving for Angola with “a light suitcase, because she gave me her clothes” (Almeida, 2020, p. 90) in a protective gesture that metaphorically constructs a safe harbour of maternity and ancestry.

## 2. POST-MEMORY AND THE AURAL LEGACY IN POST-COLONIAL PORTUGUESE FICTION

The representation of writing in its various forms (such as diaries and letters, among others) has been a privileged narrative device in Portuguese — and western — literature,

<sup>4</sup> There is a significant contrast between the image of Lisbon from the perspective of Filomena and that of Justina, the eldest daughter of Cartola, when she visits her father and brother several years later, in the 1990s. For Justina, during a stroll around the Baixa, the “fountains, statues, pavements, they seemed spent, old, uninteresting, dirty” (Almeida, 2018, p. 125); this is the image of the washed-up, ex-imperial capital in the post-colonial era.

functioning as a means of bearing witness to memory. While other forms of memory transmission are not excluded, Hirsch's (2012) concept of post-memory highlights the tangible component of transmission when she talks about the "material 'living connection' [that] is powerfully mediated by technologies like literature, photography, and testimony" (p. 33). Franz Kafka's *Letter to His Father* (1919) is a prime example within western literature, and there is no shortage of notable examples in Portuguese literature, either, such as *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters*, 1972) by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa, *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (*Notebook of Colonial Memories*, 2009) by Isabel Figueiredo, and in cinema, Ivo M. Ferreira's *Cartas de Guerra* (*Letters from War*, 2016).

With regard to post-colonial Portuguese literature, writing is the means by which the children of the empire deal with the legacy of their progenitors' memories of the colonial period and — very specifically — with the legacy of the memories of their fathers, the former soldiers. Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and António Pinto Ribeiro (2018) establish that this is a common feature underlying the fiction produced by the heirs to the Colonial Wars: a dialogue with the father figure about loss often becomes a dialogue about the figure of the fatherland (p. 294). In *As Telefones*, the father figure is completely absent; rather, this is a narrative that constructs the figure of a motherland drawing from the mother figure, Filomena. However, because it is a search for ancestral references that make of Solange's body a history of complex lived experiences, this journey is followed in dialogue with her living mother, a woman of her own time. Filomena knows that "Aretha died"; she is interested in her daughter's daily life, her friendships, sorrows, and joys ("and Rita, that friend of yours, is she still bothering you, she's very envious of you, darling, are you friends again now?"); and she recounts episodes from her own daily life and little stories about her circle of friends in Luanda: "Catila? Oh, kiddo, my poor friend Catila, love. Would you believe that Zé, that same Zé who used to carry you about when you were little, well, Zé got Catila pregnant ( ... ) that prole disappeared, he skedaddled, sis" (Almeida, 2020, pp. 38, 13, 39). Filomena is a storyteller who transmits her own religiousness and hopes for a brighter future that is a redesign of the colonial framework: "one day we will go on a cruise, darling, you'll see. ( ... ) Drinking champagne, the whole lot, us, two fancy Black women with servants in ties filling our glasses. Your Mama believes, love. God is faithful" (Almeida, 2020, p. 26). Solange asks her mother to "teach me to pray, Filomena"; and her mother teaches her the recipe for *shebujen*: "fry the fish, bream, just chopped into steaks and seasoned with salt or garlic if you have it, and then put it in a pot in which you've already made a tomato base that's well cooked, with the tomato properly broken down, well mashed up, and add water" (Almeida, 2020, pp. 82, 85).

The importance of the orality, the heart of tradition in African societies, rests on the figure of the griot. In the traditional societies of West Africa, the griot preserves and transmits the music, myths, and history of his people; he educates, informs, and entertains; and he is the guardian of ancestral African references. The representation of the character of Filomena in many ways is a representation of the African griot in terms of the role that she has in Solange's life. On the one hand, we can identify in Filomena the representation of the mother who transmits her memories and knowledge to her daughter.

On the other hand, we can see in this transmission the way in which she guarantees the preservation of a memory of Angolan life, which cannot, in any other way, be recovered for Solange's life and knowledge of her roots as a fundamental part of her existence, as a person of African descent growing up and being raised in Lisbon. Filomena's memories and teachings are the connection with Angolan culture that Solange needs to have within her in order to bridge, or soften, her feelings of longing and (un)belonging. Furthermore, the transmission of testimony between those who leave and those who remain runs alongside the global history of the telephone and the phone conversation, which follows the complexity of contemporary lived experience of which the diasporas also form a part:

language of farewells and omissions, of longing, of distractions, of disastrous news and fleeting joys, that of the possibility of taking the other by their ear and, nowadays, of that conversation being overheard by the great ear that overhears all conversations, the involuntary prayer, and the gnashing of teeth, these are the voices of all of us, listening, chatting, agreeing meetings, postponing lunches, changing the subject, talking about health, death, life, crimes, births, cures, hospitalisations, accidents, sadness, trivialities, looking for consolation in one another's ears (Almeida, 2020, p. 25)

In 2017, *Djidiu: A Herança do Ouvido* (Djidiu: The Aural Legacy) was published in Portugal. It is an anthology of authors and poets of African descent that was created as part of the project *Djidiu* by the cultural association, Afrolis. *Djidiu* is a project that brought together several writers of African descent, who met monthly in Lisbon to share their experiences of being “Black in the world and, in particular, in Portugal” (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 13). As the sociologist Cristina Roldão underlines in her preface to this anthology, it “is inscribed within a legacy of Black cultural and political resistance through collective literary production” (Carvalho et al., 2017, p. 11). “Djidiu” is the Manding word for griot. The narrative of *As Telefones* sits within this broad literary movement of recovery in post-colonial Portugal of the experience of being Black and of African descent, which was in fact always present in the literature produced in Portugal during colonial times — as is the case of the *Claridade* (Clarity) magazine in the 1930s, and the *Antologia de Poesia Negra de Expressão Portuguesa* (Anthology of Black Poetry in Portuguese, 1958). However, this movement was made invisible by the mechanisms of canon formation of Portuguese literature. As a resistance movement that redeems Black experience, this literary discourse has been established from the margins; it is given visibility by the publication of the *Djidiu* anthology, which follows in the wake of this movement and provides a literary and poetic representation of the experience of being of African descent, with a focus on recording lived experiences. The narrative of *As Telefones* takes this discourse of resistance a little further by working it and integrating it within the framework of themes that are widely recognised as belonging to the canonical Portuguese literary tradition and the white Portuguese experience. It places Black and African-heritage experience at the centre of this discussion by deploying the theme of longing for the absent body. To conclude the argument that has driven this section of the article, the writing that canonises Eurocentric experience places what was seen and witnessed at the visual centre, while the representation of Filomena aligned with the figure of

the African griot decentralises that visual focal point in favour of the memory of lived experience. As *Telefones* thus decolonises that experience from the principles of legitimacy and authority that are constructed by means of the grammar supplied by so-called western and European epistemology at the same time as it makes more complex the density of Solange as a border-world body. As a subject gifted with “world-sensing”, the character of Solange is based on a set of discursive tools that relate to a central theme in Portuguese literature, but which cannot be defined in the same terms as those used by the grammar that sustains the theme (Mignolo, 2017, p. 20). This is another reason why I have observed that, although the trope of *saudade* (nostalgia or longing) is explored in *As Telefones*, it is not articulated using this specific term, because *saudade* refers specifically to its own epistemology, which belongs to a world that predates the creation of a new, border-space sensibility.

### 3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: POST-COLONIAL FICTION AND HISTORICAL REPARATION

In the article mentioned above, Paulo de Medeiros (2020) argues that in novels such as *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso* the return to Portugal should be read in the light of both sides of the colonial experience:

therefore, and in order to read these novels properly, it is necessary to bear in mind that the notion of return, even when it is a false or impossible return, cuts across the experience of many people on both sides of the line of colonial division. ( ... ) And, as such, they also participate fully in another tradition, which, although it demands a much more critical approach, is not new; it is related to the work of Afro-Europeans and to the vision of the historical, cultural, political, and personal entangled relations that are emblematic of that condition (p. 147)

Post-colonial Portuguese fiction by authors of African descent brings to the centre of the discussion the cultural entanglement produced by colonialism and which constitutes the nucleus of African-heritage experience for the successors of the generation that lived through the colonial empire and the decolonisation processes, and which, in terms of its collective memory, has been absent from discussion in the public space<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, and from the historical-literary point of view, Black writing has been present in the Portuguese public space since colonial times, functioning as a resistance movement from the margins of the Portuguese literary canon and directed towards the experience of alterity that was at the heart of Portuguese colonial society. Such literature developed a narrative of African origins (Angolan, Cabo-Verdean, etc.), and became a fundamental tool for the formation of the Portuguese-speaking African nations. In post-colonial times, Afro-Portuguese writing has sought to destabilise this parting of the waters, reflecting new literary topographies on which the Portuguese post-colonial imaginary is based to mirror

<sup>5</sup> Of particular note in this context is the project *Memoirs: Filhos do Império e Pós-Memórias Europeias* (Memories: Sons of the Empire and European Post-Memories), based at the Centro de Estudos Sociais (Coimbra), co-ordinated by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and funded by the European Research Council. The project explores the European dimension of the experience of the descendants of the generation that was involved in the decolonisation processes and studies the Afro-Portuguese experience alongside and in comparison with French and Belgian experience to show how the Portuguese post-colonial processes are framed within a European post-colonial dynamic.

the complexity of the experience of the population of African descent; and incorporating Portuguese literary heritage as much as it does the literary heritage of African origins. In narrative terms, it is noteworthy that the story of *As Telefones* is organised around a more or less equal division between the monologues of Solange and Filomena, thus reflecting the lived experience of the daughter in the diaspora and the mother in Angola. In an interview with Isabel Lucas (2018) given for the launch of *Luanda, Lisboa, Paraíso*, Almeida argues that “we may all participate in a conversation, which is a very old conversation, and which is called Portuguese literature” (para. 6). She highlights that her literary influences are those of an author whose reading was shaped in Portugal, including Sá de Miranda, Raul Brandão, and Herberto Helder among these influences. Almeida’s various narratives — and in particular *As Telefones*, the focal point for the foregoing discussion — reflect the Portuguese literary legacy, just as they reflect ancestral African heritage and the legacy of key authors from the Angolan literary tradition, such as José Luandino Vieira. This complexity does not begin with Almeida; it is present in the work of other Portuguese-speaking African authors, such as José Eduardo Agualusa (1997) — another Luso-Angolan — whose *Nação Crioula: Correspondência Secreta de Fradique Mendes (Creole)* takes the work of Eça de Queiroz as a starting point from which to explore narrative processes.

In his review of Portuguese literature published since 1974, Eduardo Lourenço (1984) asserts that the literary generations of the 1950s and 1960s who produced their work after 1974 always saw the revolution with the “eyes of the past” because in fact, and unlike authors such as Lídia Jorge or Eduarda Dionísio, they were not the “literary generation of the revolution” (pp. 13–14). In the same way, we can assert that the literary generation of the African and African-heritage diaspora comprises those who were born after independence in the various countries and were raised in a world of multiple literary confluences. In contrast, the generation born before independence will always look at the lived experiences of the diaspora with similar “eyes of the [colonial] past”. The recognition of post-colonial writing by authors of African descent makes use of the Portuguese literary legacy as much as it draws on African literature in Portuguese (Angolan, Cabo-Verdean, etc.), reflecting the complexity of the diasporic experience of people of African descent. It may thus contribute to a decolonial literary project that takes responsibility, above all, for producing historical reparation. This reparation must involve the destabilisation of literary cartographies and their reinvention. It creates transit spaces to express border-world sensibilities — which represent, in practice, the feelings of bodies that belong to the broad space of the diaspora — and contributes to the discussion of a truly polyphonic collective memory in the Portuguese public space.

**Translation: Rhian Atkin**

#### TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

Throughout this article, I use the terms “sensitivity” and “sensing” with the meaning that Mignolo gives them. The Portuguese title *As Telefones* uses the feminine definite article with the masculine noun, creating a grammatical strangeness that denotes both that the conversations of the narrative take place between women, and that they

effectively come to embody the material objects (telephones) that substitute for being in one another's presence.

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