

THE ANGOLAN NOVEL

The Portuguese language is spoken more widely, and in a more standard form, in Angola than in any other former Portuguese colony in Africa. In Mozambique, where English is also important, Portuguese has spread more slowly. Creolized dialects rule street-life in Guinea Bissau and the two-island republic of São Tomé and Príncipe. In the Cape Verde Islands, Creole is gaining ground in public contexts, including literature. Angola owes its distinctness to two calamities: slavery and civil war. As the source of Portugal's slave trade to Brazil between the 16th and 19th centuries, Angola developed a class of African middlemen –known, confusingly, as “Creoles”– who managed the trade for their colonial masters. The Creoles adopted Portuguese-speaking, Catholic culture and often intermarried with European traders. In the early 20th century, when large-scale European settlement of Angola began, the Portuguese government's attempts to marginalize the Creoles in order to strengthen the settlers failed to stem mixing across racial lines. The syncretized culture of the capital, Luanda, gave birth to the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), the Marxist guerrilla force that went to war against Portuguese colonialism in 1961, took power in 1975, and, under a more opaque ideological banner, remains in power today. For most of the country's history, the MPLA has been at war with rival guerrilla factions, South Africa or Zaire. In the 1990s, when Mozambique was settling its civil war, Angola returned to the battlefield. The worst fighting in the country's history drove millions of people out of rural areas into the crowded *musseques* of zinc-roofed cinderblock houses on the outskirts of Luanda. Here African languages are in retreat; most urban young people speak only Portuguese. Reliable figures are scarce, yet with four million inhabitants, Luanda is probably –after São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte in Brazil– the world's fourth-largest Portuguese-speaking city.

Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto, was both a poet and a Creole married to a white woman: the father of the nation was also the father of three mixed-raced children. Today, when the MPLA has abandoned Marxism (even though the streets of downtown Luanda continue to bear the names of Marx, Engels and Lenin), the governing party's multicultural legacy lives on. Current Angolan fiction, like the revolutionary leadership in the 1970s, is monopolized by men of mixed race. The dominant writer of the 1960s and 1970s, José Luandino Vieira, a working class white man who wrote his books during a twelve-year incarceration in the colonial government's concentration camps, twisted the Portuguese language in search of an instrument to express Angolan reality. Vieira lapsed into creative silence after independence (he now lives as a recluse in Portugal), but the quest for *Angolanidade* (“Angolanness”) persists.

Angola's best-known writer, Pepetela, is closely identified with this quest. “Pepetela” became the guerrilla codename, and later the pen-name, of Artur Pestana, a sixth-generation Angolan of predominantly European ancestry born in Benguela, in the country's southern coastal region, in 1941. Trained as a sociologist and MPLA operative in Algeria during the 1960s,

Pepetela fought as a guerrilla for seven years, rising to the position of a regional commander during the defence of Angola against the first South African invasion in 1975. From 1976 to 1982 he was Deputy Minister of Education. Pepetela's 15 books have earned him large audiences in Portugal, Brazil and some European countries. He owes his international reputation to *Mayombe* (1980), a tightly observed novel about the ethnic and ideological splits and sexual tensions afflicting a group of MPLA guerrillas. *Mayombe* was so controversial that President Neto himself had to approve its publication in Angola.

In Pepetela's later fiction the transition from insurgency to nation-building turns *Mayombe*'s portrait of ethnic strife on its head in the search for cultural fusions capable of reconciling Angola's diversity into syncretic unity. In *Yaka* (1984), (which, like *Mayombe*, is available in English), a Bakongo statue initiates a white settler family into engagement with the Angolan nation. *Lueji, o Nascimento de um Império* (1989; *Lueji, the Birth of an Empire*) shuttles between a retelling of the rise of the Lunda people of northeastern Angola to imperial grandeur in the 16th century and a modern story about a mixed-race Luanda dancer, who shares the queen's name and struggles to put on a ballet celebrating the historical Lueji's accomplishments.

The MPLA's abandonment of socialism in 1990, combined with the return to war in 1992, undermined the construction of *Angolanidade*. *A Geração da Utopia* (1992; *The Utopian Generation*), Pepetela's most popular novel after *Mayombe*, follows the lives of four Angolan revolutionaries from their student days in Lisbon through the struggles of the 1970s to total disillusionment by the early 1990s. *Párola do Cágado Velho* (1996; *The Old Turtle's Parable*) abandons the Creolized makers of modern Angola to tell the story of the war in the countryside from the perspective of the African poor. *A Gloriosa Família* (1997; *The Glorious Family*) returns to the 17th century to trace the first glimmerings of *Angolanidade*, as it emerged in opposition to the Dutch occupation of Luanda between 1641 and 1648. The Van Dum family (whose name echoes that of the Van Dúnems, the most powerful of Luanda's Creole dynasties) define the culture they defend in terms of Catholicism, the Portuguese language and their mixed racial identity. These values, which are presented as positive, are undermined by the Van Dums' brutal reliance on the slave trade. Narrated by a Van Dum slave, the novel insists on the corruption that attended the Creole class from its inception.

A Gloriosa Família marks the end of a cycle in Pepetela's work in which the Creoles serve as a model for the nation. His two recent novels about the Luanda detective Jaime Bunda ("James Bum"), an overweight descendant of the great Creole families, turn to satire. Pepetela is an ambitious writer, but he is rarely subtle. He has a compelling narrative gift and a deep emotional investment in his characters. He writes in efficient standard Portuguese, seasoned with a very mild sprinkling of African words. His weakness is narrators who spell out for the reader insights amply demonstrated by the action. The sardonic tone of the Jaime Bunda novels parlays this editorializing tendency into a conduit for acerbic commentary on contemporary corruption. The first novel, *Jaime Bunda, Agente Secreto* (2001) opens with the murder of a young girl on Angolan independence day; it ends with a criminal mastermind, who is a high government official, congratulating detectives on national television for arresting someone else for crimes he has committed.

In *Jaime Bunda e a morte do americano* (2003; *Jaime Bunda and the Death of the American*) Pepetela pokes fun at the Luanda-centrism of younger urban Angolans by forcing Jaime to leave the capital to solve the murder of an American engineer in Benguela. The government fears that unless the murderer is arrested, the United States will declare Angola a

terrorist nation. The narrator warns that many Angolans continue to resent the U.S. for its support of apartheid-era South Africa, although few will say so, “preferindo hoje blandiciosas globalizações mais pós-modernistas” (“preferring today appeasing globalizations more in the spirit of postmodernism”). The novel itself partakes of the post-modern spirit in being modelled on the case of a Portuguese engineer who was murdered in Benguela in 1950. The imperial mantle having passed from Portugal to the United States, Washington sends an FBI agent to Benguela to shadow Jaime’s investigation. Besotted with U.S. popular culture, Jaime looks forward to meeting a real FBI agent, only to have his expectations upstaged when the agent turns out to be a light-skinned African-American woman who bears a suspicious resemblance to Condoleeza Rice. Jaime’s blundering attempts to seduce the agent are rebuffed as she opts for an affair with the winner of the Miss Benguela contest. Behind this comic plot, which shreds the Creole elite’s last pretensions to patriarchal authority, a tragedy unfolds. Júlio Fininho, a young man demobilized from the army to face unemployment, falls in love with Maria Antónia, a mixed-race woman forced to support herself through prostitution. Trapped by the manipulations surrounding the murder investigation, they see their future –and by implication that of Angola– destroyed. The only glimmer of hope, ironically, lies in the post-modern device of multiple narrators who suggest competing solutions, the second less grim than the first, to the mystery of the American’s death.

Manuel Rui, also born in 1941, has followed a trajectory similar to that of Pepetela. A native of Huambo, in Angola’s cool central highlands, Rui is of mixed Portuguese and Ovimbundu parentage. He practised law in Portugal while beginning his literary career. Returning to Angola in 1974, Rui served as the MPLA’s Director of Information and Propaganda, wrote the country’s national anthem and composed an Angolan version of the *Internationale*. A collection of short fiction from this phase of his career was published in English under the title *Yes, Comrade!* (1993), but it is Rui’s later, more comic and disenchanting work that has secured his reputation. Rui is best known for a short novel, *Quem Me Dera Ser Onda* (1982; *If Only I Were A Wave on the Sea*). Told with rippling light-heartedness, this satire on socialist housing policies recounts the story of a man who is accused of “capitalist speculation” when he begins to raise a pig in the bathroom of his flat. In comic scenes, the man’s young sons, motivated purely by the desire to save the pig’s life, play havoc with the state bureaucracy.

Rui’s latest short novel, *Um Anel na Areia* (2002; *A Ring in the Sand*), was published just as Angola’s 41 years of civil war ended. Maritime imagery emphasizes the characters’ rudderlessness, as, one by one, African religion, Catholicism, Marxism and consumerism are discarded as moral guides in a society where war has pulverized all systems of belief. Marina, a young secretary, receives a gold ring from her boyfriend Lau the first time they make love on the beach. Her response is to toss into the ocean, as an offering to the goddess Kianda, the inferior rings she inherited from her late mother. Marina’s colloquial interior monologues dramatize her regret at having jettisoned her inheritance. In spite of her successful career –fluent in English and adept with computers, she and Lau are Angola’s potential new middle class– Marina is stymied by the fear that the war may not end quickly enough to prevent Lau from being conscripted. Her paralysis is inseparable from the crisis of values that crystallizes when she loses his ring in the sand. Neither her status-conscious aunt nor her depressed best friend can offer reliable counsel as to how she should live her life. The tale ends with a rhetorical question asking who is in charge and a tentative suggestion that the family is the only institution worth saving.

José Eduardo Agualusa, also from Huambo, belongs to a different generation. Born in 1960 to a Brazilian father and a white Angolan mother, Agualusa did not participate in the struggle for independence and has a difficult relationship with the MPLA. Profoundly disillusioned by the events of 1977, when a failed coup attempt led to a massacre, Agualusa roamed the world for years as a kind of “loyal dissident,” often speaking on Angola abroad but refusing to live in the country (he recently married and moved back to Luanda). Agualusa’s pared-down fiction extols the cultural incongruities characteristic of Creolized societies; he has cited Bruce Chatwin as an influence. His first novel, *A conjura* (1989; *The Conspiracy*) reconstructs a 1911 uprising against Portuguese colonial policies that were designed to curb intercultural mingling; his epistolary historical novel *Nação Crioula* (1997) was translated into English as *Creole* (2003). *Estação das Chuvas* (1996; *Rainy Season*), his most powerful work, breaks down the emotional distance that sometimes accompanies Agualusa’s stylistic elegance, by making explicit the narrator’s engagement in historical events.

Agualusa’s most recent novel *O Vendedor de Passados* (2004; *The Man Who Sold Past*) is narrated by a gecko clinging to the wall of the home of Félix Ventura, a Luanda antiquarian book dealer. As an albino, Ventura is often mistaken for a white man. Taking advantage of his access to old books and photographs, he constructs fictionalized genealogies, complete with memorabilia, for *nouveau-riche* members of the Luanda elite, “proving” their Creole ancestry. The client known as José Buchmann poses a particular challenge because he is white. Ventura provides Buchmann with a genealogy attesting to his origins in a white settler community in southern Angola. Accustomed to indulging the snobbish fantasies of the new black business class, Ventura is alarmed when figures from Buchmann’s fabricated past come to life. The gecko, meanwhile, relates his memories of a previous life in which he was a man: not just any man, but Jorge Luis Borges. The parallels between Buchmann and Borges the “book-man,” fuelling Agualusa’s insights into the ways in which history is created by books but cannot be contained by them, are ingenious. Told in short, ironic scenes, *O Vendedor de Passados* is consistently taut and witty. Unfortunately, the novel’s violent conclusion, which re-enacts the gruesome fate of the couple who staged the 1977 coup attempt, does not emerge organically from events in Ventura’s bookshop; the story’s final twists feel imposed.

Both history and earlier Portuguese-language African literature influence the work of Ondjaki, the first significant writer to emerge from the generation that grew up with the revolution. Born Ndalú de Almeida in a mixed-race family in Luanda in 1977, Ondjaki is the author of nine books. Some of his early work is slight, but his autobiographical novel *Bom dia camaradas* (2001; *Good morning comrades*), a bittersweet memoir of the relationship between Angolan pupils of the 1980s and their Cuban schoolteachers, is honest and affecting. Ondjaki’s most recent novel, *Quantas Madrugadas Tem a Noite* (2004; *How Many Dawns Has the Night*), marks a large step forward. Narrated in a rough-edged Luanda slang twisted with knotty wordplay and many literary allusions, the novel recounts the attempts to bury the deceased Adolfo Dido (the name is an obscene pun) in the face of obstacles posed by bureaucratic obtuseness and a tropical downpour. Adolfo claimed to have fought in the civil war (in a province bypassed by the war); two women, each maintaining that she is his spouse, aspire to the pension due to his “state widow”. Yet, as one character remarks, in order to have widows, the state must be dead. Denied a decent burial, Adolfo has no choice but to come back to life and reveal himself as the tale’s narrator. At one level, this novel is about Angola’s inability to bury the corpse of the Marxist state. But it is also a celebration of the Portuguese language in Africa; the Lisbon edition contains a glossary of three closely printed pages. Ondjaki’s voice recalls

the stories of Luandino Vieira; there are allusions to the Mozambican writer Mia Couto, to Pepetela, to Brazilian novels. In its boundless energy, *Quantas Madrugadas Tem a Noite* illustrates that contemporary Angolan fiction is responding not only to history, but to an evolving literary tradition.

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