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Postcolonial Exceptionality and the Portuguese Language: José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Book of Chameleons*[1]

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ABSTRACT

Language discourse attached to Portuguese national culture has been critical for the re-establishment of the imperial centre in the space of *encounter* between Portugal and its former colonies. The Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa has been problematising this centrality; both criticising and re-enacting the mythology of a benevolent colonial encounter *à la Portuguese*. This article analyses the representations of the Portuguese language in Agualusa's novel *The Book of Chameleons*. It unravels the author's negotiations with the postcolonial narrative of imperial exceptionality, concluding about the transgressive quality of Agualusa's language imagination.

1. This is a version of the article originally published in the collection *Itinerâncias. Percursos e Representações da Pós-colonialidade-Journeys Postcolonial Trajectories and Representations* (see Schor).

> *Passa-se com a alma algo semelhante ao que acontece à água: flui. Hoje está um rio. Amanhã estará mar. A água toma a forma do recipiente. Dentro de uma garrafa parece uma garrafa. Porém não é uma garrafa.* (Agualusa, *O Vendedor de Passados* 198)
>
> *The same thing happens to the soul as happens to water—it flows. Today, it's a river. Tomorrow it will be the sea. Water takes the shape of whatever receives it. Inside a bottle it's like a bottle. But it isn't a bottle.* (Agualusa, *The Book of Chameleons* 180)[2]

Locating the Query

In 1974 the *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution) lead to the collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship, which was also precipitated by the Portuguese defeat against the struggles for national liberation in Africa. After this demise of the bulk of the remaining Portuguese territorial empire in 1975, the Portuguese language assumed a central role in the constitution of the transnational *Lusofonia* (Lusophony): the community of the Portuguese language. There is an imperial metanarrative inscribed in the representations of the Portuguese language that shape this "imagined community" (Anderson), which includes Portugal and its former colonies in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The language stands here as synonym for a culture originated and centred in Portugal.

African fiction written in Portuguese has been problematising this centrality. It has done so by scrutinising the relation between identity and alterity tailored by Portuguese colonial history. This scrutiny is mainly carried out by Angolan, Mozambican, and Cape Verdean writers, who have a developed consideration of those concerns that shape border studies and theory (Fonseca 41–61). The Angolan José Eduardo Agualusa is one such writer. His writing will allow me to carry out a critical reflection upon the terrain of the postcolonial, centred

2. These citations refer to the same passage, the first taken from the original publication in Portuguese, the second from the translated book. All the following citations from this novel are from the translated book.

on the metaphorical *fronteira*. In Portuguese, *fronteira* coalesces the definitions of border and frontier (Canelo 89–108). In the opening quote above *garrafa* (bottle) stands for the border as containment, and *água* (water) stands for the frontier as openness and permeability. With this complexity and ambiguity in mind I will analyse this writer's perspective to the Portuguese language. I will focus on the negotiations established with the metanarrative of imperial exceptionality, aiming to discuss in depth the transgressive quality of Agualusa's language imagination.

Agualusa is, alongside the seasoned Pepetela and the younger Ondjaki, the most recognised Angolan writer of the moment. He has been elected by literary scholars, critics, and the editorial market as part of the canon of postcolonial Portuguese-language literature. His works have been warmly received in Portugal and beyond. Agualusa left Angola for Portugal as a teenager and lately he has been sharing residence between Lisbon, Luanda, and Rio de Janeiro. The writer has a strong presence in the public sphere of this triangular space.

The Book of Chameleons (2007), which from hereon I will refer to as *Chameleons*, is a recent novel of Agualusa that offers a postcolonial reflection centring on discursive practice. The title of the original novel is *O Vendedor de Passados* (2004), literally "the salesman of pasts." It tells the story of the Angolan albino Félix Ventura, who makes up and sells family trees. The story is narrated by a gecko living in the walls of Félix's house in Luanda. Through observation of Félix's visitors and clients, listening to his monologues and dreaming, the gecko Eulálio tells an adventurous and dramatic story. As the story unfolds, Félix gets entangled in the lives of two photographers: his client, the foreigner José Buchmann, and Ângela Lúcia, with whom he falls in love. This is a lively interruption in Félix's otherwise detached routine of constructing "new pasts," memories, and identities for the Angolan political and business elite. It enables him to experience life beyond the books which surround him and the stories of life he meticulously invents.

Chameleons invites its readers to reflect upon the very craft of writing. As the genealogist and writer of national History is revealed to be a storyteller, language emerges as a central instrument in the transformation of story into historical fact.

Conceptions of Language: Revealing Authoritative Language

Agualusa places his novels in what he identifies as the "shared universe of the Portuguese language" or the "world of *Lusofonia*" (qtd. in Machado).[3] In *Chameleons* the "foreigner" character of José Buchmann discloses to the gecko his true "Lusophone genealogy":

> My mother—poor woman—had died in Luanda while I was in prison. My father had been living in Rio de Janeiro for years with another woman. I'd never had much contact with him. Yes, I had been born in Lisbon, but I'd gone to Luanda when I was tiny, even before I had learned to talk. Portugal was my country, they told me so in prison—the other prisoners, the informers—but I never felt Portuguese. (172)

After further perambulation he concludes: "My whole life was an attempt to escape. Then one evening I found myself in Lisbon—one of those in-between places on the map" (172–73). The Portuguese language is here a common home. It is a place of encounters in the space Angola-Brazil-Portugal. This conception rescues the language from a disputed terrain of nationality. It belongs to a collective Portuguese postcolonial identity, where Portugal has lost the status of origin, proprietor, and the title of author. The core of Agualusa's literature is in the uncovering of the constructed nature of "authoritative narratives." With irony, the writer deconstructs the artificial and power-led division between stories, criticising the authenticity of History. As Félix lends his services to the *Ministro* (Minister), to writing the minister's memoirs, "Félix would sew fiction in with reality dextrously, minutely, in such a way that historical facts and dates were respected" (127). It is then by use of the common places of the political discourse that a story is shaped into the mould to enter the official narrative: "As soon as *The Real Life of a Fighter* is published, the consistency of Angola's history will change, there will be even more History" (127). Here, language serves the purpose of

3. All translations from assorted Portuguese-language sources are mine.

creating the illusion of truth. Language is revealed as a form devoid of content: an empty bottle.

Continuing on debunking established truths about language, Agualusa renders it empty of its universal value. As Walter Mignolo has argued, the linguistic (and philosophical) models of the twentieth century have been built in complicity with colonial expansion. Their subject of enunciation is European, although taken as universal. They are monolingual and couple language with territory in one homogeneous whole (219).[4] Contrasting with this model and legacy, for Agualusa, the meaning of language is found in locality. Much as Lisbon itself, the Portuguese language is no more and no less than a "*lugar de passagem*," (place of passage) "one of those in-between places."[5] The actual value of the language lies in the unique expressions of the *other* places traversed in the speaker's life path.

In one of the dreams narrated in *Chameleons*, Eulálio talks to José Buchmann in a train compartment. The gecko describes his counterpart during a short stop: "I heard him speaking with the fruit sellers in a tight, sing-song language, which seemed to me to be composed exclusively of vowels. He told me that he spoke English — in its various accents — and a number of German dialects, Parisian French, and Italian" (123). In this Babelian scenario, national languages seldom qualify themselves, as it is the accent and the dialect that attach meaning to them.

Chameleons does not present a case for the adoption of African languages either. They belong to Félix Ventura's childhood at his father's inherited farm: "I felt like I was visiting Paradise. I used to play all day long with the workers' children, and one or other of the local white boys from the area, who knew how to speak *quimbundo*" (87). Kimbundo is a language confined to the space of memory, which will fade away in the life path of *Chameleons*' characters, all urban

4. The enlacement between language and empire is an important focus of analysis in anticolonial and postcolonial critiques in different geographies and languages. In his analysis, Mignolo borrows from Latin American and Caribbean sources — see his chapter "'An Other Tongue': Linguistic Maps, Literary geographies, Cultural Landscapes" (Mignolo 217–49).

5. "Place of passage" is the literal translation from the original "*lugar de passagem*," (Agualusa, *O Vendedor* 191) which Daniel Hahn translated as "one of those in-between places."

and cosmopolitan. It remains as traces of a language appropriated by and incorporated into Portuguese: a *língua mestiça* (*mestiça* language).[6]

This *mestiça* character is undoubtedly Agualusa's most notorious trade. The writer's conception of *mestiçagem* evokes the racial mixture specific to Portuguese colonial experience, but also the condition of living amidst several cultural systems. David Brookshaw characterises the literary space that Agualusa inhabits as a "borderland":[7]

> [P]erhaps what appeals to Agualusa in these mixed [Creole] societies is the interstitial space they occupy, blurring borderlines, creating ambiguities and contradictions (and sometimes self-contradictions), which suggests that they are in continual gestation, or better, possess an endless capacity for re-invention. (Brookshaw, *Voices* 20)

Following from here one could argue for a need to surpass "the border" as a metaphor and interpretative tool to analyse Agualusa's postcolonial aesthetics and ethics. Brookshaw himself refers to Bill Ashcroft's conception of the "true post-colonial transformation," which must "break down the borderline [between self and other], and forge a path towards 'horizontality'": "It is in horizontality that the true force of transformation becomes realised, for whereas the boundary is about restrictions, history, the regulation of imperial space, the horizon is about extension, possibility, fulfilment, the imagining of a

6. *Mestiça* is the mixed race woman who is born out of the—as a rule violent—"sexual encounter" between a European white settler and a non-white woman. *Mestiçagem* (in Spanish *Mestizaje*) is a gendered and racialised term synonymous with the process of mixing. According to Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal: "*Mestizaje*, the process of interracial and/or intercultural mixing, is a foundational theme in the Americas, particularly in those areas colonised by the Spanish and the Portuguese" (257). For a concise account on the significance of *mestiçagem* in Latin America and its particular culturalist fashion in Brazil, see Martínez-Echazábal (257–65). In this article I will examine the significance of *mestiçagem* as one of the central metaphors attached to the Portuguese language in the imagined *Lusofonia*.

7. This concept is borrowed from Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In fact, Black, Chicana, and Third World feminism are foundational to the field of Border Studies, alongside anticolonial critique and postcolonial studies, which harbour in the constructed aspect of borders and their (political) implications.

post-colonial space" (qtd. in *Voices* 4). Brookshaw terms this location a "borderland" that works as a frontier territory without borders, without containment. Horizontality is the borderland's possibility for emancipation from the (colonial) territorial frame.

Chameleons acts this implosion of frontiers and consequent displacement in a radical fashion, as it borrows from and plays with magical realism. It opens with a citation from the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges: "If I were to be born again, I'd like to be something completely different. I'd like to be Norwegian. Or Persian, perhaps. Not Uruguayan, though—that'd feel too much like just moving down the street…" Here the self is determined by the place. There is however the possibility of constructing representations of the self upon a chosen/fictional locality. The novel's opening sentence accompanies this statement. Eulálio, Borges reincarnated as a gecko, tells: "I was born in this house, and grew up here. I've never left" (3). The primary source of identity is here the home, the paradigmatic place that accompanies us along our lives. Yet this place will be built along the novel not only as subject to construction and playful manipulation but also as a moving entity. There is no centre to a place that is movement. There is no certainty in an identity built upon an invented place.

In this sense, Agualusa conceives a language that challenges borders. Its horizontality qualifies it as a home that is changing and moving. It is therefore natural that language does not manifest a supposed origin, but one's voyage. Félix Ventura, for instance, cannot fixate the identity of "the foreigner" through his speech: "I couldn't place his accent. He spoke softly, with a mix of different pronunciations, a faint Slavic roughness, tempered by the honeyed softness of the Portuguese from Brazil" (16).

The *Luso-tropical* Language

The senses of sound, smell, and taste, here associated with the Portuguese language, play an important role in Agualusa's ambiance and characters. This is a distinctive aspect that places the novel in dialogue with *Luso-tropicalismo*.

This doctrine, fashioned by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre in the 1930s, proposed recovering the value of the African and Amerindian contribution in the constitution of Brazilian society and culture (see Freyre, *Casa Grande*), positioning it against the hegemonic whiteness of the Brazilian national metanarrative. Instead, *Luso-tropicalismo* posited the "malleability and adaptability" of the Portuguese to the "tropics" in their imperial enterprise, and their specific type of "benign colonisation" based on their "inclination to racial intermixing." The doctrine was appropriated by the Portuguese dictatorship in the 1940s and 1950s, serving as a justification to the maintenance of its colonies in Africa (Castelo 166). In that period, in close ties with the Portuguese "New State," Freyre widened the scope of his argument to characterise all societies colonised by Portugal (see Freyre, *Um Brasileiro*). *Luso-tropicalismo* had great influence in Brazil, Portugal, and the newly independent African colonies, despite of its critiques, and it remains in the core of the current *Lusofonia*.

Following Freyre, it is through the senses evoked by the experiences of entanglement between the Portuguese and their colonial subjects in the tropical landscape that a "true life" is manifested. Correspondingly, *Luso-tropicalismo* attached aesthetic claims to the Portuguese language, which was transformed through this contact:

> A few words, hard or bitter even today when pronounced by the Portuguese, were softened in Brazil by influence of the African mouth; the African mouth coupled with the weather—another corrupter of European languages, through the boiling process they have experienced in tropical and subtropical America. (Freyre, *Casa Grande* 387)

Omar Ribeiro Thomaz contends that Freyre introduces the reader to a "deeply sensorial universe, populated by smells, sounds, tastes, and images that inevitably evoke the reader's memory; memory not of individual experience, but that which concerns the 'myth'" (*Ecos* 54). These trades echo in Agualusa's writing. David Brookshaw denotes the continuities of the doctrine in the writer's other novel *The Year Zumbi Took Rio*: "It is perhaps natural that Agualusa, whose fiction has sought

to evoke the historic and cultural links between Portugal, Africa, and Brazil, should ultimately see the old Luso-Tropicalist tradition of superficially harmonious race relations through miscegenation as a positive legacy" ("Race Relations" 167). Yet, Brookshaw argues that the same novel champions a fierce critique of racial inequalities in Brazil, the accompanying colour prejudice and the hypocritical discourse that hides racism. The writer could then be using *Luso-tropicalismo* in order to surpass it, seeking its horizon.

In doing that, Agualusa would be attempting to deconstruct the very categories that serve as a pillar to the conception of a Luso-centric space. Yet, does he succeed? Here Brookshaw touches on the core question of Agualusa's writing:

> It may well be that Agualusa's hidden nostalgia for the creole worlds that issued from the Portuguese imperial encounter can be attributed to their being anti-essentialist, pragmatic, and *chameleon* in both their cultural expression and in their cultural and political affinities. […] But here, it is appropriate to distinguish between hybridity as a creative force, in the words of Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "a destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverses the current, subverts the centre" (56), and the assimilationist model enshrined in Luso-Tropicalism and which served the purposes of Portuguese colonialism even as this was dying on its feet. ("Race Relations" 170, emphasis mine)

The critical aspect of this interpretation is revealing creolisation and hybridity as forces that dispute the authority of the centre and act its very transformation. This is the core of the promise of the borders. Yet this promise carries particular and ambiguous meanings in the history of Afro-Luso-Brazilian entanglement. The idea of Portuguese colonial exceptionalism took various shapes in the process of finding a foundation to the Portuguese "spirit of conquest" and its "civilising mission." This mythology lives on in the postcolonial imaginary. Maria Canelo contends that Portuguese modernism, which emerged at the time when African colonies became a core element in defining Portuguese national identity, has shaped a "Portuguese border identity." Through portraying Portugal

as a space of encounters with a variety of "others," national identity was given universal appeal with an appearance of cosmopolitanism. Yet the Portuguese, supposedly adaptable and creative, absorbed and erased such others, restating their cultural superiority (Canelo 89–108). These very trends are found in what Thomaz termed "*Luso-tropical* eschatology ("Tigres" 60)."[8]

Vale de Almeida contended that any argument on miscegenation, hybridity, or creolisation call for an approach devoid of naiveté. These terms, he posits, constitute what became a category of commonality in the processes of shaping national identities in the Portuguese postcolonial field. They are, however, mostly used to denote the process of social whitening and cultural Europeanisation (Almeida, *Crioulização*).

The *mulata* (mulatta) is an outstanding element that confirms a *Luso-tropical* continuity in Agualusa's literature.[9] She is the synthesis of Freyre's new civilisation, born out of the desire of the Portuguese man toward "tropical women." She is the organic and fraternal link between coloniser and colonised. In *Chameleons* it is Ângela Lúcia that incorporates this mixed coloured synthesis. Her sensuality is presented through the colours of her skin: "Ângela Lúcia is a young woman, with dark skin and fine features, black braids falling loose on her shoulders" (49); "Ângela Lúcia's skin shone. Her shirt, clinging to her breasts" (152).

It is then by way of the "vertigo of the primacy of affections and senses" (Almeida, *Gabriela (R)* 3), that Agualusa shapes the sensual *mulata*. She embodies the tension between the maintenance of the system of slavery and white settler's supremacy that *created* her, and the utopia of a civilisation project. For this, Vale de Almeida argues that the "social figure of the mulatta" is "one booby-trapped field" (*Gabriela (R)* 3).

8. Analogously, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (23–85) has developed an influential analysis on Portuguese colonialism, stating the subaltern position and role of Portugal as semiperipheral empire. The sociologist characterised the former coloniser as hybrid. This theory has been criticised for its element of continuity with that Portuguese colonial exceptionalism, and with the resilient heritage of Luso-tropicalism, following its trajectory from a valorisation of "the Black" towards a validation of Portuguese colonisation (Arenas).

9. The term *mulata* refers to the mixed-race woman (*mestiça*), however with an explicit indication of her skin colour, which is a marker of a racialised identity.

Agualusa places his literature in this mined terrain. His utopia, given body and colour, is a commodity in a cultural market that consumes it in a process of feeding the exceptionalist quality of the postcolonial centre. The writer rescues the *Luso-tropical* trademark of *mestiçagem*, walking a fine line between the reaffirmation of a Portuguese hegemonic representation and its transgression.

The language, *mulata* as well, manifests an allegedly all-encompassing compatibility. Asked about his conception of *Lusofonia*, Agualusa responds: "It's something that goes beyond language. It includes many other references that have to do with ways of feeling the world, with the common history of all countries who speak Portuguese or where Portuguese is spoken" (qtd. in Vitória 44). Here again the writer enters *Luso-tropical* terrain. It is the very commonality of feeling and the absence of conflict between different subjects in unbalanced relations — violently established through racist and patriarchal colonisation, capitalism, and globalisation — that called much criticism to the idea of a "shared space of the Portuguese language." Even if this space is subverted in its Lusitanian authority, the affirmation of such a commonality around a Portuguese centre perpetuates the core of Portuguese exceptionality.

Agualusa ends *Chameleons* with Félix Ventura affirming himself to be an animist, for whom the soul flows like water. Analogously, language is form, the bottle; it is not the self, not the moving soul. It enables rescuing images in order to create dreams. *Chameleons* closes: "Yes, I've made a dream" (180).

The making of a dream is a metaphor to one's engagement in building happiness. Agualusa reveals the emancipating power of language beyond the service of political ideology. It has the force to produce stories crafted upon unsettled and ambivalent material, namely identities in movement made out of memories in metamorphosis. This is the language of the other, the "stranger within ourselves," that is not settled in the fixed localities of national identity and belonging. This internalised alterity is turned into a force of liberation for the one conscious of her/his own ambiguity and multiplicity. She/He is Julia Kristeva's "happy cosmopolitan":

> One who is a happy cosmopolitan shelters a shattered origin in the night of his wandering. It irradiates his memories that are made up of ambivalences and divided values. That whirlwind translates into shrill laughter. It dries up at once the tears of exile and, exile following exile, without any stability, transmutes into games what for some is a misfortune and for others an untouchable void. Such a strangeness is undoubtedly an art of living for the happy few or for artists. And for others? I am thinking of the moment when we succeeded in viewing ourselves as unessential, simple passers by, retaining of the past only the game... A strange way of being happy, or feeling imponderable, ethereal, so light in weight that it would take us so little to make us fly away... (Kristeva 38)

The Eating Language

This accomplished cosmopolitanism corresponds to the "Creole" condition for Agualusa: "[I am] a Creole in this cultural sense that doesn't have to do with races. It is a man of the world, of Modernity, someone capable of feeling at home in all cities and all cultures he traverses" (qtd. in Jornal Angolense).

Yet the internalisation of alterity that gave birth to this Creole is perverse, as it turns his marginal identity invisible. Agualusa is presenting a libertarian identity while hiding the other. Vale de Almeida argues that the discourse of creolisation turned the black African into a ghost that diluted himself in the racial mixture (*Crioulização* 16). In *Chameleons* it is Félix Ventura that incorporates the ghost of race. The writer shaped this identity as a metaphor to the constructed character of national and racial authenticity. In this operation he gives the protagonist role to the otherwise marginal Angolan albino. Yet, concomitantly, he does away with race, which is a critical element in the constitution of a marginal identity in the Portuguese postcolonial geographies.[10]

Agualusa's fluid *mestiçagem* leans toward the trademark of Portuguese exceptionalistic colonialism. In an assimilationist fashion, it hides the black African and her/his marginal position. Hereby the

writer is erasing the borders in an attempt to overcome them. In a Brazilian interview Agualusa affirms: "African peoples are, in general, very open to the world and to new things and, like the Brazilians, capable of devouring everything, to transform and integrate all other cultures" (qtd. in Kassab). The writer borrows from Brazilian anthropophagic modernism, which countered the supremacy of Western models. He subverts the hegemonic power relation, offering instead an active cannibalistic native, absorbing from the West and making its own original culture. The Portuguese language that is Brazilian and "Creole" carries the forces of appropriation, incorporation, and transformation. It is a voracious language that devours other cultures, to regurgitate them into a different, livelier version of itself. This eating language supposedly loses its centre along the meal: every meal, a new gestation.

Conclusion

According to Ribeiro the richness of the metaphorical border is due to its very arbitrariness of meaning, which can be used to fixate and delimit and/or to liberate from boundaries, depending on the symbolic appropriation made (469). A fundamental aspect of critical reflection in the Portuguese postcolonial field is to call attention to the particular metaphorical appropriations of the border. The richly conceived language that emerges out of Agualusa's text is both *fronteira*-border or *garrafa*; and *fronteira*-frontier or *água*.[11]

The libertarian promise of this text lends it to be characterised as a borderland, fluid as water, emancipated from the fixed territorial frame

10. Race is a contested category, which served both the empire and the struggles for the affirmation of colonial subjects. I refer to race as an element in a socially constructed narrative of identity. This narrative has a critical role in establishing and therefore also in fighting social, economical, and cultural positions in the context of relationships permeated by unbalanced power. It is paramount to address race within the changing dynamics of the establishment of national identities and the access to citizenship. I here have recourse to Lilia Schwarcz: "The term 'race', before appearing as a closed fixed and natural concept, is understood as an object of knowledge, whose meaning is constantly being renegotiated and experienced in a specific historical context [...]" (17).

11. The terms "fronteira-border" and "fronteira-frontier" are borrowed from Rui Cunha Martins quoted in Fonseca (43).

and the official history of the Portuguese nation and empire. Agualusa's text offers the possibility of overcoming colonial divisions and seeking a utopia through horizontality. Ribeiro refers to one amongst the several meanings given to the horizon as theme, which supports comprehending this promise. Here the border appears to delimit a line between the duty of forgetting the past and the burden it imposes in the present. The horizon is then a condition for building a future (Ribeiro 463–88). This is a horizon, or frontier, that stands for liberation from the confines of boundaries. It is, however, dependent on a notion of delimitation. Ribeiro enlightens this aspect of containment in the border metaphor, reflecting on the frame as border. The frame acts as a closure to the exterior and a concentration in the interior. This process of demarcation sheds light on the structuring element of the borders, which enables their very transgression (Ribeiro 463–88). It follows that only through the possibility of visualising the other and that which separates us, can a relationship other than domination or exploitation be established. It must necessarily be a relationship that does not act the assimilation of the other or her obliteration. Agualusa's conception of the Portuguese language enables a reflection on the Portuguese empire and its reminiscences in the transnational space. It proposes a horizon (water, *água*), a civilisation utopia that faces the future. It also offers incursion into a given frame (bottle, *garrafa*): the Portuguese language as border trespassed by its postcolonial others.

The appropriation of the border metaphor requires contextualising and historicising it in the spaces of articulation where it emerges. This analysis avoids the naiveté that has characterised both border studies and postcolonial theory; it demands a departure from the utopian aspect of the border (Fonseca 41–61; Ribeiro 463–88). This entails narrating the asymmetries that cut across postcolonial encounters, which delimit the universe of possible negotiations, leaving a mark in the meanings produced.

Agualusa's narrative is ambiguous. Its conservative disposition is found in the strong association with a Portuguese postcolonial "location." Establishing a dialogue with the tradition of Portuguese exceptionalist narratives, the conception on the Portuguese language that emerges here gives continuity to the Portuguese imperial

trademark. Its creolisation feeds the benevolent centre that tolerates African incursion. The hybridity born out of this place of encounters manifests the Portuguese making of a universal civilisation. These brand marks refer back to Brazil as a model of Lusitanian making that would be exported to Africa. Agualusa's language-conception appropriates the material of this *Luso-tropical* narrative, using it as a tool to shape the narrative into an emancipatory text. However, the text also re-enforces the Lusitanian matrix of this hybrid model. Therein, the "diluting appetence of the border" erases Africa.[12]

Its transgressive force, on the other hand, is found in the demise of the narrative of modernity. Hereby language loses its universal meaning: in itself it is only form. It is conceived as a place of passage whose value is found in its hinting to the localities it has traversed. Furthermore, it reveals the artificial and subjective character of national and individual identities, subverting the centre. Here language acts as a critical instrument in deconstructing the authoritative text it inhabits from an insider's perspective. This language is a home without nationalities, without the primacy of origin and the authority of property. It is an orphaned Portuguese language in continuous transformation. In this sense Agualusa confronted what Walter Mignolo has coined the "territorial logic" that coupled language to the empire (371).

Language is a powerful instrument in the construction of fantasies and in the evocation of ghosts. Agualusa resorts to the "artifactuality" of the word to build images that accompany one's life and guide one's living. Here another critical element in the writer's literature emerges, that is arguing language as a manifestation of ideology. He is revealing the constructed character of narratives at a time of rewriting Angola's national history after socialism, upon the negotiation of a violent memory of both the struggle for national liberation and the following civil war.

The dramatic height of *Chameleons* turns around the revelation of the actual story whereby all central characters are entangled. The "old tramp" Edmundo Barata dos Reis enters the novel smoothly, amusing all with his tales of the past, but he soon brings havoc. José Buchmann

12. Expression borrowed from Rui Cunha Martins quoted in Fonseca (43).

recognises dos Reis as the "ex-agent of State Security" who tortured Buchmann, himself the political dissident Pedro Gouveia in his past life. Dos Reis also killed Gouveia's wife and stood beside his companion agent that maimed his baby daughter, who turns out to be Ângela Lúcia. Out of the tale of the torturer burning a cigarette into the flesh of the just born baby girl, emerges the ghostly image that has haunted his accomplice: "Even today when I lie down to sleep, the smell is still there, the sound of the child crying…" (159). This image will haunt all, including Eduardo Agualusa's readers.

Chameleons' characters are escaping their haunting pasts for one or other reason. Ventura's clients seek to erase their history in order to buy acceptance into the new political regime and prestige, according to the new norms of neoliberal Angola. Hereby this novel fits into the African postcolonial literature that makes recourse to fantasy as an inquiry into the memory of its history, and as a reminder of the coping strategies needed to face its brutality, past, and present.

Simultaneously, in *Chameleons*, Agualusa is calling one to write her own story, and take on the risk that is experiencing life through the senses that language can so skilfully evoke. The writer is appealing to the emancipatory potency of the border that is realised when the subaltern appropriates narrative elements that render her marginal, and manipulates them as to escape this very condition. In the novel it is Ângela Lúcia who claims such agency, taking vengeance on Edmundo Barata dos Reis and leaving the country. Tracing her voyage through the postcards she sends, Félix Ventura abandons the safe confines of his house, of his craft of storyteller and past maker, and of the conversations with the gecko Eulálio, dead by now. Ventura finally "ventures" himself to Ângela Lúcia's encounter, in Rio de Janeiro.

Altogether, reading Agualusa involves sharing the common home of *Lusofonia* from its different localities within, and being complicit with a utopia. His accomplice reader, engaged in the writing of her own dream, incorporates a cosmopolitanism that is here synonymous with a *Creole* condition. It is ethereal and liberating. Her language is Agualusa's language of the senses, a tool in the construction of tales, the authority of which he is questioning, the centre of which he is invading. Her language is a place of passage, seeking its horizon through *mestiçagem*.

This is an appealing project that carries its own ghost in a *Luso-tropical* utopia. While seeking new horizons, it reinforces the current Luso-centric hegemonic representation. The language, unessential, mixed, and ethereal, hides its cannibalistic force. Along Eduardo Agualusa's literary journey, the Portuguese language dilutes Africa. It gets bottled and labelled "*Brasil*."

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