Rewriting the past in O Vendedor de Passados (2004) and Teoria Geral do Esquecimento (2012)

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Abstract:

The novels Teoria Geral do Esquecimento (2012) and O Vendedor de Passados (2004) by José Eduardo Agualusa feature characters who, on opposite sides of history (a colonist and a colonized), reconstruct and reposition their identities in the tumultuous social and political context after the independence and the end of the civil war in Angola, between the 1970s and the beginning of the 21st century.

The problematic relationship of the characters with their memories is structured from, and around, concrete places such as Ventura's house and Ludovica's apartment in the "Invejados" (the envied) building, which becomes the ultimate location vis-à-vis the post-colonial reality. Life within these places is regulated and circumscribed by political and social phenomena linked to colonialism's violence and its repercussions. Ludovica's and Ventura's efforts to isolate and barricade themselves from the outside world, generates a tension between the space they inhabit and the world that surrounds them.

Throughout the action, the limits of these houses are dissolved and invaded by the radical transformations that from the outside interfere with the inside, reorganizing and intervening in the characters' awareness of their identities and memories, forcing the recognition of their biographies and therefore a historical repositioning. This process takes place through the infiltration and contamination between colonial history, the civil war that followed, and the characters' biographies.My reading of these two novels focuses on how the tension between colonial reminiscences and the new postcolonial narratives are materialized in the biog-

raphies of the protagonists. From the reclusion of their houses the protagonists rewrite the past in their walls, through their interaction with the visitors, the intruders, their neighbors, the books, the sounds of the radio that infiltrate the structures of the houses and transform their interior landscape and the events that they can watch through their windows.

The novels O Vendedor de Passados[1] (2004) and Teoria Geral do Esquecimento[2] (2012) by José Eduardo Agualusa feature characters who, on opposite sides of history (a colonist and a colonized) reconstruct and reposition their identities in the tumultuous social and political context after independence and the end of the civil war in Angola, between the 1970s and the beginning of the 21st century.

The characters' problematic relationship with their memories is structured from, and around the protagonist houses. Life within these places is regulated and circumscribed by political and social phenomena linked to the violence of colonialism and its repercussions. Ventura's and Ludovica's (the main characters) efforts to isolate and barricade themselves from the outside world generate a tension between the space they inhabit and the world that surrounds them.

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[1] My translation of the title to English: *The Seller of Pasts.*
[2] My translation of the title to English: General Theory of Oblivion

the characters' awareness of their identities and memories, forcing them to acknowledge their biographies, which leads them to a historical repositioning. This process takes place through the infiltration and contamination between colonial history, the civil war that followed and the characters' biographies.

The tension between the colonial reminiscences and the new postcolonial narratives is materialized in the biographies of the characters: they reenact the postcolonial problematics of cultural memory in their countries, by rewriting the past as a way of (dis)enabling the nationalist, post-independence Angolan narratives.

O Vendedor de Passados (2004) and Teoria Geral do Esquecimento (2012)

In O Vendedor de Passados[1] (The Seller of Pasts in its translation into English), Félix Ventura, an albino, is a forger or genealogist of pasts, who recreates biographies for clients dissatisfied with their real past in post-civil war Luanda. His house, which is occupied by a gecko, Eulálio, the novel's homodiegetic narrator, is visited by ministers, journalists and businessmen who seek to buy names and biographies more adjusted to the new Angolan political conjuncture, erasing the traces of less glorious pasts.

The novel VDP is divided into 32 chapters, separated between linear time of action and dreams. The voice of narration corresponds to Eulálio, with the exception of Buchaman's letter to Felix Ventura and the diary entry in which Ventura announces and informs the reader of Eulálio's death. This entry corresponds to the end of the novel. Since the novel refers to the end of the civil war 2002 and the diary entry is dated 2004, the reader assumes that this is the time in which the action takes place.

In Teoria Geral do Esquecimento[2] (General Theory of Oblivion in its translation into English), on the eve of Angola's indepen-

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[1] From now onwards it will be referred to by the novel's initials VDP.
[2] From now onwards it will be referred to by the novel's initials TGE.

dence, Ludovica is confronted with the unusual disappearance of her sister and brother-in-law who leave her alone in the city of Luanda, where events are increasingly violent. This is followed by an attempted robbery at her house that ends with Ludovica firing a gun, killing one of the assailants. Ludo buries him on the terrace and builds a wall that separates her from the building she lives in and permanently cuts her off from the rest of the world. The novel is narrated by a heterodiegetic narrator, who is said to have gained access to Ludovica's diaries through Sabalu, a secondary character.

The novel TGE has 36 chapters, and the voice of narration is guided by entries from Ludo's diary, by letters and by two poems. This novel ends with a diary entry written by the main character. Because it is dated 2012, it makes it understood that the diegesis takes place between Angola's independence in 1974 and 2012. As with the death of Eulálio, the gecko, so the death of Ghost (Ludovica's dog) causes the house to be opened to the world. Two chapters after Ghost's death, Sabalu, like a phantom itself, begins to show signs of his presence in the house.

The house is the central place of action in both novels and the main characters are isolated in the space of the house from the outside world: inVDP the narrator is a gecko limited to the walls of the house he inhabits and, consequently, this is the space that is accessible to the reader; in TGE, Ludovica blocks the exit from her apartment to the building, barring all access from her house to the building, thus detaching the house from the rest of the diegesis.

The narrators' isolation – both Ludovica's efforts to barricade herself in and the fact that the narrator Eulálio is restricted to the house – causes a tension between the space that the characters (and the reader through them) inhabit and the world that surrounds them. As a centripetal force of convergence and divergence of action, the house of the protagonists is the place with which all the characters in the novels have a connection – they enter the house, pass near it, are in its surroundings, or relate to characters whose fate is directly linked to these houses. It is also in the houses of

Ventura in one novel and Ludovica in the other that the action of the two novels reaches its climax.

In both novels, the characters develop a problematic relationship with the memory of the colonial past and the civil war in Angola. This memory is conditioned by the trauma of the colonial and civil war: by the impossibility of achieving justice, of overcoming, forgiving, and forgetting the crimes committed, not only during the colonial period, but also in the post-independence period. In post-independence and post-civil war Angola, as represented in the two novels, the past is mediated by forgetting and by the adulterations of individual, collective, and institutional memories and narratives about the traumatic events. The falsifications of the past, the active and passive forgetting, convey the problematic of the traumatic memory of the war that marked decades of the second half of the twentieth century in Angola.

Memory

Both novels announce memory as a central theme in their titles. In the title The Seller of Pasts, the noun "seller" shows the past as a tradable good, as if, like a false passport or identity card, it was possible to invent and trade a biography, a family history, or a genealogy that would provide a new identity and memories to whoever resorts to a dealer in pasts. General Theory of Forgetting similarly refers to the past but emphasizing oblivion. The designation "General Theory" proposes a kind of comprehensive essay on the various forms of forgetting, from the most benevolent and palliative to the most pernicious coercions to forget, such as the erasure of a culture, for example, in the case of colonial invasion and domination, or, also, institutional reformulations, and is a form of appeasement of past traumas.

This dynamic between remembering and forgetting is referred to by Aleida Assmann, who highlights forgetting as a fundamental element of the constitution of memory – memory, in an intrinsic

way, will always imply a selection of the past and, therefore, an inevitable forgetting of part of the events (Assmann, 2008, p. 97-98).

In these novels, the falsifications of the past and the characters' memories are constituted as forms of individual ruptures with the prevailing narratives about events, with external reality, and with cultural memory (Erll, 2008, p. 2), (Assmann, 2008, p. 97) and (Assmann, 2008, p. 110-12):

> Cultural memory is a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: they may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. External objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory. (…) On the social level, with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not "have" a memory tend to "make" themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. This is what we call cultural memory (A. Assmann). In order to be able to be reembodied in the sequence of generations, cultural memory, unlike communicative memory, exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodiment (Assmann, 2008, p. 110-11).

In The Seller of Pasts, the action progresses from seclusion, amnesia, and forgetfulness to becoming aware of the past, overcoming the traumas, pacifying the memories, the latter corresponds to the period when the house opens. One of Ventura's clients, Gouveia returns to Luanda to take revenge for the crimes of which his wife and daughter were victims at the hands of the torturer Edmundo Barata dos Reis, of the political police. To do so, he uses the services of Felix Ventura and assumes the new identity of José Buchmann.

Gouveia and his daughter Angela Lucia meet again at Felix Ventura's house when the villain Edmundo Barata dos Reis bursts into Ventura's house and they both confront the torturer with his past:

> "I hear Edmundo Barata dos Reis' voice, squeaking, distressed, and only then do I see him. He is leaning against the wall, standing, his arms down. His shirt glows red over his thin chest. The edge of the scythe, the gold of the hammer, sparkle, an instant. Then they dim.
> – That, little girl, fell from hell! From the past! There where the excommunicated come out...
> José Buchmann is trapped between Angela, in front of him, and Felix, who holds his arms behind him. His face is glued to his wife's. He cries out in a rage.
> He suddenly looks like a colossus. The veins in his neck swell and pulsate, they bulge in his forehead:
> – Exactly, I fell from the past! And who am I? Tell them who I am!...
> He suddenly breaks free in a fierce thrust, knocking Angela to the ground. He leaps on Edmund, grabs him by the neck with his left hand, and forces him to kneel at his feet. He buries the barrel of the pistol in his neck:
> – Tell them who I am!" (Agualusa 2004, 202).[1]

In General Theory of Oblivion the plot unfolds around Ludovica's confinement and tends towards the opening of the house and the consequent pacification of traumatic memories through forgetting, overcoming and accepting the crimes committed. As in The Seller of Pasts, in General Theory of Oblivion the climax takes place when the villain Magno Moreira Monte (a police who perpetrated numerous crimes) is confronted by his victims at the door of Ludo's house. At that moment, all the characters in the novel whose fate is intertwined with Ludovica's and with her Building

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[1] All quotations from both novels are my translation to English from the original in Portuguese.

converge at the door of her apartment, upon which Magno Moreira Monte is confronted with his past as a torturer:

> I am remembering the gentleman. You woke me up the night Simon-Pierre disappeared. The idea was to make me disappear – right?
> By now all eyes were on the former agent police officer. Nasser Evangelista let go of Baiacu and advanced towards Monte, angrily, knife in hand: "I remember you too, and they are not happy memories. Monte, seeing himself surrounded by Jeremiah, Antonio, Little Soba, Daniel Benchimol and Nasser Evangelista, began to retreat toward the stairs: Calm, calm, what has passed, has passed. We are all Angolans. Nasser Evangelista did not hear him. He was listening to his own screams, a quarter of a century earlier, in a narrow cell, smelling of shit and piss. He heard the screams of a woman he never saw, coming from an identical darkness. Screams and the barking of dogs. Behind him everything was screaming. Everything was barking. He took two steps forward and pushed the blade against Monte's chest. He was surprised to find no resistance. He repeated the gesture again and again. The detective staggered, very pale, and brought his hands to his shirt. He saw no blood. His clothes were intact. Jeremiah grabbed Nasser by the shoulders and pulled him to himself. Daniel snatched the knife from his hand: It's a fake. Thank God, it's a circus knife.
> So it was. The knife had a hollow handle, with a spring, into which the blade slid, hiding itself, whenever pressed.
> Daniel struck himself, on the chest and neck, to show the others the falseness of the weapon. Then he jumped on top of Jeremiah. He stabbed Nasser. He laughed loudly, in wide, hysterical laughter, which the others followed. Ludo was also laughing, clutching Sabalu, tears streaming from her eyes (Agualusa, 2012, p. 192-93).

In the transcribed excerpts from the two novels, it is possible to analyze the way in which they equate the tension between remembering and forgetting in the Angolan historical context in the transition from colonial occupation to independence and subsequent civil war. The need to reiterate national unity is highlighted, as Monte claims: "we are all Angolans". On the one hand, there are the victims of the various crimes perpetrated by both the colonial power and the political forces of independent Angola; on the other, the colonists and the perpetrators of war and political crimes. On one side of the barricade are those who seek to overcome and avenge the past; on the other, those who seek to be forgotten and to overcome the past through new narratives.

The importance of forgetting in the pacification of historical memory, especially in the cases of traumatic pasts of a people, as the upcoming excerpt shows, is compared to the Kubango River on the Angolan side, Okavango on the Namibian side. The river is referred to as a reminder that once the confrontation with the past and the necessary settling of scores has passed, there is also such a need for those who were victims of violence to overcome and forget, but also the fear of those who perpetrated the crimes that they will never be forgotten:

> Only Monte remained serious. He stretched his shirt, straightened his back, went downstairs. Outside, the air was scalding. A dry wind shook the trees. The detective was breathing hard. His chest hurt, not where Nasser had hit the fictitious stabs, but inside, in some secret place he couldn't put a name to. He wiped his eyes. He took his sunglasses from his pants pocket and put them on his face. The image of a canoe floating in the Okavango Delta came to his mind for no apparent reason.
> The Kubango is called the Okavango when it crosses the border with Namibia. Being a large river, it does not fulfill the common destiny of its peers: it does not flow into the sea. It opens its strong arms and dies in the middle of the

desert. It is a sublime, generous death that fills the sands of the Kalahari with green and life. Monte had spent the 30th anniversary of his marriage in the Okavango Delta, in an ecological lodge – a gift from his children. They had been fortunate days, he and Maria Clara, hunting beetles and butterflies, reading, canoeing.

Some people suffer from the fear of being forgotten. This pathology is called atazagoraphobia. With him it was the opposite: he lived in terror that he would never be forgotten. There, in the Okavango Delta, he felt forgotten. He had been happy" (Agualusa, 2012, p. 193-94).

The river is also associated with time, particularly as a form of manifestation of the past, in VDP. The song that the gecko knows by heart and which is "the soundtrack of twilight" in the house (Agualusa 2004, 14) shows how the experience of time inside the house is intrinsically linked to the past and how it is remembered:

> Nothing passes, nothing expires/ The past is/ a river that sleeps/ and memory a lie/multiple. The waters of the river sleep/ and in my lap the days sleep/ sleep/ the sorrows/ the agonies sleep,/sleep. Nothing passes, nothing expires/ The past is/ a sleeping river/ it seems dead, it barely breathes/ wake it up and it will jump/ in an outcry (Agualusa, 2004, p. 14).

On the other hand, the house is associated with a boat moving on a river, which leads the characters in their journey to the past:

> I often think of this house as a boat. An old steamship cutting its way through the heavy mud of a river. The immense forest. The night all around. (...) He pointed in a vague gesture to the vague books: "It's full of voices, my boat" (Agualusa, 2004, p. 39).

InVDP characters re-write their narrative by embodying the new biographies they request of Ventura: José Buchmann, for example, begins to believe that the story sold to him by Ventura is real and begins to adopt behavior, ways of being and speaking that are characteristic of the invented character, making Gouveia disappear, contaminated by Buchmann:

> I've been studying José Buchmann for weeks now. I observe him changing. He is not the same man who entered this house six, seven months ago. Something, of the same powerful nature of metamorphosis, has been operating in his inner self. It is perhaps, as in chrysalis, the secret stirring of enzymes dissolving organs. You may argue that we are all constantly changing. Yes, I too am not the same as yesterday. The only thing in me that doesn't change is my past: the memory of my human past. The past is usually stable, it is always there, beautiful or terrible, and it will stay there forever.
> (I believed this before I met Felix Ventura).
> (...) I am referring to more subtle changes. First of all he is changing his accent. He has lost, is losing, that Slavic-Brazilian accent, half sweet, half sibilant, which at first disconcerted me so much. He now uses a Luandan rhythm, matching the printed silk shirts and sports shoes he is now wearing. I also find him more expansive. Laughing, he is already Angolan. He has also lost his mustache. He has become younger. He showed up at our house tonight, after almost a week of absence, and as soon as the albino opened the door for him, he went off:
> – I was in Chibia!
> He came in feverish. He sat down on the majestic wicker throne that the albino's great-grandfather brought from Brazil. He crossed his legs, uncrossed them. He asked for a whiskey. My friend poured it, bored. Good Lord, what was he doing in Chibia?
> – I went to visit my father's grave (Agualusa, 2004, p. 75-76).

In General Theory of Forgetting the intervention in memory is made by the observers' narratives about inexplicable events: the barking of Ludovica's dog, which nobody sees, is quickly attributed to a ghost; the case of the missing journalist that the street children think they saw being swallowed by the earth because the only trace left was a hat on the ground; the disappearance of the chickens stolen by Ludovica, an event that will be attributed to Kianda (a local deity) by her neighbors:

> Thieves! thieves!
> Then, having verified the impossibility that someone had climbed the smooth walls to reach the balcony and steal the chickens, the accusations turned into a terrified wail:
> Spell... Spell...
> And soon after into a certainty:
> Kianda... The Kianda... (Agualusa, 2012, p. 49-51).

Furthermore, Ludo was a Portuguese settler. By committing a homicide, she reenacts the crime of the colonial occupier. By covering up the crime, hiding it and all evidence, building a wall that separates her from the world and submerging herself in the depths of silence, this character resembles the problematic silence regarding the crimes committed by Portugal during the colonial occupation and the civil war and its subsequent participation in the persecutions that took place in the post-independence civil war.

The lies about the past, the fictions sold by Ventura to attribute new biographies and pasts to his clients, such as the case of José Buchmann (Gouveia), constitute another way of re-writing the past. These forgeries cause a disturbance in the pacified and domesticated versions of the official narrative. Examples of this are the Minister of independent Angola who elects a hero of the colonial war as his forged ancestor, and the President, whose face has been altered and his identity stolen, seeking a new biography without glory:

– All the stories are connected. In the end it all connects. Sigh: – But only a few, very few, very crazy people are capable of understanding this. Anyway, what I want is for you to get me the opposite of what they usually hire you for. I want you to give me a humble background. A lackluster name. An obscure and irrefutable genealogy. There must be rich guys with no family and no glory, right? I'd like to be one of them... (Agualusa, 2004, p. 213).

Memory and the postcolonial nation

In both novels there is a confrontation between the memory of Angola's recent history and the biographical memories of the characters. This confrontation presents itself as a form of intervention and rupture with the new narratives that aim at the formation of a unity and national identity, where the characters, appealing to calm and consensus, often repeat now "we are all Angolans" (Agualusa, 2012, p. 192). Thus, also in these two novels the negotiation between the individual and biographical memory of the characters and the national narratives about identity and historical version of the past should be read in the light of Astrid Erll's words: "The notion of cultural memory has quite successfully directed our attention to the close connection that exists between, say, a nation's version of its past and its version of national identity" (Erll, 2008, p. 6).

In this context, in which memory is negotiated between the biographical and the collective for the production of a cultural memory, literature takes up the role in both novels of a tool and process of memory and intervenes in different ways in the plot: on the one hand, as a recording or a witness, as a therapy, as an autobiographical object; on the other, as an instance of creating national narratives, of contradiction??? or form of interrogation, thus contributing to the maintenance and negotiation of biographical, collective and cultural and official memories of the places inhabited by the characters. In Ventura's words:

> – I am a liar by vocation –, he roared: – I lie with joy.
> Literature is the way a true liar has to make himself socially
> accepted (...)
> – I think that what I do is an advanced form of literature,
> he confided to me. – I also create plots, I invent characters,
> but instead of leaving them trapped inside a book I give
> them life, I throw them into reality (Agualusa, 2004, p. 91).

The reinvention and obliteration of memory is the result of the negotiation between the past and the present as materialized in the characters' individual biographies. These biographies are positioned as a form of rupture with the institutional and official narratives about the historical, political and social moment from the colonial occupation to the building of the independent and post-colonial national identity. Thus, in both novels, the negotiation between remembering and forgetting is preponderant for the destiny of the characters and conditions the outcome of the plot. Therefore, in both novels the relationship and intersection between the characters as individuals and social subjects is framed by the historical context that delimits their individual and biographical narratives, which also have the ability to influence the collective space, that is, cultural memory as presented in Cultural Memory Studies: "(...) a broad understanding of cultural memory, suggesting as a provincial definition 'the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts'" (Erll, 2008, p. 2).

In this context, memory also has a prospective mission, since, by delimiting and framing the characters' past, it largely determines, or strongly conditions, their destinies, simultaneously investing itself with potential –collective and individual– futures. This characteristic also applies to institutional and national memory, which, by framing the past, delimits or directs future trajectories within the collective imaginary.

The role played by literature for the notion of memory is seen as relevant, active both as a means and object of memory

conservation and, consequently, as a resource for observing the production of cultural memory (Erll and Rigney, 2006, p. 112).

In The Literary Representation of Memory, Brigit Neumann proposes a narratological analysis of memory fictions (Neumann, 2008, p. 334) recalling multiple contributions made by literature to the formation of cultural memory. Here the role of negotiation of cultural memory that literature plays is highlighted:

> "However, on the textual level, novels create new models of memory. They configure memory representations because they select and edit elements of culturally given discourse: They combine the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten, and, by means of narrative devices, imaginatively explore the workings of memory, thus offering new perspectives on the past. Such imaginative explorations can influence readers' understanding of the past and thus refigure culturally prevailing versions of memory. Literature is therefore never a simple reflection of pre-existing cultural discourses; rather, it proactively contributes to the negotiation of cultural memory" (Neumann, 2008, p. 335).

In VDP the rewriting of the past is done through the stories invented to support the new identities created by Ventura and by the embodiment by the characters of these new identities. In TGE the narratives created by the numerous characters to explain inexplicable events and Ludovica's diaries are a form of rewriting the past.

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