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Settling Scores and Unsettling Homecomings: A Reading of Jose Eduardo Agualusa's "A Armadilha"

Micaela Kramer

- 1 Despite its parable-like style, José Eduardo Agualusa's short story "A Armadilha" – "The Trap" – revisits the timeless tale of homecoming in a localizable and historically determined setting. "A Armadilha" portrays the return to Angola of a character who had left twenty-five years earlier – coinciding with the beginning of the Civil War, and the end of the war of independence from Portugal in 1975 – and the vengeful rancor of those left behind. Yet beyond simply thematizing homecoming and political betrayal, Agualusa's narrative also engages the question of a literary legacy of exile, betrayal and revenge, and invites one to consider what it means to write from the locus of a post-colonial state. Indeed, a story such as "A Armadilha," written in the colonial language of the Portuguese, and evoking European literary texts, inevitably urges one to reflect on the questions of indebtedness to colonialism, and the betrayal of the newly independent, postcolonial nation, all of which might be expected when there is a recognition of debt to former colonial powers. Although not directly addressed by the narrative, one of the subtexts of Agualusa's text thus seems to be a reflection on the possibility of creating an Angolan literature, written in Portuguese, with European references, without necessarily betraying the spirit of emancipation, nor the rupture with the colonial legacy that Agualusa's narrative marks and to which it bears witness. In effect, I want to suggest that one of the text's underlying questions is the possibility of inserting oneself in a literary and intellectual history without being tagged as a traitor to one's nation.
- 2 The title of José Eduardo Agualusa's collection of short stories, in which "A Armadilha" is published – *Passageiros em Transito; Novos contos para viajar* (2006) [*Passengers in Transit: New Stories for Traveling*] – reveals that the leading thread of this collection of stories is the destabilized and deracinated existence of those living in a post-colonial and post-civil war Angola. This ravaged country is one that cannot offer hospitality, and receives its visitors

and returning citizens with landmines that explode under their feet. The subject of these stories is a wandering, transitory nature that cannot be separated from the background of violence and disorientation produced by the succession of wars the country has undergone and the dispersal that ensued.

- 3 Set in Luanda after the civil war, “*A Armadilha*” depicts a former exile, significantly named Justo Martírio (*Just Martyrdom*), who, having spent twenty-five years in exile in Lisbon, returns to face a city, whose “decrepitude” he “cannot reconcile himself with” (37),¹ and confronts the rancor and resentment of those who stayed in Angola during the period of political turmoil and civil war.
- 4 Agualusa’s story urges one to consider what such a return might entail for nations that are reconstituting themselves after the wounds of colonialism. How can a former exile fit in with a new nationalism which surfaces as a response to the prior colonial condition? How can a return from the heart of the colonial power not be regarded as complicit with colonialism or with colonial nostalgia?² In other words, how could the one who returns not be regarded as a traitor? Moreover, how can one understand his/her status in relation to the home or the *patria* (fatherland)? Is s/he a parricidal citizen, and can one therefore even speak of a return “home” in this case? Yet another question that emerges is whether the impossible return to a radically transformed Angola doesn’t perhaps illustrate the case of *any* attempt at a homecoming. According to Georges van Abeele, “[t]he concept of a home is needed (and in fact can only be thought) only *after* the home has already been left behind. In a strict sense, then, one has always already left home, since home can only exist as such at the price of its being lost” (xviii). Indeed, one might say that “home” only exists if it can be left, abandoned, betrayed, and that it therefore necessitates and calls for its own betrayal.

Abandoning Ship

- 5 “*A Armadilha*” is significantly sandwiched between narratives of mobility, which depict characters who prefer not to look back. In the story that opens the book, the protagonist
had traveled too much, and it no longer made any difference if [he] retreated or if he pressed on. [He] continued onwards. Today [he] travel[s] without knowing why.
(14)³
- 6 In this respect, the name of “*A Armadilha*”’s protagonist – Justo Martirio – seems to point towards a sacrifice of European pleasures and of freedom, and to a sacrifice of possibility, underscored by the fact that the title that frames the story is “The Trap”. The character’s name is also highly ironic: Martirio had left Angola in the interests of self-preservation, which is the opposite of martyrdom. As he admits himself: “Yes, he had abandoned the ship. He’d abandoned the ship because he knew how to swim” (38).⁴ This remark also reveals Martirio’s viewpoint as one that places individual freedom above political freedom and above the interests of the people. Yet those who remained behind weren’t simply those who couldn’t swim – they were also those who were prepared to sacrifice their lives – or their limbs, as the story implies – for the freedom of the nation. Martirio is thus an anti-Martirio, who will be symbolically sacrificed as a representative (and thus martyr) for all those who “abandoned ship” who are now returning to Angola unscathed, in an act of revenge carried out by those who stayed behind and suffered for their country.

- 7 The new, independent Southern African nation is one that, as Richard Werbner notes, is formed around a memory or a myth of sacrifice.

For many if not most people, the memory of sacrifice, self-sacrifice no less than collective sacrifice, is haunting, and it comes back with immediate, painful force at least for the first postcolonial decades of the nation *virtually* born from the barrel of the gun. (...) Wartime suffering and sacrifice dominate the notion of national origin (77).

- 8 One can thus read the return of Martirio and others who didn't participate in the struggle and "wartime suffering and sacrifice" as presenting a menace to the myth of national origin being produced in postcolonial nations. These nationalist myths do not tolerate plurality or contradiction. "Quite the contrary", writes Werbner, "the ideological effectiveness of the origin myth is in the semblance it gives of singularity in the actual presence of plurality" (75). The sudden reappearance of those who were not part of the struggle contradicts a smooth narrative and an attempt to homogenize the history that is quickly becoming a triumphalist history. Furthermore, not only is Martirio a "pollutant" – an element of contradiction with the emergent, nationalist narrative – but he also represents contact and contamination with the colonial power – Portugal – where he spent his years of exile. As Werbner writes:

The brutalized in quasi-national violence are the people who seem to stand in the way of the nation being one under one leader, *being pure as one body*, being truly free of alien rule and foreign intervention. The brutalized are cast – to use a Zimbabwean label – as the 'dissidents' who collude with a foreign enemy to destabilize the regime (Werbner 93, emphasis added).

- 9 Martirio's return home disrupts any possible myth of purity and cohesiveness. His long exile and years of European life provoke resentment in those who remained and who suffered the hardships of war, and these Angolans express their feelings very clearly: they believe Martirio doesn't deserve to have Angola as his home if he didn't fight for it. The trap Martirio falls into, and which gives the story its title, is one that makes a martyr of him for no revolutionary or political reason whatsoever; it is merely to assuage the feelings of resentment and vengefulness of those left behind, and who were a part – either directly or indirectly – of the struggle to create an independent nation.
- 10 If Edward Said remarks on the animosity felt by exiles, who "look at non-exiles with resentment" – "*They belong in their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place*" (181) – in Agualusa's story the resentment that is portrayed is the one experienced by those who stayed behind. These are the ones who, in Martirio's words, hadn't abandoned ship ("*os que tinham ficado no barco*" [38]) and who now see the exiles return to reap the benefits sowed by them, the ones who stayed and suffered:

They saw those who had abandoned the ship return. Those who hadn't eaten only grilled swordfish and rice for months on end; those who hadn't had to shower with mugs; those who didn't know how to distinguish a gun by the sound of shooting; those who had never known the humiliation of standing in line, nor experienced the lack of water. They saw them arrive and couldn't forgive them (38).⁵

- 11 The following line brings Martirio and the reader to the scene where the action of the story takes place: the building where Martirio will be martyred. This building is significantly marked as colonial; besides marking an era that belongs to the past, its European architecture and its extravagance make it stand out, and seem arrogantly imposing and out of place.

One could still see traces of the lost grandeur in the strong marble in the hall, which signaled a former splendor with no blemishes, or in what remained of the stained glass windows in art deco style over the wide entranceway. (37)⁶

- 12 However, the imposing façade and extravagant appearance of the building masks a decrepit interior, which is exposed to the protagonist as he ascends in the elevator. Yet before the protagonist can be exposed to the interior of the building and its other floors, the colonial hallway is penetrated by an unexpected figure who holds the keys to the elevator. This character controls the flow up and down the building, though, like the gatekeeper in Kafka's parable, "Before the Law," he merely guards access to Martirio's destination. He is only a representative or, as Kafka's guard claims, "only the least of the doorkeepers" (148). On the other hand, the actual *rendez-vous* Martirio shows up for never takes place – no one is there for the appointment, much like Kafka's Man from the Country, who never reaches the Law.⁷ The only encounter in both narratives is with the guards or representatives. Indeed, these parable-like texts both underscore and allow us to see how the Law is nothing but a continuous deferral in which one meets only representatives and bureaucracies. As Derrida writes, in a commentary of Kafka's parable:

As the doorkeeper represents it, the discourse of the law does not say "not" but "not yet," indefinitely. (...) What is deferred forever till death is entry into the law itself, which is nothing other than that which dictates the delay. The law prohibits by interfering and deferring the "ferance," the reference, rapport, and relation (141).⁸

- 13 Martirio's punishment – the justice or revenge met out to him – is precisely to experience such a wait or deferral; a wait that will take him to his death, just as Kafka's Man from the Country waits at the gate of the Law until his death. This wait might also be seen as a traumatic repetition of Martirio's wait to return to Angola – a wait of twenty-five years, which, according to Edward Said's views on exile, is an experience akin to death.

Mis-readings, Mis-calculations, and Literary Accounts

- 14 Yet another striking element about these two texts is the way both encounters with the elevator and gatekeepers stage instances of mis-reading, or the inability to read. In effect, the textuality of this scene is emphasized by the protagonist's comparison of the elevator-keeper to punctuation:

A thin man, wearing an extremely dirty and tattered military coat, stepped out from the shadows and stood before him like an exclamation mark. (37-8)⁹

- 15 The elevator-keeper appears to Martirio as a textual intervention, cutting through the darkness like a diacritical mark of exclamation. This comparison also conveys the character's thinness: the ones who stayed behind in Angola are, in fact, very much like Kafkan hunger artists, who sacrificed their bodies against different political factions, after having resisted against the colonial patriarchy. Martirio, the enemy, is the one who returns as an ally to the paternal Portugal. Moreover, he is an ally who has extremely poor reading skills, for the elevator-keeper's military outfit is a warning signal that goes unheeded by Martirio. Indeed, this entire story can be read as an allegory of poor reading skills, for Martirio chooses to ignore the exclamation point, the military coat, and the Kafkan signals that he is entering a realm of nightmarish consequences. And, like Kafka's parable, where the gate of the law is meant only for the Man from the Country, the hallway with its closed doors – where Martirio finds himself trapped – is a denial of access intended solely for him, and results from his inability to read. For even if Martirio is

returning from a country where the language is the same as in Angola, he is still coming from elsewhere, and he no longer shares the same epistemological ground as his fellow citizens. One might thus see Martirio's nightmarish entrapment as stemming from the gap in his experience which keeps him apart from his fellow countrymen – those who didn't "jump ship".

- 16 Filip de Boeck writes of a breaking of the "doxic experience" resultant from the colonial situation:

The violent breaking up of the 'doxic experience' (Bourdieu 1980: 44) attacks the quality of a world that goes without saying for those who experience, live in and belong to it. The consequences (...) jeopardize the continuity and the very existence of local historico-cultural systems (which had already lost a great deal of their cohesiveness during the colonial period); they undermine the notion of historicity itself, the 'natural' economy of habitus and the cultural identities that result from it. Yet many people from Congo and elsewhere in Africa have no choice but to continue to live in a world that seems to be falling apart before their very eyes" (25) (emphasis mine).¹⁰

- 17 This break in a shared epistemological ground seems applicable to Martirio who, like Kafka's Man from the Country, is approaching the situation in the wrong way. As Derrida writes, the misreading in Kafka's parable is a matter of dissonant and conflicting reading codes:

Perhaps man is man from the country, as long as he cannot read; or, if knowing to read, he is still bound up in unreadability within that very thing which appears to yield a reading. He wants to see or touch the law, approach and "enter" her, because perhaps he does not know that the law is not to be seen or touched but deciphered. (137)¹¹

- 18 Like the Man from the Country, Martirio is ill-equipped to "read" the Angola he returns to. As a lawyer, Martirio may want to decipher the situation and the vengeance being met out to him, yet the site he is summoned to is not a court of law or justice, but an accountant's office. After following the directions to a *rendez-vous*, Martirio thus finds himself in front of a "metal sign. He approche[s] it and read[s] – 'Gonçalves & Sons – Accountants'" (40).¹² Given such a location, it becomes clear that the issue is no longer – if it ever was – one of reading or of deciphering, but is rather a matter of calculation and accounting. Indeed, Angola's new lawmaking seems to be consumed with the question of accountability. The fact that Martirio is made to go to an accounting office throbs with the symbolism of settling accounts and of getting even. If Jacques Derrida writes of justice as that which exceeds calculation,¹³ the question of revenge is one that mobilizes a calculated payback. In effect, the question of revenge is one that, in Portuguese, as well as in English and in French, is formulated as a matter of calculation and of settling scores. In this episode we have thus clearly left the realm of the juridical, and entered the province of revenge.

- 19 The accountant's office, where accountability will be both demanded and deferred, is situated on the ninth floor of the art-deco building, where another prominent literary resonance makes itself felt. The intertextual nod here is towards Dante's *Inferno*: an exile himself, Dante seems to provide the necessary sensibility required to invoke the nightmarish entrapment of homecoming. When Martirio sees the inside of the building and its intestines – represented by the exposed pipes, which are putrid and decaying, each floor seems to represent an allegory for the country and its successive phases of war

and hardship. Moreover, the description of the successive floors evokes the horrific encounters made in the different circles of Dante's *Hell*.

By peeking attentively through the shattered window he could see the floors passing slowly by, and their confused universe of rust and ruins. The desolation increased at each floor. Tubes of copper and plastic climbed the walls, bore holes in the ceiling and multiplied further above in an entanglement that was impossible to unravel. On the fifth floor he saw mechanical wreckage and naked children running about in their midst. The sixth floor was plunged in pitch darkness. The seventh and eighth seemed abandoned (39).¹⁴

- 20 Martirio's destination is significantly on the ninth floor, which corresponds nicely to the ninth ring in Dante's *Inferno* – the one for traitors, and those treacherous to “family, country and friends” (Dante's *Inferno*, Circle IX).¹⁵ This is where Martirio will experience the revenge met out to him, and where he will be martyred as one who has betrayed his nation, his family and his people.¹⁶
- 21 The radical reconfiguration of Angola's political status, and its long political struggle might certainly seem to justify an intertextual nod in the direction of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, and to the *Inferno* which Dante, the writer and protagonist of the *Commedia*, and the famous political exile from Florence, traverses. Italy had been undergoing a major shift in its political configuration during Dante's lifetime, and this is portrayed in his writing.¹⁷ It remains to be seen, however, how one should read such a canonical European reference in a text by an Angolan writer who is tackling questions of colonial legacies and contaminations. If Justo Martirio is contaminated by the colonial power by his extended stay in Europe, how should one read an African text whose intertextual references are European ones? How can one avoid reading such references as colonial gestures or symptoms?
- 22 A partial response to this question might reside in the resonances with Kafka that we can detect in Agualusa's writing – to a Kafka for whom Deleuze and Guattari coined the expression and theory of a “minor literature.” As Deleuze and Guattari write:

A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise (16).¹⁸
- 23 When engaging with the work of an Angolan writer, who writes in a colonial language, Deleuze and Guattari's theories of a “minor literature” may well be a productive approach. It certainly allows one to view Agualusa's writing as not being necessarily complicit with a colonial stance but, rather, as possibly creating its own deterritorialization and minor literature. Indeed, another characteristic of minor literatures, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “is that everything in them is political. (...) [I]ts cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. (...) In this way, the family triangle connects to other triangles – commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical – that determine its values” (17). The episode portrayed in “A Armadilha” meets Deleuze and Guattari's criteria impeccably, for it provides a clear instance in which the private life of the character is shown to be indissociable from the political, and his personal fate is marked with political overtones.

- 24 If the ninth floor in Agualusa's text parallels Dante's ninth circle of hell, it is appropriately the stage where the conflict between those who made sacrifices and hungered for their country will confront Martirio, who will represent – and be martyred for – those who betrayed the nation and its struggle. The elevator itself is introduced by the militarily-dressed superintendent (or elevator-keeper), in what seems to be a metaphor for the resistance and stamina of the people who didn't – and will not – give up. The superintendent exults in the fact that the elevator will keep on working even if the city suffers electricity shortages, for it has its own generator: "The *Cota* can remain calm", he says, reassuringly; "this elevator has its own generator. Even if there's an electrical shortage in the entire city, it continues to work. It never stops. (...) The elevator shuddered and started to climb, emitting various gasps, with the effort of an asthmatic animal" (39).¹⁹
- 25 This thumb-less superintendent is an uncanny apparition, who appears on Martirio's journey as one of the living-dead in the building. The way he refers to Martirio is yet another element worth looking at: "*Cota*", a slang term, which refers to a parent or another adult, also refers, in Africa, to an older, wiser member of the community. In this context it may allude to the difference in class, and to a hierarchy that is also the product of a difference of race.²⁰ The expression *Cota* certainly brings up the question of quantification – be it the measure of relation based on calculation and hierarchy, or the calculations indicated and allegorized by the appointment at the accountant's office. In effect, the primary, dictionary meaning of "*cota*" is "the quantity each individual contributes to a specific purpose or end", or "Determined portion" (*Michaelis*). The *Michaelis* dictionary translates it as "1. Quota, share, portion, part. 2. Installment," or as "5. Contribution", "7. Elevation (above a determinate point)." The sense of elevation also finds resonance in Agualusa's text; in fact, the term is uttered during an exchange about the elevator – a conversation that thus doubly emphasizes the subject of elevation. As the narrative indicates, there are several elevations, or "*cotas*," at stake: The protagonist, already elevated in rank and class in Angolan society, will be further elevated by an asthmatic elevator, thereby enacting, on a metaphorical level, the supposed elevation of arrogance with which the character is associated due to his flight away from his people and from his nation's struggle. Martirio's punishment is thus symbolically staged through a reenactment of his sinful elevation, so that he can be allotted his quota/*cota* in its various connotations.
- 26 Martirio's ascent here is thus not to the heavenly spheres, and the naked children he sees running around the putrid pipes are not winged angels. Martirio finds himself in a kind of purgatory or hell from which there is no way out, for once he gets to the ninth floor, the three doors there are locked.
- The three doors – one on each wall – were protected by strong bars. A fourth set of bars, even larger and more solid than the rest, impeccably painted in red, blocked the access to the stairs. (39-40)²¹
- 27 Suddenly, the elevator is called down and Martirio finds himself trapped. A sign on the door informs him that everyone is away until August 1st, and Martirio realizes, with despair, that the date is July 6th. He will clearly perish of thirst and hunger before anyone returns.

The Alienating Effects of Colonialism

- 28 This ninth floor is moreover strikingly different from the other floors: it is so clean “that it didn’t seem to belong to the building, nor to the city, nor even to that epoch” (39).²² Such strangeness corresponds well to the experience of exile as an experience of dislocation and alienation, as well as isolation. Indeed, this scrubbed and vacant floor, with bolts and locks on its doors, is practically a coffin, and Martirio is thus buried alive – a fate that doesn’t sound so different from Said’s description of exile, which he compares to “death but without death’s ultimate mercy” (174).
- 29 Martirio’s death trap is also in striking contrast to the numerous ceremonial burials of the heroes of the resistance, taking place immediately following the civil wars, in tributes that marked the beginning of the new, independent African nations, including Angola. These tributes and memorials were ways of marking the origins of these new, free nations – what Richard Werbner describes as the manufacturing of “tribute” by the “nation-building regime”. “It is a tribute in at least two senses,” writes Werbner:
- immaterial and material. The immaterial tribute gets realized in symbolic transactions, when the regime selectively makes national heroes from the leaders of the freedom fighters who fired the guns in the nation-building wars. Tribute is also extended as invidious distinction among the freedom fighters who are themselves also selectively heroised (76).
- 30 Martirio’s fate is the opposite of this; yet, the revenge he is met with is so strikingly and ceremoniously staged that it becomes a ritual of sorts – the sort an anti-hero or enemy might receive. In fact, Martirio gets the opposite of a hero’s burial: instead of being buried in the ground, he is suspended on the ninth floor. This elevation and “groundlessness” can further be viewed as a death inscribed with the symbolism of exile, in which one is “cut off from [one’s] roots, [one’s] land, [one’s] past” (Said 177).²³
- 31 If, as Jacques Derrida writes, exiles lament two things: their language and their death, desiring to return, “at least in pilgrimage, to the places where their buried dead have their final abode” (1997: 81),²⁴ the death that is hinted at, and whose promise – or menace – closes the narrative, is nothing less than a perverse betrayal of the exile’s yearning to return home to die. If Martirio’s return home is part of an intention of finding a resting ground, his death is such that it cannot be identified or marked, and will therefore remain unmournable.
- 32 Martirio’s fate therefore resonates with that of yet another canonical Western European character: Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus may be considered a martyr: when Thebes is afflicted by a plague, his sin is supposedly responsible for it, and, as the one responsible for the plague, his sacrifice and punishment is announced (by none other than himself, without knowing that he is the culprit) as exile. In fact, Oedipus is doubly exiled – first at birth, after the announcement of his fate, and then as an actual parricide and sinner. One can also see doubling in Agualusa’s tale: the revenge enacted upon Martirio when he is trapped on the deserted ninth floor repeats his former experience of exile.
- 33 Derrida remarks that the parricide must come from within the family: “As with any parricide, it takes place within the family. A foreigner cannot be parricidal unless he is, in some way, a part of the family” (1997 : 13).²⁵ It is the betrayal of the one from “home,” the ungrateful, parricidal child, which is the most unforgivable betrayal. Agualusa’s story is, in effect, a story about sons and filiation: The sign on the door of the accountant’s office –

“Gonçalves & Sons” – refers to good sons, the supposedly grateful and loyal ones, the ones who, contrary to Martirio, stayed behind in Angola and helped raise the country from the ground. Thanks to them, Angola is now a fatherland to its citizens, having liberated itself from its infantilized relation to Portugal, and from its inner turmoil and civil wars. If civil wars are commonly theorized as fratricidal wars,²⁶ the end of a civil war implies that the warring siblings have now grown up.

- 34 As Derrida notes, Oedipus – the one who commits parricide – will pay for his sins and be punished through a death that cannot be properly lamented, commemorated or mourned.²⁷ Similarly, Justo Martirio, the ungrateful, parricidal Angolan citizen, will be given a death that is secretive, unmarked, and therefore unmournable. Yet if Oedipus manages to produce a lineage, even though it is the product of incestuous relations, Martirio leaves no descendants. His sister is also childless, and the barrenness of both siblings suggests that the predicament of those who align themselves with the colonial power is that of bearing no offspring. They are the end of a line and thus already belong, in a sense, to the past. It is those who enact revenge in the name of the Angolan nation and its people who will now produce a lineage and a sense of futurity.
- 35 Agualusa’s story certainly illustrates the alienating result of colonialism, for even if one does not leave one’s country as Martirio does, one is inevitably already a stranger in one’s home due to the alienating effects of colonial power. This is clearly portrayed by the description of the building in which the narrative takes place, where the *art deco* style of the building and its elegant facade clash violently with its interior and with its inhabitants. These inhabitants are the naked children who live in the midst of mechanical debris and ruins – a mechanicity that represents a project of progress gone dramatically wrong, where the future of the country, metonymically represented by its children, has been radically neglected in favor of an exploitative project of advancement.
- 36 Achille Mbembe claims that the loss of a sense of home and identity is an integral part of the colonial enterprise: a process by which the natives are expelled from their own homes in the colonizer’s attempt to take over and to feel at home in the colonies. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe notes how
- [a] native (or a protégé) cannot be a citizen of law. Consigned unilaterally to a sort of minority without foreseeable end, he/she cannot be a subject of politics, a citizen. Since the notion of citizen overlaps that of nationality, the colonized being excluded from the vote, is not being simply consigned to the fringes of the nation, but is virtually a stranger in his/her own home (35).
- 37 Although in “The trap” Martirio seems to be the one who cannot return home after having left it, the other characters in the story have been equally bereft of their sense of home. The children who populate the otherwise empty-seeming building run around naked in the most inhospitable environment, while Martirio remarks how his sister lives alone, and doesn’t have children. In this story, adults lack children, and children lack parents who can provide them with shelter and nurturing.
- 38 The children Martirio sees running around can also be read as the ghosts of a lost childhood and innocence of a country that has been ravaged, first by colonialism, then by war, and whose future seems bleak and unpromising. Moreover, this seemingly haunted building that is falling into ruin houses an elevator-keeper whose body has been ruined by the mines that have been planted in the country’s land, and which render it extremely un-homelike, to say the least.

- 39 As I have pointed out, Martirio fails to take heed of or to read the elevator-keeper's missing finger and dismemberment – a sign that points to his involvement in the Angolan resistance, or, at the very least, to his having suffered the effects of war. This also renders him one of the living-dead, if we follow Mbembe's claim that "[d]ismemberment turns the living into "living dead, while the dead, with disembodiment, increasingly seem to expand their presence into the realm of the living" (4). This fingerless elevator-keeper holds a key to a space that seems to lie outside the city, as well as outside of time. This is the space of death that awaits Martirio as his payback for attempting to return home after his years abroad.
- 40 Nevertheless, the space of death is not merely reserved for Martirio. As his name suggests, Martirio is a martyr for all the returning exiles. Moreover, this space of death that the protagonist is tricked into entering is also a metaphor for the entire country, which, as a colonial site, was a space of terror and death (Taussig, 468). Now, as a *post* colonial nation, not only is it a space of terror and death but it is also, to use Mbembe's term, a site of "zombification," or of the living-dead; a locus that is somehow in between life and death, where boundaries blur, and where the sense of hauntedness is pervasive.
- 41 One can therefore read Agualusa's story within the larger context of postcolonialism, and more particularly, of what Achille Mbembe calls "the mutual zombification" that occurs – "of both the dominant and whom they apparently dominate" – in postcolonial reality (1992: 4). If Mbembe reminds us that the "colonial relation" was inseparable from forms of punishment, which targeted the body of the colonized,²⁸ Martirio, who returns from Portugal physically intact, with all his limbs and without having suffered hunger, must go through his own sacrifice, and isn't allowed to escape from the martyrdom suffered by his fellow Angolans. He had swum away because he knew how; if others had known how to swim, they would have done the same, Martirio rationalizes. He thus lessens his guilt for having betrayed his fellow-citizens through this thought. Yet, like the fish he had caught as a child, he is ultimately also caught, as if by the
- wicker traps with which he used to fish in his childhood. The fish would enter easily through a narrow yet flexible opening, shaped like a cone on one of its extremities. Once inside, they couldn't get out. Sometimes he took a long time to collect the traps, and a large fish would come in and eat the other ones (40).²⁹
- 42 The comparison with the traps he had set as a child frames Martirio's own trap within a narrative of payback, and gives a semblance of "evenness," and of being justified. Yet, as we have seen, justice is what must be thought beyond calculation, and beyond the measure of revenge or of payback. As Derrida claims, the just decision must "go through the ordeal of the undecidable;" it must not be the result of a "programmable application or [the] unfolding of a calculable process" (1992: 24).
- 43 The act of revenge by those who stayed behind can be seen as a venting of resentment on the one who represents a colonial past, and whose return might be seen as an enactment of colonial nostalgia. If Martirio is seen in this way, he already symbolizes a space of death, and, as such, represents an impediment for the country to move forward into a space of life.³⁰ Getting rid of Martirio, (the traitor), may serve a delusion of getting rid of an undesirable past, yet it is crucial to consider whether Martirio won't thus turn into an idealized martyr for a colonial past.
- 44 Some of the various questions this story leaves us with might therefore be formulated as follows: How can one make room for the present when there is still so much resentment, and when the past hasn't been successfully mourned? How can one end the cycle of

revenge and allow for healing to begin, so that a nation might move forward without the continual need to punish those regarded as traitors or enemies? In Agualusa's story, no confrontation takes place, since no one shows up for the appointment with Martirio. For Lacan, "the real" is a missed encounter; it cannot be represented or rendered symbolically; no sense can thus be made from it.³¹ Indeed, there is something of the order of the "real" and of the traumatic that is conveyed in Agualusa's tale. His short story incites one to think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the neighboring South Africa, where open confrontation was encouraged as a means of promoting healing rather than a meting out of punishment and state-sanctioned revenge. If criticized for not producing a juridical response to the past or a more immediately satisfying legal justice, the TRC certainly allowed for the production of narrative, and promoted the attempt to frame the past in symbolic form. A historical narrative could thus begin to emerge, and a process of national mourning perhaps be initiated.³² Mourning, as we have seen, is precisely what is not allowed for in "A Armadilha". Martirio thus joins the other un-buried and un-mourned ghosts who continue to haunt the coffin-like building and dilapidated city that reverberates with the living-dead. Such specters will keep returning from a colonial past to haunt a postcolonial present – at least until a process of working through is initiated.

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NOTES

1. "[A]inda não se conformara com a decrepitude da cidade" (37).

2. See Renato Rosaldo on Colonial (or Imperial) nostalgia. "Imperialist nostalgia," in *Culture and Truth; the Remaking of Social Analysis*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; pp.68-87
3. My translation, as are all subsequent translations from Agualusa's work. "[T]inha caminhado de mais, e já tanto fazia recuar como avançar. Continuei em frente. Hoje viajo sem saber porque" (14).
4. "Sim, abandonara o barco. Abandonara o barco porque sabia nadar" (38).
5. "Viam regressar os que tinham abandonado o barco, os que não tinham comido durante meses a fio apenas peixe-espada grelhado com arroz, os que não tinham tomado banho de caneca, os que não sabiam distinguir uma arma pelo som do disparo, os que não haviam conhecido nunca a humilhação das filas, nem da falta de água, viam-nos chegar e não lhes perdoavam" (38).
6. "Ainda havia nos fortes mármore do hall, outrora de um fulgor sem mancha, ou no que restava dos vitrais, ao estilo *art deco*, sobre a larga portada, vestígios da grandeza perdida" (37).
7. The protagonist's relation to the law is quite explicit – not only is he a lawyer, but his very name evokes justice (*Justo Martirio*). Both elements provide further support for an intertextual comparison with Kafka's "Before the Law".
8. Translated by Avital Ronell. The original passage reads as follows: "Représenté par le gardien, le discours de la loi ne dit pas 'non' mais 'pas encore,' indéfiniment. (...) Ce qui est à jamais différé, jusqu'à la mort, c'est l'entrée dans la loi elle-même, qui n'est rien d'autre que cela même qui dicte le retard. La loi interdit et en différant la 'férance', le rapport, la relation, la référence" (122).
9. "Um sujeito magro, vestido com um casaco militar muito sujo, muito gasto, emergiu das sombras e postou-se diante dele como um ponto de exclamação" (37-8).
10. This epistemic gap and estrangement resonates with Sylvia Molloy's description of the origin of her writing: "For me writing arises precisely from displacement and from loss: the loss of a starting point, of a place of origin; in sum, of an irrecoverable home". (*"Para mi la escritura surge precisamente del desplazamiento y de la perdida: perdida de un punto de partida, de un lugar de origen, en suma de una casa irrecuperable"*) (18). If loss—including the loss of a sense of origin and wholeness – leads to writing, it may be that the disruption and the production of a discontinuous world (such as occurs with exile), also explains the attraction of the parable-like style adopted by Agualusa. The timeless and universal quality of parables, do in fact appear to provide a sense of continuity precisely where a realistic discourse might appear to break down or falter.
11. Translated by Avital Ronell. The original text reads as follows: "[P]eut-être l'homme est-il homme de la campagne en tant qu'il ne sait pas lire ou que, sachant lire, il a encore affaire à de l'illisibilité dans cela même qui semble se donner à lire. Il veut voir ou toucher la loi, il veut s'approcher d'elle, 'entrer' en elle parce qu'il ne sait peut-être pas que la loi n'est pas à voir ou à toucher mais à déchiffrer" (115).
12. "Reparou numa placa de metal. Aproximou-se e leu – 'Gonçalves & Filhos – Contabilistas'" (40).
13. In "Force of Law," Derrida writes that "the instant of the just decision that must rend time and defy dialectics. It is a madness" (26). He also claims that "there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth" (27).
14. "Podia ver, espreitando através da vidraça estilhaçada, passarem os lentos andares e o seu confuso universo de ferrugem e ruínas. A cada andar aumentava a desolação. Tubos de cobre e de plástico galgavam pelas paredes, furavam os tectos e multiplicavam-se, mais acima, num emaranhado impossível de destrinçar. No quinto andar entreviu destroços mecânicos e crianças nuas correndo por entre eles. O sexto estava mergulhado numa escuridão maciça. O sétimo e oitavo pareciam abandonados" (39).
15. "Who but an exile like Dante, banished from Florence, would use eternity as a place for settling old scores?" (Edward Said, 182).

16. In Dante's *Inferno*, political dissidents and those who betrayed their political party or homeland are placed in *Antenora* – the second region of the 9th circle. The first region, *Caina* (named after the biblical figure Cain) is reserved for those who betray individuals with whom they have bonds of friendship and love.

17. As B.B. Carter writes: "For Dante and his age, the anarchic modern conception of a world of sovereign States, each a law unto itself, did not exist (though it was coming into being). His whole life was a fight to preserve the older vision of Christendom as an organic unity, in which every form of community, family, city, kingdom, had its divinely appointed end, integrating the ends of their individual members for whose sake they exist, and co-ordinated by a supreme authority, which stands as supreme guarantor of the essential triad of social living, justice, freedom, peace" (348).

18. Deleuze and Guattari go on to give the example of "what blacks in America today are able to do with English language" as another example of "a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses" (17) – a certainly provocative claim, which I unfortunately don't have the space to comment on.

19. "O cota esteja tranquilo, este elevador tem gerador próprio. Mesmo que falhe a luz em toda a cidade ele continua a funcionar. Nunca pára. (...) O elevador estremeceu e começou a subir, arfando muito, num esforço de animal asmático" (39).

20. Indeed, the question of race is one of the silences in the narrative, even though the protagonist, who left Angola and who blended in so well with the colonial power, is probably white, while the elevator-keeper with the missing thumb is likely to be black.

21. "As portas, três, uma em cada parede, estavam protegidas por fortes grades. Uma quarta grade, ainda mais larga e sólida que as restantes, impecavelmente pintada de vermelho, fechava o acesso as escadas" (39-40).

22. "[Q]ue parecia não pertencer nem ao prédio, nem a cidade, nem tão-pouco aquele tempo" (39).

23. As Said continues: "The pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question" (179).

24. Translation mine. "[A]u moins en pèlerinage, vers les lieux où leurs morts inhumés ont leur dernière demeure."

25. Translation mine. "Comme tout parricide, celui-ci a lieu dans la famille. Un étranger ne peut être parricide que s'il est en famille, en quelque sorte."

26. See Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 1983.

27. "Let us hear her, this Antigone, the crying foreigner who addresses herself to the ghost of a father who is an outlaw in more ways than one, and a foreigner in many respects: a foreigner for having come to die in a foreign land, a foreigner for having been buried in a secret place, a foreigner for having been buried with no visible tomb, a foreigner because he cannot be wept for as he should be by his loved ones in mourning" (1997 : 103)). Translation mine. ("Écoutons-la, cette Antigone, la pleureuse étrangère s'adressant au spectre d'un père plus d'une fois hors la loi, étranger 'a plus d'un titre, étranger d'être venu mourir en terre étrangère, étranger d'être enterré dans un lieu secret, étranger d'être enterré sans sépulture visible, étranger de ne pas pouvoir être pleuré comme il se doit, normalement, par les siens endeuillés.")

28. "Whatever the forms and quality of the penal rituals, they shared the feature of doing something to the body of the colonized" (2001: 28).

29. "armadilhas em vime com que, na sua infância, costumava pescar. Os peixes entravam facilmente por uma abertura estreita, mas elástica, em formato de cone, numa das extremidades. Uma vez lá dentro já não conseguiam sair. Às vezes, se ele se demorava a recolher as armadilhas, entrava um peixe maior e comia o restantes" (40).

30. “[I]ntimately tied to a generalized *memory crisis* and the breakdown of the production of history – is linked to an impossibility to place or *posit* death. In the postcolonial ‘beyond the grave’, (...) the living continuously live in the disturbing company of severed restless souls wandering around, of dead unable to ‘liberate the apartment for the living’” (De Certeau 1988:101).

31. See Lacan’s seminar “The Unconscious and Repetition,” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis; The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*. “The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter – the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter – first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of trauma” (55).

32. See, for instance, Antje Krog’s *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and The Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998, and J. Derrida’s commentary of it in “*Versöhnung, ubuntu, pardon: quel genre?*” in *Vérité, Réconciliation, Réparation*, Paris: Seuil, 2004, pp. 111-156.

ABSTRACTS

This article addresses the various levels of betrayal that are evoked in the short story “A Armadilha,” by the Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa. Even though the theme of betrayal is introduced in the story within an explicitly political and postcolonial frame, this article suggests that the question of literary betrayal constitutes yet another underlying theme in the narrative. One of the questions this article raises is thus the possibility of producing an Angolan literature, written in the colonial Portuguese language, that doesn’t betray Angola’s emancipatory, postcolonial spirit.

Cet article traite des différents niveaux de trahison évoqués dans le conte « A Armadilha », de l’écrivain angolais José Eduardo Agualusa. Si ce conte introduit le thème de la trahison dans un cadre explicitement politique et postcolonial, cet article suggère qu’il y a encore un autre niveau de trahison dans le texte, moins explicite : la question de la trahison littéraire. L’une des interrogations que nous formulerons ici est la suivante : est-il possible de produire une littérature angolaise, écrite dans la langue coloniale portugaise, qui ne trahisse pas l’esprit postcolonial et d’émancipation de l’Angola ?

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