

Looking for “God” in Non-Identity: Reading the Transcendental in Agualusa’s *The Book of Chameleons*

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Abstract. In his novel, *The Book of Chameleons*, Angolan author, José Eduardo Agualusa, goes well beyond the stage of apology (or defense) of Afrocentric societies, the need to rescue pre-colonial cultural paradigms, or have well-defined national identities, which tend to be common preoccupations in many African post-colonial societies. Such concerns are often reactionary, emerging out of the need to form, create, and display nationhood in the face of the burden of European colonialism and its cultural impositions, which suppress African socio-cultural and political systems, downgrading them to a status of an inferior “other.” Yet, the very idea of nationhood tends to annihilate difference and otherness to construct monolithic identities based on unified (and Western) notions of statehood, thus forcing multiplicity into sameness so that African nationalistic projects often end up committing the same sins Europe committed in relation to Africa—notwithstanding the fact, of course, that pre-colonial Africa, as any society, had its own “nations,” too, that could also suppress difference through conquest. The central argument in this article is that Agualusa sees ethnic, racial, and national identity—whatever it may be, whether Eurocentric, or Afro-centric, or a mix of both, etc.—and the physical, cultural and ideological marks and frameworks that it carries or transmits as problematic. As I illustrate, Agualusa considers identities based on these essentialist parameters as something that causes deep suffering, violence, and division, and is pushing the reader to conceive identities and their respective ideological affiliation/s as fluid, ephemeral conditions, and to accept “non-identity” as the best path for human beings to follow. This different framework of seeing the Self (or the nation) generates a symbolic opening that allows for various ethnicities and races to live (or envisage living) in peace in a single space, as it emphasizes a relational collective consciousness and pushes humans to a superior state of being that transcends the finite materiality of life and the socio-political discourses that frame that materiality. I demonstrate how *The Book of Chameleons* is replete with metaphors of what I call the “non-self,” or “supra-self,” or even “God,” which are commonly found in Zen Buddhist thought, classical African epistemological and ontological paradigms, and more specifically, the idea of African Personality as put forward by Léopold S. Senghor or even in some of Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophical principles related to the dialectic between self and other or otherness (the non-human) and the divine. This use of multiple cross-cultural frameworks serves to reveal how different paradigms (from West to East, North to South) display parallel ontological visions, thus pointing to the idea that humans (wherever they are) yearn to exit their “small self” and expand their selfhood.

Keywords: José Eduardo Agualusa; Angola; literature; national identity; transcendental; supra-identity; expanded selfhood; dialectic between self, other, and otherness; Léopold Senghor; Emmanuel Lévinas; Zen Buddhism

“I was born in this house, and grew up here. I’ve never left. As it gets late I press my body against the window and look at the sky. I like watching the flames, the racing clouds, and above them, angels—hosts of angels—shaking down the sparks from their hair, flapping their broad fiery wings. The sight is always the same. But every evening I come here and I enjoy it, and I’m moved by it, as if seeing it for the very first time” (3). Thus begins *The Book of Chameleons*—a novel by the contemporary Angolan writer, José Eduardo Agualusa, first published in Portuguese in 2004 under the title of *O Vendedor de Passados* (“The Seller of Pasts”), and then in its English translation in 2006. Such a beginning invokes both presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, materiality and divinity, stability and instability of self and reality, and it is indicative of the fundamental nature of the novel: the author’s exploration of the transcendental, or what I will loosely term “God” or the “Supra-Self,” and how that very transcendentalism is linked to his view of the problematic of identity and nationalism in Angola. At first, one may be tempted—and with good reason—to see the novel as a mere depiction (or rehearsal) of Angola’s post-colonial and post-civil war multicultural and multi-ethnic unsettled condition—a platform where the many peoples and the multifaceted socio-cultural and political history of the country, along with the problems that arise from that, as well as the problematic of national memory, identity, and historical veracity are debated. Many critics have already, and quite successfully, discussed these matters at length.¹ Within this reading of the novel, Agualusa’s principal aim is to paint the situation of a nation whose national identity is still unformed, a nation unsure of itself, where many peoples and cultural paradigms coexist and have coexisted for centuries. These identity and nationalistic concerns are common in many African countries colonized by the West, which have suffered the burdens of the so-called universal—”superior”—European cultural paradigms, pretty much since the event of the first encounters between Africans and Europeans, over five hundred years ago. As a result of that cultural extroversion and imposition, many African countries have needed to affirm their right to be different, to deviate from Eurocentric, monolithic, grand master-narratives, socio-cultural impositions, and simplified and dualistic historical depictions, in other words, to reject or contest the “white man’s civilizational burden.”² On one level, Agualusa is certainly dealing with all these issues in his novel, much like other post-colonial African writers have done before him in their own specific ways, such as, to name a few, Chinua Achebe in Nigeria and Mia Couto in Mozambique. For example, in the well-known novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe ‘writes back’—to employ Bill Ashcroft’s terminology, as used in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in*

Post-Colonial Literature—to Europe, contesting the colonial library and offering us another narrative about Africa, or more precisely, the Igbo, a people of South-Eastern Nigeria. Afrocentric narratives of this type are important to counteract the image of an Africa that is savage, amoral, in perpetual childhood, and devoid of civilization, such as depicted by Hegel in *The Philosophy of History*, or in Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*.³ And yet all this is only part of Agualusa's story. In *The Book of Chameleons*, José Eduardo Agualusa goes well beyond the stage of apology—or defense—of Afrocentric societies, the need to rescue pre-colonial cultural paradigms, or have well-defined national identities which tend to be common preoccupations in many African post-colonial societies. Such concerns are often reactionary, emerging out of the need to form, create, and display nationhood in the face of the burden of European colonialism and its cultural impositions which suppress African socio-cultural and political systems, downgrading them to a status of an inferior "other." Yet, the very idea of nationhood tends to annihilate difference and otherness to construct monolithic identities based on unified (and Western) notions of statehood, thus forcing multiplicity into sameness, so that African nationalistic projects often end up committing the same sins Europe committed in relation to Africa—notwithstanding the fact, of course, that pre-colonial Africa, as any society, had its own "nations," too, that could suppress difference through physical and ideological conquest.⁴

The central argument in this article is that Agualusa sees ethnic, racial, and national identity—whatever it may be, whether Eurocentric or Afro-centric or a mix of both, and so on—and the physical, cultural, and ideological marks and frameworks that it carries or transmits as problematic. Agualusa considers identities based on these essentialist parameters as something that causes deep suffering, violence, and division, and urges the reader to conceive identities and their respective ideological affiliation/s as fluid, ephemeral conditions, and to accept "non-identity" as the best path for human beings to follow. This different framework of seeing the Self, or the nation, generates a symbolic opening that allows for various ethnicities and races to live, or envisage living, in peace in a single space, as it emphasizes a relational collective consciousness and elevates humans to a superior state of being which transcends the finite materiality of life and the socio-political discourses that frame that materiality. I demonstrate how *The Book of Chameleons* is replete with metaphors of what I call the "non-self," or "supra-self," or even "God," which are commonly found in Zen Buddhist thought, classical African epistemological and ontological paradigms, and more specifically, the idea of African Personality as put forward by Léopold S. Senghor or even in some of Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophical principles related to the dialectic between self and other or otherness (the non-human) and the divine. The intersection between these seemingly different theories from various cultural spaces demonstrates that we may not be as different as we think we are and often come up with ways of seeing—the self,

other, world, and universe—that intersect, all yearning to enter an unbound self, where “one is all” and “all is one,” as the Buddhists may put it. Within these paradigms, “body” and “difference” are left behind and a “supra-identity” that is mostly spiritual in nature can be attained. The “supra-identity” overrides the limitations imposed by the identities forged in the “body politic”—related to race, dress/class, speech, ethnicity, religion, ideological affiliation, etc.—and the differences between self, other and otherness, the non-human, are erased, or at least suspended, thus allowing for the entrance into a transpersonal wholeness that has mystical dimensions and fulfills our human ontological need to connect, expand selfhood, and love others and otherness. This similarity between paradigms shows that no matter where we are, we yearn to encounter one another, to fulfil our supra-identity, to enter a collective consciousness. Even though we may tell ‘stories’ using different allegories, we are after the same thing and long to exit the specificities of culture, religion, race, political ideology, space, or temporality to become more than an isolated and lonely entity and connect with the “whole.”

Theoretical Considerations

Before entering the analysis of the novel, and in order to ground it in the theories and concepts noted above, I will discuss some important aspects related to Zen Buddhism, and Senghor’s and Lévinas’s philosophies, to demonstrate how similar they are.

In his book, *The Awakening of Zen*, Suzuki tells us the following:

We have two eyes to see the two sides of things, but there must be a third eye that will see everything at the same time and yet not see anything. That is to understand Zen. Our two eyes see dualistically, and dualism is at the bottom of all the trouble we have gone through. This does not mean that dualism is to be abolished, only that there ought to be a third eye. [...] We say God is everywhere, but we try to put God in Heaven. How can we conceive God as giving rules to us? If God is immanent, God is ourselves. But Zen does not say that God is transcendent or immanent. When you try to comprehend a fact by means of words, the fact disappears. When we use our minds we have to understand things dualistically—either transcendently or immanently. When I have explained that, there is nothing more to say. All that is needed is the opening of the third eye. When we have a third eye, it does not annihilate the two eyes. So the world of dualities is not annihilated at all. Let me tell you a story about this. It is a sort of joke. Yejaku called on Yenen, and asked, “What is your name?” Yenen replied, “Yejaku.” Yejaku said, “But that’s my own name.” Then Yenen said, “My name is Yenen.” Whereupon Yejaku gave a hearty laugh. You are I, and I are you; in oneness there is manyness, and in manyness there is oneness. The transcendental and immanent God exist at the same time. (31–32)

Léopold S. Senghor, the *Négritude* poet and first president of Senegal, says the following when speaking of what he calls the “African Personality” and opposing it to the “European Personality”:

Let us consider first the European as he faces an object. He is, or at least he was from the time of Aristotle until the 'stupid nineteenth century', an *objective intelligence*, a man of will, a warrior, a bird of prey, a steady gaze. He first distinguishes the object from himself. He keeps it at a distance. He freezes it out of time and, in a way, out of space. He fixes it, he kills it. With his precision instruments he dissects it in a pitiless factual analysis. [...] [The African] does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone, the man or animal or social event. He does not keep it at a distance. He does not analyse it. Once he has come under its influence, he takes it like a blind man, still living, into his hands. He does not fix or kill it. He turns it *over* and *over* in his supple hands, he *feels* it. [...] Our subject abandons his I to sympathize and identify himself with the THOU. He dies to himself to be reborn in the *Other*. He does not assimilate, he is assimilated. He does not kill the other life, he strengthens his own life through it. He lives with the *Other* in a communal life, lives in *symbiosis*: he is born-with and thereby knows the *Other*. Subject and object are dialectically confronted in the very act of knowing one another. It is a long caress in the night, an intimacy of mingled bodies, the act of love, from which the fruit of knowledge is born. [...] More exactly we can say emotion is the seizure of the whole being, consciousness and body, by the indeterminate world. It is an irruption of the mystical or magical world into the world of determinism. The African is moved not so much by the outward appearance of the object as by its profound reality, less by the *sign* than by its *sense*.⁵ (29–34)

We can say that in general terms Senghor's ideas echo classical African philosophical and religious systems which understand reality holistically and see the human self as part of all the others and otherness that exist, while also considering the visible and invisible realms as highly interconnected.⁶

Both Zen's and Senghor's philosophies are quite similar, as we can gather from these descriptions: they both see the self as part of a larger other, consider the "I" as only living through the other, see non-rational intelligences—the "third eye" in Zen, the "sensorial/the mystical" in Senghor's—and non-spoken language as superior modes of knowing that allow entrance into a spiritual and mystical apprehension of reality—a merging with the other, both human and non-human. They also both speak of a symbiosis of self and other, or dialectic of being, to attain an enlarged sense of self—while not annihilating the other or self altogether.

Emmanuel Lévinas, the Lithuanian-French philosopher, also shares a philosophy that is similar to Zen Buddhism as well as Senghor's in relation to mystical consciousness and the dialectic between self and other. He defends a philosophy of alterity that favours the "face" over the "gaze"—the idea that the other, be it the human or non-human other, always surpasses our logical understanding, remaining in the "infinite" realm. In his own words:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at

each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me. ... (Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 50–51)

Lévinas also speaks of the entrance into the realm of “elementality,” or what he calls “being-in-the-element,” when one perceives and receives the world through the sensorial rather than the rational mind or its language; this sensorial epistemological apprehension also corresponds to the “infinite” realm associated with the “face.” “To-be-in-the-element” allows entrance into a mystical, transcendental state of being, a wholeness that expands ontological consciousness. As he notes:

To-be-in-the-element does indeed disengage a being from blind and deaf participation in a whole, but differs from a thought making its way outward. ... It is to be within, to be inside of. ... This situation is not reducible to a representation, not even an inarticulate representation; it belongs to sensibility, which is the mode of enjoyment. [...] One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset. ... Sensibility, essentially naïve, suffices to itself in a world insufficient for thought. ... Sensibility establishes a relation with the pure quality without support, with the element. ... Sensibility is not an inferior theoretical knowledge bound however intimately to affective states: in its very *gnosis* sensibility is enjoyment; it is satisfied with the given, it is contented. ... This earth upon which I find myself and from which I welcome sensible objects or make my way to them suffices me. The earth which upholds me does so without my troubling myself about knowing what upholds the earth. I am content with the aspect this corner of the world, universe of my daily behavior, this city or this neighborhood or this street in which I move, this horizon within which I live, turn to me; I do not ground them in a more vast system. (*Totality and Infinity* 135–37)

Moreover, Lévinas sees the other as indispensable to finding selfhood, to grounding oneself into an actual reality, showing how beingness can only be found in otherness:

It is as if in going towards the other I met myself and implanted myself in a land, henceforth native, and I were stripped of all the weight of my identity. A native land owing nothing to enrootedness, nothing to first occupation; a native land owing nothing to birth. (Lévinas, *Proper Names* 44–45)

The “self” forms itself in society, in its relations with the “other” and the “others” of the world: identity is not *a priori* essence but is rather attained in life, by relating to other people. The “native” land is not found in the “self” but in the “other”: in fact, it is this encounter with the “other” that relieves us from the weight of our ontological insecurity. Relationality is thus the basis of the self.

The Self vs. the Selves: Searching for the Supra-Self or “God”

Through an analysis of some of the novel’s main characters, situations, and corresponding metaphors, I now demonstrate how the above philosophical

concepts from Senghor, Lévinas, and Zen Buddhism manifest themselves in *The Book of Chameleons*. The novel is mostly recounted by a Gecko who is given the name of Eulálio by Félix Ventura, the albino and seller of pasts, who lives in the house where all the action takes place. We could say that the main characters of the novel are the house, the Gecko, and the albino—and although I will concentrate on these in my discussions here, I will also resort to several others to illustrate my arguments. These three entities have highly fluid selves and can symbolize much more than themselves—they are chameleons, beings with many beings inside them, ontologically multiple, and constantly changing and adapting to the changing circumstances. Sometimes we even feel that they are indistinguishable from one another. This is especially true for the voices of the Gecko and Félix Ventura, which become entangled in one another even though the Gecko recounts most of the events. This entanglement can be seen as a meeting of many selves, a collective encounter of sorts where one becomes all, as Zen Buddhists may say, or where the “I” is inseparable from the “other”—the identity of the self always dependent on others to exist, to feel and root itself, as Lévinas might put it. There is also a constant movement from reality to dream that confuses the reader: the novel’s chapters are intercalated with six dreams—each titled in sequence: “Dream No.1,” “Dream No. 2,” and so on—that recount or add details revealed in the other sections, further conflating reality and dream and mixing the many characters together or making them almost *undifferentiable*. For instance, in “Dream No. 2” the Gecko seems immersed in the landscape, becoming the river, a young Black boy, and a dog all at the same time, and this conflation is presented as being akin to hearing the voice of God. God, then, is a state of being when one feels the others and the otherness and is no longer an individual self:

The river, lying at the feet of the forest, had finally gone to sleep. I remained, just sitting there, for some time, quite sure that if I could concentrate, if I could keep perfectly still, alert, if the brilliance of the stars could touch my soul—oh, I don’t know—in a particular way, I would be able to hear the voice of God. And then I really did start to hear it, and it was hoarse and hissed like a kettle on fire. I was struggling to understand what it was saying when out of the shadows—right in front of me—appeared a dog. [...] Before I’d reached the road I saw the young man again, crouched by the wall, his arms around the setter. The two of them looked at me as if they were a single being. (45–46)

Reality and dream become entangled, as if reality is a dream or dream a reality: the division between conscious and unconscious life is erased. This convergence between reality and dream speaks to the power of the mind, the unconscious, the spirit, which refuse dissection, merging all in one and creating a dwelling space where the human self is unbound and multifaceted—not chained or restrained by the dichotomies that the ‘body politic’ imposes via language, ideology, rationality, dress, race, ethnicity, etc. This holistic dwelling

space is also a way of being and seeing (or sensing) the world and the self where object and subject, self and other, visible and invisible are merged, as Senghor illustrates and as noted previously. To recall his own words, “[The African] does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object, the tree or stone, the man or animal or social event. [...] The African is moved not so much by the outward appearance of the object as by its profound reality, less by the *sign* than by its *sense* (29–34). We shut our minds to the dissecting “objective intelligence” that Senghor associates with European epistemology to become more, to enter an enlarged beingness. “He [the subject] dies to himself to be reborn in the *Other*” and from that “the fruit of knowledge is born” (32), writes Senghor. “Other” here can refer to both human and non-human entities. Knowledge of self is thus attained through other and otherness, through the process of effacing the self (in reason) and finding it through non-reason, in other words, finding it through “non-rational intelligences”⁷ (or subjective intelligences, as opposed to the objective intelligences) like the senses, the spirit, or the instinct or the “third eye” of Zen Buddhism that Suzuki mentions and as noted herein.

The House

The house is the place where both the albino and the Gecko have conversations and where visitors come frequently to buy a new identity from Félix Ventura. It is the site where dreams and memories are recollected, identities are forged, where people constantly come to, and where they die and are buried. The house could be taken to signify the multicultural and multiracial nature of Angola, a country with many ethnic groups, races, languages, cultures, and political paradigms—a place colonized by the Portuguese in the late 15th century, which fought a long guerrilla war against the colonizer from 1961–1974 backed by Marxist forces, gaining independence in 1975 and installing a Marxist-Socialist regime; then in the early nineties, with the fall of communism, Angola shifted its political paradigm to a (seemingly) more democratic, neo-liberal, and capitalist ideology. The novel recounts all these moments of Angola’s history, either through the photos Félix Ventura has on his walls, the newspaper clippings or videos he obsessively collects about important events—or through the stories and lives of its characters, which are gradually revealed inside the house, sometimes with chilling suspense and surprising climaxes, as if we are inside a detective murder story.

The house is a living entity, full of history, histories—as the following passage illustrates:

This is a living house. A living breathing house. I hear it singing, all night long. The wide brick and wooden walls are always cool, even in the heat of the day when the sun has silenced the birds, lashed at the trees, and began to melt the asphalt. It does me good. It makes me feel safe. Sometimes Old Esperança will bring along one of her grandchildren. She carries them on her back, wrapped tightly in a piece of cloth, as is the ancient custom of the country. She does all her work like this. She sweeps

the floor, dusts down the books, cooks, washes clothes, does the ironing. And the baby, its head pressed into her back, feels her warmth and heartbeat, believes itself to be in its mother's womb, and sleeps. My relationship with the house is just the same. As I've said, as it gets late I stay in the living room, pressed up against the windowpanes, watching the dying sun. Once the night has fallen I wander from area to area [...]. (9) "I used to think of this house as being a bit like a ship. An old steamship heaving itself through the heavy river mud. A vast forest, and night all around. [...] It's full of voices this ship of mine." (24)

On the one hand, the house is associated not only with a peaceful and resting place like the mother's womb, where child and mother become one and selfhood is erased, but it also is a place of memories, of the many beings and voices of those who lived there throughout times. In that sense, the house is the symbol of an Angola that has had a long history, a place where many people with different ideologies and from different races and cultures have lived: a plural Angola. Yet, precisely because of this plurality, the house becomes the site where individuality is erased and we are left with the otherness, an otherness that is alien and yet also ours—a collective consciousness of sorts. The self melts into the collective soul and we are left with a supra-collective identity or a supra-spirit that erases difference and brings in a fluid embrace, where one becomes all and all becomes one, as if we are joined again in the big primordial soup before the big bang, that force, that entity that possessed all in itself. The fact that the house is also compared to a ship that tries to move through the heavy river mud and is surrounded by night and a vast forest is indicative again of this collective soul, the all in one. The night, the mud, the river, and even the forest are undefined substances, elemental substances that erase difference, creating a whole. They are anti-dualistic and merge self into otherness—and that is why the ship "heaves" through the mud pointing to the difficulty in asserting its own self, its difference as its difference is always threatened by the undifferentiated "others" of the mud, the forest, the dark night, that refuse dissection and division and are united in the "Grand Self."

On the other hand, the ship is full of voices, beings who are in its belly, as it were, preventing it from being a stable, isolated, or self-sufficient entity. The ship wants to have a stable/homogenized, ethno-racial identity, but it cannot attain this identity, for there are many voices wanting to speak, which then prevent a grand, one-dimensional narrative of nationhood. These many voices represent the many "others" living in Angola who espouse different ideologies, wear different clothes, have different skin colour. Each group undermines the supremacy of the other, as they murmur or shout their self/identity: "I too am a person, I too have a voice, a story, a history, I too deserve to be, want to be." Here we see again echoes of the Lévinasian, Senghorian, and Zen Buddhist ontological paradigms, as explained above: the self is grand, wants to be grand, it wants to merge with others and otherness to fulfil its ontological and relational desires, and needs, and ethical concerns vis-à-vis the other—and even

when it insists on “being a lonely ship,” *trying to push through the river of life alone*, its individual selfhood remains fragile, always threatened, denied by the many others who also want to BE. As Lévinas notes in *Difficult Freedom*, “In front of the face, I always demand more of myself” (294)—meaning that the individual feels an ethical pull toward the other, a demand that tells ‘it’ to let the other be without incorporating it into its sameness. The other is an infinite unnameable “thing,” a “face” that the self cannot, should not want to capture fully and rationally—it is a rich and multi-dimensional vastness that refuses, and resists, the finite prison that the gaze is, for the gaze names, reduces, traps, and annihilates personhood in unidimensional, individualized, and reduced socio-political confines constructed in a society that operates on dichotomies of good/bad, Black/White, rich/poor, self/other, etc. The other can only be envisaged and imagined through the gentle and fluid prism of what I term here a transcendental infinity corresponding to the “face” of Lévinas or the “third eye” of Buddhism or the “sensorial/mystical” of Senghor, as defined above.

The Gecko(s): Men, Masks, and Ideals

Geckos are chameleon-like, as they can change colours to escape predators. The Gecko’s camouflage is a self-protecting mechanism that allows him to escape danger, for those pursuing him will be fooled by his colours, which can seem like leaves, moss, or the earth. The Gecko merges with the elements: he is—protects—himself in otherness, and in so doing, survives. Thus, his merging with otherness is in fact the best way to maintain his Self alive, to keep his identity. Geckos also adapt very well to different environments, again showing their capacity to survive in hostile places, to keep the species/the Self alive⁸; the hostile environment is the otherness that they have to confront and adapt to in order to keep on living. Moreover, the Gecko is a chameleon, in the sense that he tells us that he used to live as a man in his previous life and has now reincarnated in the body of this lizard. For example, in the section titled, “My First Death Didn’t Kill Me,” the narrating Gecko tells us the following: “Once, when I was in my old human form, I decided to kill myself. I wanted to die, completely” (63). The same idea is reiterated in “Dream No. 1”: “In an earlier life, my life still in human form, the same thing used to happen to me quite frequently” (29). He has many dreams and memories of his life as a human, further pointing to his capacity to mutate, to travel to another realm of being and feeling self, of understanding the world and the other, to be, literally, in someone else’s skin. He has in his soul and body remembrances of his other life/lives and this capacity, a sort of accumulated cognition, enlarges his epistemological and ontological realms: his self is no longer a single entity, as it possesses many others in it. This ability to transform serves him well also in the sense that it allows him to empathize with others and otherness, given that he can see and feel the world through many prisms. His identity is crisscrossed,

saturated with otherness, dwelling in a pool of collective consciousness: he cannot be only one person, only one species.

The memories of his other life, as a human, the people and places he met or visited often come to him in dreams—though sometimes he also has some recollection or sensation of those while awake. It is as if the inner spiritual world—this unconscious revealed through dreams—is the supreme gnosis, knowing, feeling, and remembering best, allowing an awareness that surpasses the material realms of perception; it is a knowing that evades the narrowness and duality of the rational—fully awoken—mind that names, divides, and puts things and people into hierarchical categories—therefore facilitating entrance into a mystical realm or a meeting with “God.” Again, this introspective and metaphysical way of understanding echoes the “third eye” in Zen Buddhism and the corresponding epistemologies by Lévinas and Senghor noted previously. This inner world is preferred because it can see and not be seen, it can feel—know—the world without being framed by its finite materiality; it can step away from the unconscious aloofness of those who are imprisoned in their narrow ways, their bodies, cultures, social class, religion, politics, race, and are therefore incapable of expanding consciousness, remaining trapped in isolated, individualized paradigms of selfhood and difference where the other, or otherness in general, is seen as a treat to the self. This way of life is a wretched one, as it causes suffering and fear, because the subject is always afraid to lose him/herself in otherness, not realizing that that is not in fact a healthy way to live, to attain true beingness and existential fulfilment. The access to the inner world allows the Gecko to expand beingness and exit the body politic, to dwell in a realm of possibilities, unchained by materialisms or socio-cultural and religious ideological paradigms that classify, dissect, and frame, thus narrowing selfhood and knowledge. The following quotation describing one of the dreams of the Gecko illustrates this well:

I'm crossing a road in some alien city, making my way through the crowds of people. People of all races, all creeds, all sexes (for a long while I used to think there were only two ...) pass by me. Men dressed in black, with dark glasses, carrying briefcases. Buddhist monks, laughing heartily, happy as oranges. Gossamer women. Fat matrons with shopping carts. Skinny adolescents on skates, slight birds slipping through the crowds. Little boys in single file, in school uniforms, each holding hands with the one in front, one teacher in the lead and another behind. Arabs in *djelabas* and skullcaps. Bald men walking killer dogs. Cops. Thieves. Intellectuals lost in thought. Workers in overalls. Nobody sees me. Not even the groups of Japanese, with their video cameras, and narrow eyes alert to everything around them. I stop right in front of people, I speak to them, I shake hands with them, but they take no notice of me. They don't speak to me. I've had this dream the last three nights. In an earlier life, my life still in human form, the same thing used to happen to me quite frequently. I remember waking up afterward with a bitter taste in my mouth, my heart filled with anxiety. (29)

As the Gecko also tells us here, he wakes up with “a bitter taste in [his] mouth, [his] heart filled with anxiety” because no one notices him when he shakes hands with or speaks to them in the dreams he has now or had when living as a human: the people in the dreams are too imprisoned in their condition, identities, materiality, and narrow angles of vision, and fail to see him. He also feels this way because he is coming back to an awake state and fears that he, too, may become blind to himself, to his inner—expanded—self, that is, and will be imprisoned in the banality of material life which neglects to see beyond itself. It is as if, upon awakening, he feels the weight of being alive, of living in a body, a finite entity that does not see beyond itself to expand its consciousness, its awareness outside itself.

Moreover, the Gecko often complains that no one is a name after Félix Ventura baptizes him Eulálio:

“And his name? So did the guy tell you who he is?”

No one is a name! I thought, forcefully ...

“No one is a name,” Félix replied.”

The reply took Ângela Lúcia by surprise. Félix too. I watched him look at her as though he was looking into an abyss. She was smiling sweetly. She lay her right hand on the albino’s left arm. She whispered something in his ear, and he relaxed.

“No,” he whispered back. “I don’t know who he is. But since I’m the one who dreams about him I think I can give him any name I want, can’t I? I’m going to call him Eulálio, because he is so well spoken.” (83)

The Gecko is given the name of Eulálio—a name with Greek origins which refers to someone who is a good orator—because he speaks well and can communicate with the albino. This Gecko, described in the novel as a kind of tiger-gecko found in Namibia, emits sounds similar to human laughter, thus resembling humans, and that is also likely why he is named in this way. Both the Gecko and Félix Ventura seem to think that names are not reflective of the true nature of people or animals, and in fact read each other’s minds about this very issue—showing that they are like-minded, have a certain spiritual connection, and are part of the same species of enlightened beings who see beyond the appearances of materiality and its corresponding signs. A name is a language symbol that often comes to be associated with certain personality traits or even family lines. It creates a reality and imprisons the entity it names, curbing its beingness or giving it social status if one happens to be born into a wealthy family. In fact, Angolans often come to Félix Ventura precisely to buy distinguished pasts and trace their genealogy to important families and historical names—social status and identities are bought through money. In this context, names become even more meaningless and illusory, for they symbolize the political degradation of the country and its undemocratic ways: those with money or connections to the political elite can buy power and prestige, and the government will protect them as they show political allegiance.

This points to the high corruption in contemporary Angola, where the new, emerging bourgeoisie and political leaders use all their means to affirm and establish themselves in a neo-clientelistic system of patron and client, a common phenomenon in post-independence African states.⁹ In the words of Chabal and Daloz:

[In] most African countries, the state is no more than a décor, a pseudo-Western façade making the realities of deeply personalized political relations. There may well appear to be a relative institutionalization of the main structures but such bodies are largely devoid of authority. In Western Europe the Hobbesian notion of the state led to the progressive development of relatively autonomous centres of power, invested with sole political legitimacy. In Black Africa, however, such legitimacy is firmly embedded in the patrimonial practices of patrons and their networks. (16)

In a recent interview given to *Rede Angola*, the vice-president of the Portuguese International Transparency Agency, Paulo Morais, also spoke about the high corruption permeating Angolan politics¹⁰ and noted how such corruption is the biggest impediment to economic and democratic success in Angola and the development of a middle class:

The Angolan regime functions in a corrupt manner. It is a kleptocratic organization where a clique has taken over the power after the war of independence. [...] Angola's biggest problem is that all its wealth is controlled by this clique in an exaggerated and unacceptable manner which impedes the creation of a middle class. Without means there are no consumers or a middle class that can create business for consumers. No country can grow without developing a strong middle class. (My translation)

In the section of the novel titled, "The Minister," we see specific examples of the type of corruption within Angolan politics noted above. The Minister comes to Félix Ventura to buy an important and honourable past and obtain a misleading biography titled, *The Real Life of a Fighter*. After Félix Ventura fabricates his past, he becomes someone who is a direct descendent of Salvador Correia, the influential historical figure from Brazil who in 1648 helped liberate Angola from Dutch occupation. The Minister is also portrayed in the biography as a person with a genuine interest in Angolan politics and the war of liberation, who decides to return to the country in 1990 to help rebuild Angola:

The story Félix had the man tell in his true History was that in 1975, disillusioned with the course of events, and because he refused to participate in a fratricidal war ("That hadn't been what he had planned") the minister went into exile in Portugal. Inspired by the teachings of his parental grandfather, the wisest of men, well versed in the medicinal herbs of Angola, he founded in Lisbon a clinic dedicated to African alternative medicine. He returned to his country in 1990, once the civil war had come to an end, determined to contribute toward the reconstruction of the country. He wanted to give the people our-daily-bread. And that is exactly what he did. (129)

However, the reality of the Minister's life was much less honourable and grand: he had never been that interested in politics or in fighting colonialism, and had always been much more interested in women than politics, and though imprisoned by the PIDE on April 20, 1974 for some of his political activities, just days away from the Carnation revolution, he left Angola in 1975 for Lisbon. Upon his arrival there, he placed an ad in a popular newspaper that read: "Master Marimba: cures for the evil eye, envy, ills of the soul. Guaranteed success in love and business" (128), and conducted the less than honourable business of counselling ill-married women while getting rich in the process. He then returned to Angola in the 1990s shortly before the first free multiparty elections held in 1992, founded the chain of bakeries called the Marimba Union Bakeries, and entered politics:

The Minister's return also signaled the beginning of his involvement in politics. He began by buying favours from certain people in the so-called structures in order to accelerate the licensing of his bakeries, and it wasn't long before he was a frequent visitor to the houses of ministers and generals. In just two years he himself was named Secretary of State for Economic Transparency and Combating Corruption. In *The Real Life of a Fighter* the minister explains how—driven by great and serious patriotic motives—he accepted the burden of this first challenge. Today he is a Minister for Bread-Making and Dairy Products. (129)

Here Agualusa, through our narrator, the Gecko, is also being critical of the ideology of nationalism and the national historiography project that took place in Angola (as in many African nations) after or even before independence, mostly by educated elites and political figures that sought to find local heroes and affirm an Afrocentric national identity, uplift and rescue pre-colonial histories, and reveal the important role of Africans in the liberation struggles. The included detail about the Minister being "well versed in the medicinal herbs of Angola" (129), as noted in the preceding quotation, serves precisely to relay the image of a man who is culturally proud, attached to his roots, a "true nationalist" who is not ashamed to practice Afrocentric medicine. As Agualusa ironically puts it,

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. The book will come to be used as a reference for future work on the struggle of the nation's liberation, on the troubled years that followed independence, and the broad movement of democratization the country experienced. (128)

This ideology of nationalism and its accompanying nationalist historiography (knowledge production), though very necessary at this point to combat the colonial library and its inaccurate and negative depiction of Africa by the colonizers, sometimes went too far by depicting African historical and political figures only in a positive light and minimizing or dismissing the role of outsiders. As argued by Toyin Falola in *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*:

Nationalist historiography searched for, invented, and celebrated African heroes. There was a deliberate effort to deflate the importance of the major European actors in post-fifteenth-century African history, including Lord Lugard, Mungo Park, Mary Slessor, Richard Lander, H. M. Stanley, and David Livingstone. Thus, on the one hand, they were praising the African genius for the creation of excellent institutions and celebrating the heroes that made this possible. On the other hand, they were minimizing the role of outsiders in their historical narratives. (241)

Thus, through the story of the Minister, Agualusa is pointing to the construction of knowledge and history and how new ideological discourses often do not necessarily reveal the truth, but are contextual and the result of manipulation by political and intellectual forces commanding the nation at a given time.

The section of the novel titled, "The Man in the Mask," that appears toward the end of the novel complements the story of the Minister quite well and serves as a critique of the general corruption that permeates Angola's political system. Earlier on, we are told, through Edmundo Barata dos Reis, the faithful communist, that the president has doubles. Félix Ventura also discovers through watching news videos that the president sometimes is left-handed, other times is not, or shows different physical traits and mannerisms—pointing to the truth of such a fact. This is Agualusa's way of saying that José Eduardo dos Santos has managed to stay in power since 1979 after Agostinho Neto's premature death from cancer, despite the fact that the country has had several regime changes and multiparty elections, therefore pointing to the political manipulations of the ruling party (MPLA), its clientelistic nature, and even rigged elections. The Man in the Mask is in fact described in a manner that reminds us of Eduardo dos Santos: "The man who has just walked in reminds me of someone. But I still haven't been able to work out who. Tall, elegant, well dressed. His gray hair, cropped short, gives him an air of nobility, an air which his broad, rather course face quickly dispels" (167). The man then tells Félix Ventura his story, saying that his face has been stolen:

They stole my face. Oh ... how can I explain this to you? They stole me from myself. I woke up one day to discover that they'd done plastic surgery on me, and left me in a clinic with an envelope full of dollars and a postcard: *We thank you for your services—consider your job done*. That's what it said on the postcard. They could have killed me. I don't know why they didn't kill me. Maybe they thought that this way I'm even dead. ... Or rather, that's what I thought at first, that they wanted me to suffer. And I did, those first days I really did suffer. I considered reporting what had happened. I sought out my friends. Some of them didn't believe me. Others did believe me, in spite of the mask I now wear, because after all, I know things—but they pretended not to believe me. I thought it would be dangerous to insist. And then one evening, an evening like this one, sitting alone at a table outside a bar at the end of the island, I began to enjoy an amazing sensation—I wasn't sure what to call it; but I do know now, it was Freedom! I'd been transformed into a free man. I had funds, I had access to accounts abroad that would see me out for the rest of my life.

And I had the weight of no responsibilities—no critics, no remorse, no envy, no hatred, no rancor, no court intrigue, still less any fear that one of them would betray me. ... (167–8)

The man now wants Félix Ventura to create for him a modest past, exactly the opposite of what others, including the Minister, want: “I want you to give me a modest past. A name with no luster to it whatsoever. A genealogy that is obscure, and irrefutable. There must be men who are rich but have no family and no glory, surely? I want to be like that ...” (168). On one level, Agualusa is pointing here to the fact that those with money in contemporary Angola often do not have a glorious past and attained wealth and influence through illicit and corrupt means, stealing from the state’s wealth through various mechanisms—and suggesting that José Eduardo dos Santos has been a president for life because of political corruption and clientelistic relations. Thus, what the story of *The Man in the Mask* ultimately suggests is that different regimes, be it colonialism, the Marxist socialist model adopted at independence, or the multiparty, “seemingly” democratic system—first attempted in 1992 when general elections were first held in the country—have not been able to change much about the politics of the country, and, therefore, neo-patrimonial systems continue to be the hallmark.¹¹ More elections have been held since then and dos Santos has managed to always hold on to office, despite multiple accusations of rigged results and high corruption in the process. As noted by Tony Hodges:

The method used in the elections will almost certainly exemplify the patrimonial or clientelistic mechanisms that have become the hallmark of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos’s style of rule, particularly since the shift to a more ‘pluralistic’ political system and a market economy since the early 1990s. Oil-financed patronage has been a fundamental part of the strategy pursued by the President for the conservation of political power, making it necessary to resort to violence or repression only to deal with the least malleable of opponents, such as Jonas Savimbi, who wanted to [hold] supreme power rather than share in its spoils. [...] The patronage that has brought loyalty of acquiescence (from army officers, former rebels and politicians alike) depends largely though not entirely on the President’s access to the large and rising flow of oil revenue and has contributed to the formation of a rentier class through a process akin to one of primitive capital accumulation [...]. The mechanisms through which patronage has been dispensed and accumulation has proceeded have been manifold. Many are linked to oil or diamond sectors, either directly or through the financial resources generated by these sectors, while others concern land or business opportunities of various types. (186–7)

Each political paradigm, each ideology changes its rhetoric—its name, its “face”—but the mechanisms of obtaining power remain the same: corruption and clientelism remain the norm, and democracy and alleviation of poverty are un-concretized dreams, since most Angolans continue to live in destitution and

to be oppressed in many ways. In other words, the "face" of the country continues to be that of José Eduardo dos Santos, who follows the same clientelistic means to secure power. He is the same man, pursuing the same corrupt governing agenda, regardless of the name change of his politics—from Socialist-Marxism to neo-liberalism. The name change is only a mask to conceal the same governing agenda and the Big Man—to use Bayart's¹² term, or what Achille Mbembe might call the Father¹³—continues to rule through neo-patrimonial means that reproduce violence and popular subservience, and perpetuate unequal distribution of resources. What The Man in the Mask wants, then, is to erase his past, his ideological affiliations, and become unknown, obscured, forgotten in history—because he has realized that history is just a creation anyway, a manipulation of the truth by those in power, and furthermore, political paradigmatic changes only occur on a façade level. He wants to enter the non-ideological, where he can feel "purer" and free, or at least freer, from the "cages" of ideology, for ideology always ends up reproducing tyrannical systems even when it seems to have pure ideals of democracy and equality. In this non-ideological, symbolic "void" The Man in the Mask can be emptied of all social constructs and enter the non-linguistic realm, or what the Buddhists would call the *satori* or the *sunyata*, a state that reflects the true nature of being, a higher enlightenment, an ontological climax, as it were. As Suzuki posits, "the *satori* is nothing other than emptiness, which is, after all, no-emptiness. [This] reality is beyond intellection, and that which lies beyond the intellection we call emptiness" (qtd. in Roy 135). Moreover, in Buddhism, language is also seen as "empty" (Brazier 12–13; Omine 11), a mere symbol for something beyond rational comprehension and language. Here it is important to note that language encompasses all rhetoric, all ideologies, since ideology is forged in and through rhetoric/language. It can thus be suggested that The Man in the Mask has come to a higher consciousness by realizing the flaws of all ideologies and ultimately their oppressive nature: by living in *samsara*—the suffering cycle of life, according to the Buddhists—he has learned a higher truth. He now wants to exit that very *samsara* that causes suffering and which restricts his selfhood and enter *nirvana*—a space empty of the 'body-politic' where enlightenment and freedom from the mundane are attained. This state and corresponding superior consciousness, which cannot be captured through language and socio-political ideologies framed in language, is similar to the Lévinasian "infinite" and Senghor's "sensorial/mystical" realms, which privilege the sense over the sign. And here we should also recall again the aversion that Félix Ventura and the Gecko feel toward names. They know they are more than a name: their totality inhabits the realm of the un-nameable, the Lévinasian "face."

Yet, thankfully, hope is a stubborn thing, as the saying goes, and so the dream of equality or the very idea of striving for it in this realm of earthly *samsara*—paramount during the fight for, and at independence—continues and is visible through various symbolisms in the novel. For example, Edmundo

Barata dos Reis continues to use his red communist shirt, like a second skin, even though the regime is now operating as a pro-capitalist, neo-liberal, democratic system. Barata dos Reis was let go because he did not adapt to the change of the ruling party and wanted to remain a staunch Marxist. Moreover, the symbol of the MPLA remains the same: it has red and the yellow star associated with the communist bloc and its ideals of equality, reminding us of the “dream.” After Ângela Lúcia kills Barata dos Reis, when it is unveiled that it was the latter and his comrades who had burned her body with cigarettes when she was a baby and killed her mother, Félix Ventura buries the body in his backyard. From the site of the burial, a red glorious bougainvillea quickly grows and spreads itself through the walls to reach the street, even if no one seems to pay attention to it: “Out in the yard, where Félix Ventura buried the narrow body of Edmundo Barata dos Reis, now flowers the ruby glory of a bougainvillea. It grew fast. It’s already covering a good part of the wall. It hangs down over the passageway, out there, in a cry of praise—or perhaps of accusation—to which no one pays any heed” (163). This metaphor of the bougainvillea suggests that even though Angola seems to have forgotten the beautiful ideals of the revolution fought for in a long and painful war against colonialism, the ideals are not dead and keep resurfacing. The bougainvillea flower, which is ruby in colour, is reminiscent of the MPLA colours and ideals for an independent Angola, and grows out of a dead body, a body that once carried the ideals of the MPLA. The bougainvillea comes back to the world; it grows out of a dead body in the backyard to enter the streets again to remind people that the ideal is not yet attained, for Angola continues to be a wretched place of exploitation of humans by humans, a site of suffering, and so it is necessary to persist in the battle, to continue fighting for the ideal and just Angola—a country where all citizens are treated with dignity and equality. The bougainvillea is thus an allegory for the supra-self, the deeper self, that self that cries for justice and equality to be brought to society, that wants self and other to come together to form a (true) community, a nationhood based on principles of egalitarianism. The very idea of communism, which in its ideal (pure) form preaches interconnectedness, inter-aid, and erasure of hierarchies is something that we must not forget and strive for so that we can live in one another, through one another—and even if the type of Marxist communism that was practiced after independence did not work, it does not mean we should abandon its ideals. Communalism is, of course, also very much a part of African ways of life and was used by post-independence leaders such as Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana (who attempted to put in place what is known as African Socialisms) as a basis for post-independence regimes that sought to Africanize politics—even though in the end these systems, too, did not work or could not be implemented as conceived by the two figures.¹⁴ Ultimately, the bougainvillea, like the Gecko and many other metaphors and characters in the novel, denotes circularity, wholeness,

togetherness, communalism, that is, the idea that we live in one another, through one another, that nothing ever really dies, for life and beings are reborn continuously. This suggests that all life—all energy—is interconnected and beings continually transform into something else and because of that it could be said that everything and everyone possesses *remembrances* of others/otherness in them. This circularity, this “all in one” and continuous transformation of life is again very much in line with Zen Buddhist and Senghorian philosophies of dialectical and inter-dependent identity. Moreover, both philosophies are also marked by the ethos of animism, as I will make evident in my exploration of Félix Ventura below.

The Albino

Félix Ventura, the albino, is one of the most important characters of the novel, if not the most important. Like the Gecko, he is multiple and chameleon-like; he has many in himself. The fact that he is a Black albino—with Black features and White skin—already symbolizes that his identity is not monolithic. He is like Angola, a country of multiple races, mixed cultures, and races where mestizos abound. Ventura was raised by a mestizo (adoptive) father, a collector of old books, who found him inside a box on top of Eça de Queiroz’s book, *The Relic*. The child may have been abandoned by his family because he was albino, given that in some African cultures, Angola included, albinos can be discriminated against and mistreated, sometimes even killed, as it is believed that they have special powers, bring bad luck, or are ghosts.¹⁵ In this sense, then, the albino is already an outsider in the culture that birthed him but which now rejects him because of cultural ideologies that frame beingness and stipulate what is acceptable. Being the way he is, people often feel repulsed by him, especially women, with the exception of Ângela Lúcia who seems to accept him and like him and even becomes physically intimate with him—pointing to her (special) capacity to see beyond the material body and into the metaphysical infinity of the “other” she encounters. She is able to evade the “gaze” and enter the “face,” to use the terminology of Lévinas. Because the albino is seen as an outsider, an “other” that does not quite fit in unidimensional paradigms of race (he is a Black man with White skin), he is in a position to understand and feel “otherness” and be empathic to those who are misfits. He rejects monolithic apprehensions of reality and humanity, and like the Gecko, knows that people are more than a name. The very fact that Félix Ventura is an albino is what makes him special—he is a “relic,” like the very book on top of which he was found, a unique being with sui generis qualities and capacities who has a complex understanding of reality. He is Black but not Black; he is White but not White, thus evading racialized categories and therefore refusing the very concept of race, which in fact is a constructed one, given that we all actually belong to the same race, the human race. As explained by Jan Vansina,

Today there exists a single human race; the genetic differences between humans are minute. There has been a time when several humanoid races lived alongside each other, but the last surviving group other than humans, the Neanderthals, died more than 30,000 years ago. However, in so far as human groups have lived for centuries in comparative isolation, so that a particular group mates only with the people nearby whose genes are similar, distinctions between such groups can and do arise. People sharing a particular collection of genes or gene pool are properly labelled a *population* in genetics, and should not be called a race. [I]t is evident that the existing classifications of the people of Africa by their appearances are superficial—in the literal sense of the word—and worthless. There are no “Caucasians,” “Khoisans,” “pygmies,” “negroes,” “Nilotics,” “Erythroids” or “Mongoloids.” Such terms are merely labels that survived from a totally discredited and erroneous approach to human biology. They are literally “nonsense” because nothing biological corresponds to them. (12)

Racial categories are constructs charged with power dynamics related to the establishment and legitimization of European empires in Africa (and elsewhere) and to pseudo-scientific theories dating back to (at least) the 19th century used to justify exploitation, slavery, and direct colonization by placing Blacks at the bottom of the human pyramid.¹⁶

On a cultural level, Félix Ventura is also a diverse assortment: he reads and is familiar with Portuguese and Brazilian classical writers, such as Eça de Queiroz, Camilo Castelo Branco, and Machado de Assis. Additionally, he likes Brazilian music, seems to know the history of his country (and continent) quite well, and is savvy about world matters and personalities. Félix Ventura is a multicultural being, a citizen of the world, as the following passage demonstrates:

Others—bolder—will wander around the house on their own, assessing the shine on the silver, the antique quality of the furniture, but they quickly come back to the living room, alarmed at the stacks of books in the bedroom and the corridors, and more alarmed still at the fierce gaze of the men in top hats and monocles, the playful gaze of the *bessanganas*, those bourgeois women of Luanda and Benguela, the astonished stare of the officers from the Portuguese navy in their ceremonial outfits, the wild stare of the nineteenth-century Congolese prince, the challenging stare of a famous North American writer—each of them in golden frames, posing for all eternity. They look around the bookcases for records. (5)

This description of Ventura’s house also reveals how different societies—be they Western or African—fabricate identity: people play roles that are tied to their social position and standing. They dress, act, and pose to reveal and perform that very identity, and are therefore actors who put on a mask to fit into a role. Yet, this very “mask” restricts their full personhood and makes them prisoners of social constructs. It is as if by having all these historical figures on display on his walls, Félix Ventura is reminding himself that he is much more than a skin colour, a name, a social class. He knows his personhood is unbounded, should be unbounded in order to escape social,

restrictive identity paradigms that tame the self. And in any case, as Ventura's very profession reveals, people come to him to buy their identity and glorious pasts with money and via political connections—so it is all mostly a sham, a make-believe game. Even at this level, identity is acquired, bought, and does not correspond to the reality of the person's life. His own profession is a direct allegory for the artificiality of identity: it is something constructed, attained, in life, in the realm of the 'body-politic', dependent on power dynamics and relations, and has nothing or very little to do with an *a priori*, inalienable truth.

By the end of the novel Félix Ventura starts writing his own diary, as Eulálio the Gecko, our spirited and often humorous narrator up to this point, is found dead along with the scorpion, both entangled in one another as if in a dance of death:

This morning I found Eulálio dead. Poor Eulálio. He'd fallen at the foot of my bed, with an enormous scorpion, a horrible creature, also dead, champed between his teeth. He died in combat, like a hero [...]. I buried him in the yard, shrouded in a silk handkerchief, one of my best handkerchiefs, beside the trunk of the avocado tree. [...] I decided to keep this diary today, to maintain the illusion that there's someone listening to me. I'll never have another listener like him, though. He was my best friend, I think. I suppose I'll stop meeting him in my dreams now. And indeed with every passing day, every passing hour, my memory of him becomes more and more like a figure made of sand. The memory of a dream. Maybe I dreamed it all: José Buchmann, Edmundo Barata dos Reis. [...] As for Ângela Lúcia, if I did dream her, I dreamed her very well. The postcards she sends me, one every three or four days are almost real. [...] I am reminded of that black and white picture of Martin Luther King speaking to the crowd: *I have a dream* ... He really should have said, "I made a dream." If you think about it there's a difference between having a dream and making a dream. Yes, I've made a dream. (179–80)

This ending suggests that *The Book of Chameleons* is a metaphor for Angola in the sense that the country is a dream still waiting to concretize itself because its people—Black, White, mixed, or belonging to different ethnicities, classes, and political affiliations—have not been able to transcend their "physical and ideological body" to meet one another in a self-disinterested or self-detached way. They have been unwilling or unable to operate outside narrow racialized, classed, ideological, and individualized frameworks—and therefore the fulfilment of their ontological citizenship has been arrested. The book, then, is an idea, a yearning for something that happens in the head of the albino; it is a vision of his deeper/grander/spiritual and enlightened self that has not yet been realized in Angola—just like the beautiful Marxist ideals of the MPLA revolutionaries for an egalitarian and classless society have not materialized, as discussed above. And yet "the ruby glory of [the] bougainvillea" that grew out of Barata dos Reis's dead body insists on entering the world again "in a cry of praise—or perhaps accusation" (163)—because we still have not found what we are looking for, to borrow U2's famous phrase. Thus, and despite what the

albino tells us above, it may be better to say that his dream, just like Martin Luther King's dream of racial equality in the USA., is but a dream waiting to become. The goal is not to just have the dream—to envisage it, to write, and preach about it, as Ventura and King do—but make it materialize in society. In this sense, then, there is no difference between having a dream and making a dream, even though the verb “making” suggests at first the realization of the dream.

At the end, Félix Ventura also describes himself as an animist:

I am an animist. I've always been an animist, though I've only lately realized it. 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 the bottle it's like a bottle. But it isn't a bottle. Eulálio will always be Eulálio, whether flesh (incarnate) or fish. (179–80)

In general terms, an animist is someone who sees him/herself as part of a physical whole—the trees, the stones, the animals, the non-human ...—; sees all physical reality as interconnected—belief in a relational dialectic—; all entities—human and non-human—as sentient beings possessing a spiritual essence/energy; and regards death as a transformation instead of cessation of life. There is for the animist, then, a connection with “the all and everything” that is both physical and metaphysical—a sort of imbedded *remembrance* in the self of all the other and otherness of the world.¹⁷ And in that sense, animism is in line with Zen Buddhism¹⁸ and the aforementioned corresponding Senghorian epistemologies and ontologies. All three frameworks see the many parts of reality as connected parts to a whole and value an inter-relational approach to life. The personal “I” is tied to the “I” of the other human, the “I” of the plant or the tree or the stone or the star. It is this connection that enlarges the human self and expands consciousness and selfhood. Knowing the other or otherness this way, is entering a mystical state, another way of being, the realm of “God.” The albino, just like the Gecko, is the “all in one,” the supra-spirit: the element that continuously becomes something else. They are the water that may take the shape of the bottle, yet their Self cannot be contained in the bottle, it surpasses the shape of the bottle—just like the Gecko's name does not contain the entirety of his being, or just like the body of the albino—which contains both Black and White—defies simple racialized and dualistic social constructs. The revelation by Ventura that he is an animist at the end of the novel confirms that it is “non-identity” at the level of the material and discursive, that liberates the body and the soul and expands selfhood and consciousness, allowing us to connect with others and otherness and attain a mystical awareness, a wisdom, that remains outside language and all its related epistemological rational, and finite, paradigms. The Gecko was a man, then became a Gecko, and will now become something else—another body, another name, and yet he will always be more than the body and the

name. His beingness, his energy, his expanded self cannot be tamed in the smallness of the material or the chains of socio-political language and discourse, the 'body politic' always wanting to put us in a cage, a boundary, a border, a race, a nationality—for the "I" of the soul is always grander than the cage of framed and finite bodies. As Brazier puts it in relation to Buddhism, the Gecko embodies a "world of process, [a] flow" (238).

José Buchmann

José Buchmann (in fact Pedro Gouveia) is also an important character who yearns to exit static and finite identities: a chameleon. He went to Angola as a child and considers himself more Angolan than Portuguese. He pretended to be on the side of the Marxist Angolan independence fighters but was in fact a spy for the Portuguese colonial administration. Buchmann's actions were uncovered with the aid of the Portuguese consul, who brought him to the revolutionary and fierce Marxist fighter, Edmundo Barata dos Reis, when the former was trying to leave Angola. He is taken to prison where he remains for about nine years, and then leaves for Portugal, and becomes a photo journalist covering wars and travelling the world. Later on, he decides to return to Angola to try and find his daughter, Ângela Lúcia, who he discovers is still alive and had been raised by his dead wife's sister. Buchmann's wife was a Black Angolan woman who had been tortured and killed by Barata dos Reis and his comrades after she gave birth to Ângela Lúcia. When he arrives in Angola, Buchmann looks for Félix Ventura so that he can obtain a new identity, reconnect with his daughter, and pass unrecognizable by old acquaintances. And yet, by some odd chance, he ends up meeting Barata dos Reis who is now living in a gutter, seemingly mad, still wearing his old Marxist shirt, holding on to old revolutionary ideals, and claiming that the President has doubles. When all is revealed, Barata dos Reis ends up being killed by Ângela Lúcia in Félix Ventura's house and then buried in the garden. Buchmann is himself a chameleon; he is Portuguese and White by birth. He feels Angolan in spirit, is a spy agent for the colonial government pretending to be a Marxist revolutionary, marries a Black woman with whom he has a mixed child, and has an accent that is difficult to place. He becomes Buchmann although he was born Gouveia. He is never the same person, always inventing himself or running away from his past:

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. Félix Ventura took a step back: "Who are you?" (16) Yes, I had been born in Lisbon, but I'd gone to Luanda when I was tiny, even before I'd learned to talk. Portugal was my country, they told me, they told me so in prison—the other prisoners, the informers—but I never felt Portuguese. I stayed in Lisbon for two or three years, working as a copy editor on a weekly newspaper. It was then, through my contact with photographers working on the paper, that I began to get interested

in photography. I did a quick course, and set off to Paris. From there I went to Berlin. I began working as a photojournalist, and spent years—decades—crossing the world from war to war, trying to forget myself. [...] My whole life was an attempt to escape. (172)

Buchmann goes from one identity to another, one life to another, always feeling the weight of identity or political affiliation and always wanting to exit each identity, each affiliation. Living in a world that sees people as beings who ought to belong to one race or another, to one culture or another, to one ideology or another, or one nation or another, Buchmann is trapped by the physical markers of his body, colour, place of birth, accent, and even by his ideological affiliations, all of which place him into a particular physical or ideological territory—and yet he never feels he fully belongs to any. He finds that he is always more than the category, more than the frame, and this is why he turns his identity of José Buchmann—a creation by Félix Ventura—into a “reality.” Buchmann devises a way to make the burial of his parents in Chibia (Southern Angola) an “actuality,” and comes close to finding his “fictitious” mother, Eva Miller. Because reality, with its narrow socio-political paradigms, tries to frame him into a person that does not represent his full self, he uses imagination to escape and fabricate his own identity. Like the albino and the Gecko, Buchmann yearns to have an extended, boundless identity, to exit the smallness of his body and the confines of his own familial and genetic line. All these ontological yearnings are manifestations of the expanded selfhood that the Lévinasian, Buddhist, and Senghorian frameworks put forward, as discussed.

Ângela Lúcia

Ângela Lúcia is also an important character in the novel, who always wants to evade her own small self, and tries to extend herself beyond her Self. She is associated with light, beauty, non-physicality, transcendentalism, and idealism. Being the daughter of a White man, Pedro Gouveia, and a Black Angolan woman, she is between worlds, belonging to both and yet to none. Like the albino or the Gecko, she is multiple, ephemeral, difficult to name and tame into oneness. She is obsessed with taking photos—“collects light” (51), as she puts it—and she is horrified that Pedro Gouveia, her own father, had been a war photographer. Constantly attracted to light, Ângela Lúcia travels the world to find and capture it in Polaroid photos:

“I can’t believe this light,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” Sometimes, she said, she could recognize a place just by the quality of the light. In Lisbon, the light at the end of the spring leans madly over the houses, white and humid, and just a little bit salty. In Rio de Janeiro, in the season that the *carioca* locals call instinctively the “autumn,” and the Europeans just a figment of their imagination, the light becomes gentler, like a shimmer of silk, sometimes accompanied by a humid greyness, which

hangs over the streets, and then sinks down gently into the squares of the gardens. [...] "And in Egypt? In Cairo? Have you ever been to Cairo? ... To the pyramids of Giza?" [...] "The light, majestic, falls, so potent, so alive, that it seems to settle on everything like a sort of luminous mist." (50)

Though a being of flesh and blood inserted in this earthly and material world, Ângela Lúcia constantly yearns to exit it and dwell in the spiritual realm. Her very name reflects her personality and spiritual inclinations. Taken together, the names symbolize light, grace, invoking someone with an angel-like nature, even a messenger of God:

Yesterday he confided in me that he'd met an amazing woman. Though, he added, the word "woman" doesn't quite do her justice. 'Ângela Lúcia is to women what humankind is to the apes.' [...] His memory of this woman made him talkative. He talked about her like someone trying to give substance to a miracle ... 'She's ...'—he paused, his palms up, eyes screwed shut in fierce concentration, finding the words—'... pure light.' (40)

She is attracted to light, wants to be light, to travel and feel the world, to be more than herself, to expand her beingness in a manner similar to the other characters. Light is an element that gives life to, illuminates, that which has none, and so, in that sense, Ângela Lúcia is a giver of life to others and otherness. Her self makes the other be, and in that process expands itself, leaving the individual ego and entering the grand/supra self: the life of the other symbolizes her own—expanded—life, speaking again of the importance of relational identity for the human's ontological realization. That is to say, the other is the self and the self is the other. Light also travels between spaces rapidly, suggesting again the character's omnipresence: she is the connection between all and everything, symbolizing the erasure of distance between selves, an entrance into a collective state of beingness—a wholeness.

Other Metaphors of Expanded Selfhood

The novel is saturated with other images that invoke fluidity, light, and transparency—images of rivers, stars, fire, flame, open skies, angels, and shiny black bodies. All these images again speak of the mutability of all beings in the world, the universe even, the interrelation between all that exists—while also invoking the transcendental or "God," that which is beyond the here and now, or that which pure reason alone cannot grasp, but which we can perceive—feel—via the spirit, the body, the sensorial—the *sense* rather than the *sign*, the subjective intelligence rather than the objective intelligence, as Senghor writes—the "third eye" of Zen Buddhism or, by following the cognition of the "face," by seeing in and through "the-element," as Lévinas puts it. I argue that all these relational, holistic, mystical, and sensorial ontological and epistemological paradigms are already invoked in the very opening line of the

novel, to which I now return: “I was born in this house, and grew up here. I’ve never left. As it gets late I press my body against the window and look at the sky. I like watching the flames, the racing clouds, and above them, angels—hosts of angels—shaking down the sparks from their hair, flapping their broad fiery wings.” (3)

The Gecko has never left, because he lives in all, and everything; he is an animist, a being in process, in flow, like the very racing clouds or the fiery flames or the angles he observes—all mutating, transcending, and transcendent elements. The house is Angola, is Africa, is the world, is the universe. This view again reiterates the holistic and relational dimension of African epistemologies, where the body is a house for the larger universe.¹⁹ The house is the self and the other/otherness, the present and the absent, the physical and the spiritual in a *soup of selfless being or beingness* where nonetheless the many beings/others still want to be alive—like a ship pushing through the muddy river with the multiple voices in its belly, invoked by the metaphor previously discussed. The house is the self always becoming or wanting to become other or otherness in order to be and understand better—in order to fulfill the ontological desire of the “supra-self” that constantly demands, yearns for, expansion.

Concluding Remarks

The Book of Chameleons invites us to deeply reflect on the idea of selfhood and identity formation wherever we are, and to defy simplistic narratives of self and nation. When we obsessively adhere to a material or ideological identity, a body, a colour, a nation, a party affiliation, we are doing a disservice to our world, our humanity, our ontology, for we are annihilating the difference of the other—killing that other—and also killing, reducing, our own selfhood, a selfhood that demands existence outside of the self, outside of the finite frames of the overall body-politic to realize itself. Agualusa’s preoccupations are thus highly political and ontological. He presents to us a citizen that is always immersed into the physicality and materiality of power and ideological relations proper of our world, always pulled to inhabit the “body” of the here and now, while also yearning to leave this realm that curbs his/her totality and desire for freedom and expansion. By showing us the ephemeral nature of the material world—its inadequacies, shortcomings, and the oppressions it generates—and revealing how one may go about exiting it, at least symbolically, the author paves the way for another life, another way of looking at the self in this world. That is, the author shows us another way of being that is highly liberating, reminding us of our connection to all and everything, and therefore of our responsibility to all and everything. This insistence on our relationality is itself highly significant, for it demands that we look at our world—right here, right now—as a place where we can forge and create inclusive nations that do not see human beings in terms of colour, ethnicity, ideological affiliation, and so on, but rather as beings in search of themselves and in constant transition,

always open to otherness, always in expansion, always willing to negotiate their selfhood. This represents love for the self and the other. This is love for this world, this house we all share before we move on to another realm, become another skin, another body—but even in becoming other, we still linger around, we never leave, as Eulálio, our animist Gecko, tells us—our “flow” always present in one form or another—and thus, in this sense, this house is always our home and it is in our best interest to preserve it and to make it better.

Commenting on the 2015 xenophobic violence occurring in South Africa, where Black South Africans accused other Black Africans of taking their jobs and then attacked them in horrific ways—setting them on fire or killing them with machetes—Agualusa wrote the following in a piece titled, “Afrofobia Versus Panafricanismo” (‘Afrophobia Versus Pan-Africanism’) published in *Rede Angola*:

O destino do nacionalismo é a xenofobia. O nacionalismo começa por ser um erguer de muros, uma exaltação do próprio por oposição ao outro, uma euforia de autocontemplação e autocomprazimento, e vai depois crescendo e degradando-se até se transformar em xenofobia. No princípio somos nós por oposição aos outros. No fim somos nós contra os outros.

The destiny of nationalism is xenophobia. Nationalism starts as an erecting of walls, an exalting of the self as opposed to the other, an auto-contemplative and self-congratulating euphoria, which then grows and degrades itself until it is transformed into xenophobia. At the beginning, it is us as opposed to others. At the end it is us against the others. (My translation)

Also reacting to the same events, Achille Mbembe stated:

Finally, one word about “foreigners” and “migrants.” No African is a foreigner in Africa! No African is a migrant in Africa! Africa is where we all belong, notwithstanding the foolishness of our boundaries. No amount of national-chauvinism will erase this. No amount of deportations will erase this. Instead of spilling black blood on no other than Pixley ka Seme Avenue (!), we should all be making sure that we rebuild this Continent and bring to an end a long and painful history—that which, for too long, has dictated that to be black (it does not matter where or when), is a liability. (“Achille Mbembe Writes About Xenophobic South Africa”)

It seems, thus, that the insistence on a clear national identity—and the dichotomous demarcation between self and other that tends to go along with it—is doomed to end in massacres and annihilation of the “other,” as has been witnessed in many contexts in Africa and elsewhere. What we may want, then, is to become less ourselves and more “others,” and, in so doing, fulfil our ontological destiny that yearns to become grander and closer to “God”—that

human and non-human collectiveness that we all are a part of. Writing on the issue of nationalism in Nigeria and other post-colonial African states as well as concomitant ethnic and religious grievances and conflicts, contemporary Nigerian writer, Ike Oguine, said the following: “To reduce our horizons to the obsessive preservation of difference is to dismiss ourselves terribly” (“Strange Bedfellows”). To accept the “other” in our “bed,” may indeed be what is necessary and required of us.

Notes

¹ See, for example: De Carvalho, “Memória e Nação em O Vendedor de Passados, de José Eduardo Agualusa”; Coelho Morgado, “Um Mergulho na Ficção da História”; Stephen Henighan, “The Quest for Angolanidade”; and Pinto Bezerra, “A Tessitura da Memória em O *Vendedor de Passados* de José Eduardo Agualusa.”

² See Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem, “The White Man’s Burden.” Though not specifically about the colonization of Africa by Europe, Kipling’s poem is seen as a general defence of Western colonialism at the end of the 19th century. As Curtis Keim puts it, “‘White man’s burden’ is now a common phrase used to capture the essence of the colonial mentality. Kipling’s poem was sent to President Theodore Roosevelt just after the American annexation of the Philippines in 1898. It urged Americans to embrace colonialism as Britons had done.” (46)

³ In many of his works (i.e., *Contos do Nascer da Terra* and *O Último Voo do Flamingo*), Mia Couto also offers us an image of a Mozambique that should rely more on Mozambican (pre-colonial) ways of being and less on exogenic cultural and economic paradigms as a way to value classical African epistemologies and ontologies and rescue endogenic paradigms. See my own book, *Transcultural Discourses on Class, Gender, and Cultural Identity* and Philip Rothwell’s monograph, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*, for in-depth discussions on these matters.

⁴ As Achille Mbembe puts it in “The Internet is Afropolitan”: “[W]hen you study the cultural history of the continent carefully, a number of things come to the fore in terms of how African societies have constituted themselves and how they operated. First, they constituted themselves through circulation and mobility. When you look at African myths of origin, migration occupies a central role in all of them. There is not one single ethnic group in Africa that can seriously claim to have never moved. Their histories are always histories of migration, meaning people going from one place to the other, and in the process amalgamating many other people. So circulation and amalgamation, you compile the gods, you conquer one ethnic group, you defeat them militarily, and you take their gods as yours, or you take their women as your wives, and therefore they become your parents.”

⁵ Senghor’s generalizations about the nature of the European subject are not entirely correct. Within Western Christian mystical traditions we can also find the merging of object and subject, of self and nature, of self and God. We can think of the mystical experiences of Saint Theresa of Ávila, for example. And in the romantic poetry of the English poets, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we also witness a merging of self with nature, an animist ethos that sees all things (human and non-human) as having an essence and as being linked to one another, stepping away from the scientific mind of the European Enlightenment that divides, dissects, and puts humans at the centre of the universe (see Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1800*). This again denotes that African and Western epistemologies have not always been distanced from one another and that dichotomies of “us” versus “them” do not reflect the entire reality, and more importantly, that cultures are not homogeneous or mono-discursive.

⁶ For details on African holistic and relational philosophies and African religious worldviews, see N. Didier Kaphagawani and Jeanette G. Malherbe, "African Epistemology"; and Lebisa J. Teffo and Abraham P. J. Roux, "Themes in African Metaphysics." I have myself done extensive work on this subject, especially in relation to Mozambique. See "The Way/s of 'Poetry': The Contracting and Expanding Self in the Writing of Mia Couto"; "Spaces of Magic: Couto's Relational Practices"; "Confused 'Slaves' of Many Traditions: The Search for the Freedom Dance in Chiziane's *Niketche: A Tale of Polygamy*"; and *Transcultural Discourses on Class, Gender, and Cultural Identity*.

⁷ The term "non-rational intelligences" is borrowed from Hélène Cixous. See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née*; and Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. In my book, *Transnational Discourses on Class, Gender, and Cultural Identity*, I expand on this subject and extensively discuss some of the similarities between Buddhist philosophy, African holistic and relational philosophies, and the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas and Luce Irigaray.

⁸ See Alyssa Y. Stark et al., "Gecko Adhesion on Wet and Dry Patterned Substrates," for a scientific study of the adaptability of Geckos.

⁹ As many theorists have argued, the implementation in African nations of a Western/European notion of statehood, which is based on Hobbesian and Weberian ideals and which took centuries to develop and work more or less well in the West, may not be the best political model for Africa. It may be necessary to find more endogenic models of statehood or it may be that if the continent is to implement Western ideals of statehood, it will take a long time before they can work. For good discussions on these matters, see Daniel C. Bach, "Regionalization and Globalism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Revisiting a Paradigm" and Paul D. Williams, "State Failure in Africa: Causes, Consequences and Responses."

¹⁰ Morais also discussed how the corruption in Angola is tied to the current corruption in Portugal, due to the incestuous and chaotic commercial transactions between the two nations and the political influence that that generates amongst Angolan and Portuguese elites.

¹¹ At this time, Jonas Savimbi, the leader of the main opposition party (UNITA), accused dos Santos of rigging the elections, and then the country continued the civil war until 2002, with the death of Jonas Savimbi by dos Santos's troops. For a good discussion on the neo-patrimonial nature of Angolan politics from independence to the present time, see "The Angolan Regime and the Move to Multiparty Politics" by Nuno Vidal.

¹² See Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, especially chapters 2 ("The Unequal State: 'Little Men' and 'Big Men'") and 9 ("The Politics of the Belly").

¹³ See Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, especially chapters 1 ("Of *Commandement*"), 3 ("The Aesthetics of Vulgarly"), and 4 ("The Thing and Its Doubles"). Mbembe argues that the law of colonialism and its inherent violence and racist, dichotomous ideology imposed to justify the exploitation of Africa (the Hegelian master/slave duality) is replayed/reproduced in the post-colony by the tyrannical dictator who displays his power through various visible and symbolic networks. The power dynamics of the post-colony are paternalistic and embody a mixing of pre-colonial patrimonial traits, which are refashioned or re-invented in the colonial settings through different means to justify and support the colonial domination and then continue in the post-colony.

¹⁴ See Nyerere, "Ujamaa—The Basis of African Socialism"; Young, "Nkrumah and Pan-Africanism"; and Mkandawire, "African Intellectuals and Nationalism."

¹⁵ See "Angolan Albinos: Living with Health and Social Challenges."

¹⁶ In the words of Curtis Keim, "[T]he myth of the Dark Continent [...] originated in mid-nineteenth century Europe when scientific race theory was developed, without reference to the actual cultures of Africans in Africa. Then it was transferred to Africa by Europeans who had

both a theoretical and a practical interest in seeing Africa as primitive. And when scientific race theory combined with imperialist urges to conquer, there was no end to the primitiveness that could be found” (44).

¹⁷ See Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, especially the sections, “Signs of Life and Personhood” (99–114), “Death Is a Transformation” (117–18), and “Consciousness” (187–94).

¹⁸ In referring to Buddhism and its approach to death and transformation, Brazier writes, “In this universe nothing is ever lost, but everything changes. Loss is really transformation. Things seem to disappear, like the sticks in the fire, but ‘sticks’ is actually just a concept in our minds for a particular stage in the evolution of earth becoming plant becoming branches firewood becoming ash becoming earth. It is for this reason that virtually all funerary rites in different cultures include references to renewal and growth. We designate a particular stage in this on-going process ‘sticks’ for our own convenience. Because of this there arises the illusion of a world full of ‘things’ when what really confronts us is a world of process—flow. ‘Loss’ brings us back to this reality.” (238)

¹⁹ See the works cited in note 6 above, that discuss African holistic and relational philosophies and African religious worldviews. See also Robert Simon, “Love in the Lost Kalahari: Distance, Mysticism, and Alterity in *Manual para Amantes Desesperados* by Ana Paula Tavares.”

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