

**WHEN CHILDREN OF WAR FIGHT FOR THE PAST:
MEDIATIONS OF THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL WAR MEMORIES**

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Décadas após a mobilização, o inimigo é o esquecimento/
Decades after demobilization, the enemy is oblivion.¹
Maria José Lobo Antunes

This essay discusses the cultural memory related to the Portuguese Colonial War, one of the most controversial issues in Portugal's history in the twentieth century. Having lasted for thirteen years, between 1961 and 1974, and happening at three fighting fronts simultaneously from 1964 until its end,² it is estimated that around one million and five hundred thousand men³ were drafted during the long conflict, which impacted most Portuguese families who had someone involved with the war directly or indirectly.

My interest in the Colonial War derives from the fact that it is one of the most complex, repressed and tragic events in contemporary Portugal⁴, which gives it an undefined historiographic position. This historiographic indefiniteness results from (i) the official silence on the event for several years, and (ii) the geopolitical reformulation of the country taking into account the decolonization processes thereof derived.⁵

The veil of silence related to the Colonial War started to be addressed mainly from the late 1970s onwards through literary and filmic mediations that problematized the conflict from the perspective of former combatants and of their relatives through

¹ Otherwise indicated, all translations are the author's responsibility.

² The Colonial War started in Angola in 1961 opposing the Portuguese and two insurgent groups (the MPLA, The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola; and the UPA, the Union of Peoples of Angola). These groups merged, thus forming the FNLA, the National Liberation Front of Angola. In 1963, the conflict started in Guinea-Bissau, the former Portuguese Guinea, where the Portuguese had to face the guerrilla fighters of the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde). In 1964, the war started in Mozambique where the struggle for independence was led by FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique).

³ On this estimate, see Sardica (2008).

⁴ On this issue, see, among others, Quintais (2000 a, b).

⁵ On the historiographic void related to the Colonial War, see, among others Pimenta (2010), Ribeiro (2004), Vecchi (2010), and Aguiar (2019). On the public memory of the Portuguese Colonial War and on the postwar silence, see Campos (2017). With the loss of an empire that lasted for centuries, Portugal had to reorganize as a nation circumscribed to its geographical limits in the European continent together with the archipelagoes of Azores and Madeira. Even if Macau remained under Portuguese rule until December 1999, when it was transferred to China, the territory had no impact on the aforementioned need to reorganize Portugal's geopolitical position.

the remembrance of war episodes or accounts of the difficulties faced by the military to readapt to and reintegrate civilian life after twenty-six months of mandatory military service.⁶

The undefined historiographic position and the consequent politics of memory (or of silence?) related to the event can be explained by the singularity of the April 1974 Revolution that overthrew almost five decades of authoritarian regime.⁷ The silence related to the Colonial War lies in the fact that the men who led the Revolution were the same that had fought the violent Colonial War.⁸ Besides the Portuguese people's inability to deal with a painful legacy of violence, with the loss of the empire and the arrival of thousands of returnees to Portugal,⁹ there was the need to forget the old regime and forge a new beginning, so that a new nation could be built in democratic times.¹⁰ As Antunes aptly points out, the aftermath of the April 1974 Revolution corresponds to a period of "identity transit" (*trânsito identitário*) for the nation, during which, in a post-colonial context, the nation "negotiated between the ruins of the empire and European possibilities" (Antunes 2015, 331).

In this essay, my aim is to examine a different mediation of the memories of the Colonial War that is neither literary nor filmic, as I analyze Maria José Lobo Antunes's Ph.D. dissertation, whose adapted version entitled "Returns Almost Perfect. Memories of War in Angola" (*"Regressos Quase Perfeitos. Memórias da Guerra em Angola"*) was published in book form in 2015. Antunes's work interests me for two reasons: (i) the topic of the return to a disputed period of national history; and (ii) the author's methodological option for an ethnography of war memories, which sheds new light on most of the representations of the event so far made. The author's methodological option gains even more relevance when one considers the author's background. Maria

⁶ Ribeiro (1998, 2004), Campos (2017), Carneiro (2019), and Martins (2020), among others, provide references to the discussion of the Colonial War in literature and cinema.

⁷ Antunes refers to the "singular mnemonic statute of the Colonial War" (2015, 25).

⁸ On the silence related to the Colonial War in the aftermath of the April 1974 Revolution, see, among others, Medeiros (2000), Ribeiro (2004), Campos (2017), and Martins (2020).

⁹ "Returnees" (*retornados*) is the term assigned to former Portuguese settlers, their descendants and some of the Africans who worked for them, who came to Portugal in 1975, when the former Portuguese colonies acquired their independence. Estimates indicate that around half a million people came to Portugal and many were evacuated in special airlift operations, mainly from Angola and Mozambique. Many returnees were born in Africa and had never visited Portugal. Most believed, however, that they were going to a place where they belonged to. Their integration proved to be difficult and contentious, as they felt that they were not welcome by the Portuguese society and that they were discriminated against. They were very often associated with the authoritarian regime, which created several moments of tension in a period of political and ideological turmoil in Portugal. On returnees, see, among others, Peralta (2019). On returnees and airlift operations, see Ribeiro (2018). In her essay, Ribeiro lists an array of works (documentaries, books of essays, novels, installations, among others) that address returnees' experiences (336).

¹⁰ Medeiros (2000, 202) notes that "[t]he revolution, inasmuch as it is seen as a factor which has enhanced national identity, has been assimilated and historicized, whereas the colonial war, with its inherently complex and largely negative connotations, has been largely avoided".

José Lobo Antunes can be considered a “child of the war”, the heir of a “remarkable wound” (Ribeiro 2013, 30).¹¹ She is the eldest daughter of the Portuguese novelist António Lobo Antunes, who fought in Angola.¹² She lived in Angola for a short period as a child during the war, and participated in many of the regular meetings of the members of her father’s platoon, the CART 3313 1970, years after the end of the conflict.

Because Maria José Lobo Antunes was particularly interested in understanding the modes according to which the Colonial War was remembered and forgotten (and not in what had happened during the conflict), in her ethnography of the war, she dealt with two main research objects: former combatants’ personal memories and the official reports describing the events in which her father’s platoon was involved and that are compiled in the *History of the Unit BART 3835*.¹³ As these research objects comprise different types of narratives and temporalities, their analysis and confrontation reveal the ambiguities and contradictions of the reported events, as they are portrayed, on the one hand, under the emotional recollections decades after the occurrence of the events,¹⁴ and, on the other hand, in conformity with an allegedly “neutral” tone characteristic of bureaucratic and descriptive accounts that not only summarize the operations of the units of the Artillery Battery 3835, but also reveal the rhetoric of the regime as far as the characterization of the enemy is concerned.

Because memory is always reformulated and reconfigured, it is of the utmost importance to examine the convergence and divergence of various versions, and of what is told and what is silenced. This “exercise” becomes particularly relevant when one thinks that the conflict lost its meaning with the fall of the regime and decolonization, which explains to a certain extent the silence officially imposed on the conflict. It is my contention, however, that the collective amnesia as far as the Colonial War is concerned mirrors what can be considered as a sociopolitical and epistemological gap. This gap, translated into repression and denial,¹⁵ derives from Portuguese people’s inability to accept that the long-lasting and violent conflict did not result in a victory to the nation, but led to the end of the empire. Moreover, as aptly observed by Medeiros (2000, 208), “the Portuguese colonial wars have been displaced by the events of the revolution in Portugal. Consequently, Portuguese soldiers never really faced public condemnation for

¹¹ I borrow the expression “child of the war” from The Project MEMOIRS (“Children of Empires and European Postmemories”) that “focuses on the intergenerational memories of the children and grandchildren of those involved in the decolonization processes of colonies held by France, Portugal and Belgium”. For further details on the project, see <https://www.uc.pt/research/ERCs/ERCs/MEMOIRS>.

¹² António Lobo Antunes was mobilized to Angola as a doctor in 1970. He was a psychiatrist, but during the conflict he performed diverse tasks as a doctor, having participated in many rescue operations of seriously wounded soldiers and performed many amputations.

¹³ The *History of the Unit BART 3835* can be found in the Historical Military Archive in Lisbon.

¹⁴ A group of former combatants gathered in a restaurant in Fátima in 2001, thirty years after embarking on the vessel *Vera Cruz*. From then on, they have met regularly together with their families.

¹⁵ See Medeiros (2000, 206) while commenting Cruzeiro’s phrasing when addressing the silence related to the Colonial War.

their actions in war, and were celebrated instead as the heroes who had rescued the nation from authoritarian rule". The problem is that the traumatic memories of the conflict continue haunting former combatants, preventing them from attaining closure. In other words, what has been a fight *with* the past should be converted into a fight *for* the past. As Murphy (2019, 157) recalls, "[a] fight for the past is not an effort to change the events of the past. (...) Rather, it is the effort to remember, to engage with, and to learn from the past, with all the complexities that such an endeavor entails, in order to foment the conditions for more just and safe futures (...)."

I contend that Antunes's ethnography of war is an attempt to unveil and problematize this sociopolitical and epistemological gap. Inspired by Murphy's theorization of memory mapping,¹⁶ I claim that Antunes's work constitutes a memory mapping project that "produce[s] new temporal and spatial arrangements of knowledge and memory in the present that function[s] as a counterpractice to the official narratives that often neglect or designate as transgressive certain memories or experiences." (Murphy 2019, 10) In other words, I draw on Murphy's work to discuss how Antunes's ethnography of the war, by exploring the intersection between former combatants' memories and the public representation of the Colonial War, embodies a new and singular mediation of the Colonial War memories, through which the "place" of the conflict in the Portuguese public narrative is renegotiated (Antunes 2015, 38).

Antunes assumes that her attempt to access a problematic past is a mapping project, as she tried to draw the "possible map of a world that does not exist anymore" (2015, 383) through the narratives of those who experienced it. This possible map rests on the collage of fragments of different types (former combatants' accounts, literary texts written by Antunes's father,¹⁷ the *History of the Artillery Battery 3835*). According to Antunes, the combatants' accounts years after the events took place reveal aspects that do not find evidence or correspondence in her father's texts or in the *History of the Artillery Battery 3835*. This mismatch epitomizes how the "dislocation of memory" transforms the experienced events into an "imprecise mass of disconnected images that retrospective narratives try to confer meaning on" and unveils the "creative nature" underlying remembrance processes (2015, 382).¹⁸

One key element to Antunes's memory mapping and attempt to tackle with the sociopolitical and epistemological gap already mentioned is affect. In her ethnography

¹⁶ In her book, Murphy focuses her attention on contemporary visual works that address "both a new era of Latin American memory politics and the affective and performative power of visibility in relation to memory and human rights." (2019, 10).

¹⁷ Antunes resorted to two texts written by her father, the novelist António Lobo Antunes: the autobiographical novel *Os Cus de Judas [South of Nowhere]* (1979) and the letters her father wrote to her mother during his military service. The author and her sister Joana compiled the letters twenty-six years after the publication of *Os Cus de Judas* in a book published in 2005, *D'este Viver Aqui N'este Papel Descrito*. For a discussion on how the volume of letters sheds new light on *South of Nowhere* and represents a relevant unofficial source about the Colonial War, see Martins (2010).

¹⁸ On the dislocation of memory, see also Antunes (2015, 220-221).

of war, Antunes highlights two remembrance processes: the public and the private. While public remembrance is solemn, rhetorical, and politically correct, private remembrance is personal, intimate and framed by the affective impact of war on former combatants' lives. Within the framework of the remembrance processes, it is possible to devise two distinct types of private remembrance that complete each other. The first one is related to the interviews the researcher made with former combatants. The second one has to do with what she observed at lunches that brought veterans and their families together, when excerpts from António Lobo Antunes's texts were read aloud and episodes of the months in Angola were recalled.

The interviews Antunes made revolve around the association of the military service with a threefold discovery of: Africa, the self and the homeland. The discovery of Africa has to do with the awe experienced with luxuriant landscapes and diverse cultural habits. Many of the veterans had never visited Portugal's capital before being drafted, as they had humble origins that led many to leave school early to work and contribute to support the family. The military service enabled them to experience different realities which they were not aware of due to the authoritarian regime's decades of isolationism and censorship. The discovery of the self is associated to a forced maturity that the participation in the conflict brought, aspect that gains relevance when one considers the severe morals that characterized Portugal's patriarchal society. The experience in African lands also contributed to a diverse experience of sexuality, the deconstruction of several taboos imposed by the conservative society, and the suffering resulting from long periods of loneliness and despair. The discovery of the homeland is closely related to the discovery of Africa and the self. If combatants were led to believe that they were going to fight for the integrity of Portuguese overseas territories, the interaction with Africans, the violence of the conflict, and the endurance of a wide range of hardships (ill-preparation for the conflict, nutritional problems, lack of all sorts of supplies, friends' deaths, among others) led them to question the underlying reasons of the war, the fairness of the conflict, and, ultimately, the existence of the Portuguese empire. In other words, the politicization of the military, with a few exceptions, started during their missions in African soil. Regardless the convergence of veterans' subjective accounts in terms of these three discoveries (that make their personal memories gather their fear and memorable events, whose description does not necessarily correspond to the official representation), the interviews revealed, on the one hand, the longevity and the efficacy of the Lusotropicalist rhetoric to defend the singularity of the nation, and, on the other, the difficulties that many veterans have faced until now to accept the loss of the empire and the independence of former colonies.¹⁹

¹⁹ Lusotropicalism was a doctrine proposed by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Through the analysis of the plantation society in Brazil, he claimed that the Portuguese colonization was an example of "cordial colonialism", evinced in the miscegenation of the Portuguese colonizers with black slaves. In the 1950s and 60s, Salazar's regime resorted to Lusotropicalism to persuade the international community who claimed for the independence of former colonies that Portugal was not an empire, but a pluricontinental and pluriracial nation, whose territories extended to the so-called "overseas provinces". On Lusotropicalism, see, among others, Castelo

If Antunes's interviewees, despite talking to the daughter of a fellow man (which could facilitate the return to the past), had problems to address more painful memories, as attested by the silences that blocked the progression of their memories, the private remembrance process gained another dynamic when collective. I am here referring to the lunches that have brought together combatants and their families since 2001, events in which the author participated. The singularity of these occasions lies in the fact that they serve to "materialize" and celebrate the bonds of affection that cemented the relationships among men from diverse social strata and backgrounds, reminding them that, despite all the war suffering, they survived and should celebrate life. In other words, in the realm of private collective remembrance, affect and camaraderie trigger former combatants' anamnesis and help them to appease not only the ghosts that still assault them, but also their discontent towards what they consider to be the insufficient acknowledgment of their role in Portugal's history decades after the end of the conflict. Lunches can, therefore, be considered as therapeutic and even redemptive, but in a different way from the therapeutic sessions for patients with PTSD. The difference lies in affect. If it is true that therapy (be it individual or collective) aims at facilitating a work of mourning that paves the way for the access to a tumultuous past that may (or may not) lead to healing, its main focus is on mourning, which implies the recall of suffering. Veterans' lunches, however, constitute, first and foremost, moments of celebration of friendship and the possibility of life after the end of the conflict. If it is true that melancholy is present mainly when those who died are honored and the veterans' unattended claims for state's social protection are recalled, fellowship is the motor that enables the conversion of the past into a realm where it is possible to return, regardless of pain and suffering associated to it.²⁰ Thus, lunches constitute an opportunity to "celebrate the denial of forgetfulness" (2015, 368) through a careful management of language and silences as a way of preventing disruptive and painful topics.²¹

I would like to return to the ideas of "fighting with" and "fighting for" the past to underline the importance of Antunes's ethnography of war memories. If veterans have tried to fight *with* their past by taming their ghosts and fears, at the beginning of the 21st century, younger segments of the Portuguese society (mostly second and third generations of former combatants, including the author of *Regressos Quase Perfeitos. Memórias da Guerra em Angola* have fought *for* addressing a silenced or elided past, as demonstrated by a wide range of processes of memory mediation translated into literary works, films, exhibitions, blog posts, installations and Antunes's ethnography. All these outputs stem from the confrontation of new generations with their relatives'

(1998). On how Salazar's regime appropriated the Lusotropicalist rhetoric, see Santos (2002), Ribeiro (2009), and Almeida (2008).

²⁰ Antunes (2015, 362) draws the attention to the fact that, in veterans' yearly meetings, "the narrative return to the past is the exact opposite of therapeutic sessions of groups of combatants diagnosed with PTSD. (...) The common history that is built in that site of memory is an history of remission of evil and suffering, an history made only with appeasing episodes."

²¹ Antunes (2015, 392) notes that the language used in yearly lunches can be considered as a language of "the family" in opposition to the "lexicon of the nation" used in public commemorations.

objects, letters, photos, films and testimonies that have been dormant and expectant of the chance to let the past speak from diverse perspectives as an attempt to filling in the sociopolitical and epistemological gap of the Colonial War in the history of the nation. In their fight *for* the past, both veterans and the new generations know that, despite the fact that the past cannot be changed, the negotiation, recreation and reconfiguration of the representation of past memories are the best weapons against oblivion, the ultimate enemy to defeat in search for healing.²²

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²² Antunes's work has paved the way for new avenues of investigation: in line with Sarah Ahmed (2014), it will be interesting to reflect on how and to what extent affect, the circulation and sociability of emotions, can influence veterans' remembrance processes, a topic to be developed within the framework of another essay.

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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

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RESUMO:

Este ensaio discute como Maria José Lobo Antunes, uma “filha/criança” da Guerra Colonial portuguesa, para além de refletir sobre como o conflito tem sido renegociado pela narrativa pública em Portugal, propõe um processo distinto de mediação do evento através de uma etnografia da guerra. O meu objetivo é demonstrar como a sua etnografia se constitui num projeto alternativo e aproximado de uma cartografia do conflito (Murphy, 2019), através do qual Antunes desafia a amnésia coletiva relacionada com o controverso evento e luta contra o esquecimento, o derradeiro inimigo na busca pela cura e reconciliação.

ABSTRACT:

This essay discusses how Maria José Lobo Antunes, a “child of the Portuguese Colonial War”, besides reflecting on how the conflict has been renegotiated in Portugal’s public narrative so far, proposes a diverse process of mediation of the event through an ethnography of war. My aim is to demonstrate how her ethnography constitutes an alternative and tentative memory mapping project of the conflict (Murphy, 2019), through which Antunes challenges the collective amnesia related to the controversial event and fights against oblivion, the ultimate enemy to defeat in search for healing and reconciliation.

