

27 May 1977 in Luanda. The Novels of José Luis Mendonça –(Collective) Violence and its Affective Memory

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Abstract

José Luis Mendonça is a journalist and writer, based in Luanda, Angola. He is primarily a poet and has published at least eighteen poetry volumes until now. Mendonça also wrote two novels, in which (collective) violence and its affective memory in Luanda play a crucial role. In *O reino das casuarinas* (2014), he expands on the urban scenario in 1987 during one month in times of the Cold War, repeatedly looking back to the decade before. And in *As metamorfoses do elefante* (2022), he describes ten days in 2020, when a mysterious epidemic stagnates quotidian routines in Luanda. The author's hyperbolic style and irony, together with his almost encyclopedic knowledge of popular music, give to his texts most varied and grotesque insides into the city's cultural and political history. It is not a coincidence, that his plots are organized around the occurrences of 27 May 1977, an important date for signaling the path toward peaceful democratization in Angola.

Keywords: Cultural History of Luanda; 27 May 1977; (Collective) Violence; Affective Memory; Traumatic Silence and Isolation.

Tania Macêdo (2008), a Brazilian professor of lusophone literatures, characterizes Luanda in her seminal book *Luanda, cidade e literatura* (2008) as a city that symbolizes decisive moments in the history of Angola. Founded by the Portuguese in 1576, it became the colony's administrative center in 1627. A few decades later, the Dutch conquered the city (1641-1648), but it was rapidly reconquered by a Portuguese army from Brazil. Luanda remained the capital of the Portuguese colony and, thereafter, in 1975, of the Popular Republic of Angola, since 1992 re-baptized as the Republic of Angola. During the anticolonial war (1961-1975) and, then, the Civil War, from 1975 until 2002 (with some pauses), Luanda continued to be the political and cultural center of the state. Therefore, when writing about Luanda in literature, one always touches upon some metaphorical constellations of space, in which this central position is addressed. Consequently, it is not a surprise that in the novels of José Luis Mendonça, *O reino das casuarinas* (RC)¹ and *As metamorfoses do elefante* (ME)², Luanda appears in relation to another significant date, 27 May 1977, when an attempted coup d'état in the newly founded republic costed many lives in its aftermath.

This outburst of violence, which created chaos and despair, was silenced in Angola during various decades. It was an example of (collective) violence and this complex concept, key in peace research and applied to many forms of brutality, such as genocide, invasions, war, etc., is essential for the plot in Mendonça's novels. In the opinion of Wolfgang Lienemann and Sara Zwahlen

(2006), violence as such is always present on all levels of society, it is a quotidian issue. The German sociologist Dieter Senghaas published the study *Agressivität und kollektive Gewalt* (Aggression and Collective Violence) in 1971. Although this book seems somewhat stylistically outdated, it is still one of the very few that intends to formulate some general features concerning collective violence as a concept. According to Senghaas, research on social and international interconnections, which provoke aggression from which acts of violence are the consequence, is of highest importance. Without knowledge of their driving forces and initial conditions, it is impossible to understand the dynamics of the conflict. Research has to focus on empirical studies of these interconnections because scientific insights cannot be achieved without knowing their constitutive characteristics, forms of expression, and consequences and meanings. Military apparatus and weapon systems keep the disposition to collective violence awake. It is explained as necessary to “deterrence” (Abschreckung) in politics and in the communication media that shape public opinion and have a global radius.

Senghaas claims that the efforts to explain collective violence have to be done on the basis of the results of the analysis of many partial problems by trenching, combining, and folding them together in order to get a more systematic explanation. For this purpose, he recommends considering six levels: 1) the international political system; 2) the nation state; 3) big groups of interest, the parties, and the media; 4) smaller groups; 5) individuals; 6) and the inner-psychological components of personalities. A crucial question is that of the borderline between collective and individual violence and how to judge individual factors within a sociological framework. Senghaas indicates that individual factors can be instrumental and, certainly, in the inner-psychological components of personalities.

Because it is not always possible to make clear distinctions between the different levels, I will speak of (collective) violence in general, using brackets, and of collective violence without brackets only when the nation-state or the international political system is involved. Violence as such became an important issue in literary narratives since Ariel Dorfman published his book *Imaginación y violencia en América* (1970). In their introduction to *Afectos y violencias en la cultura latinoamericana* (2022), Reinhardt Dhondt and Sandra Mandolessi emphasize the importance of Dorfman’s book, giving an extensive orientation to the disclosure of violence in cultural studies on Latin America, connected with affection and its assignment in memory. They remark that affection, together with emotions, have become key concepts in the academic discourses of social sciences and the humanities, to the degree that it is even spoken of as an “affective turn” (Clough/Halley 2007). Although this is explained by the overwhelming presence of the contemporary digital media, Dhondt and Mandolessi argue that affection and emotions have been analyzed in cultural

expressions in an interdisciplinary way much before, although the link with affection and emotions was laid only later. They formulate a clear distinction between the two concepts:

Whereas affection refers to intensity, to a point of encounter between bodies that provokes a change in the degree of energy or ... “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” ..., an emotion or a feeling “is a *recognized affect*, an *identified intensity*” Unlike affection, emotion is a recognizable, identifiable category. Therefore, it is possible to postulate a taxonomy of emotions but there does not exist a taxonomy of affections. (16)³

In Latin American literature, affections and emotions have played outstanding roles. Yet, only recently, scholars have begun to study them in relationship to political events. Dhondt and Mandolessi argue that these issues always imply an active relationship with memory studies: they are in a permanent dialogue with social actors who express their claims in public. In this sense, academic intervention gives memory studies in Latin America a specific affective resonance and contributes to creating an “affective community” (24) around the object of study.

While concentrating on this *relational* dimension, I will question this argument in the study of *O reino das casuarinas* and *As metamorfosis do elefante*. Their plots are organized around one concrete historical event: 27 May 1977, the date of a coup d’état followed by a wave of violence in a rather dramatic situation. Within the governmental party, the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), the former Minister of Interior, Nito Alves, and his followers led a violent protest against the political strategies of the party: they murdered the Minister of Finance Saide (Saidy) Mingas and other MPLA politicians, and occupied the National Radio station, among other actions (Marques 76-85). This protest or coup (there exist different interpretations) was responded to with utmost brutality by the army and thousands of citizens lost their lives. Many people were imprisoned without legal evidence, and were only freed by a general pardon in 1979. Thereafter, the May 1977 occurrences were completely silenced in the public opinion. It was a taboo and only around the beginning of the present century, books and articles started to be written on the subject, and public action was taken to clarify the whereabouts of many disappeared persons. To create this memory from the perspective of an affected community in his novels, Mendonça relates his main characters to persons whose lives were destroyed by May 1977: a former soldier, who became mentally unstable, and a young girl of fifteen years old, who disappeared and nothing was heard from her again.

Mendonça, born in 1955, lived through the colonial period as a child and was a soldier in the FAPLA, the military army of the MPLA.⁴ Subsequently, as a veteran of the Civil War, he received a law degree and became a journalist and writer. He won several literary prizes and was the cultural advisor of the Angolan Embassy in Paris. Mendonça also directed the magazine *Cultura*

in its initial decade. In this unique bi-seminal publication as a supplement of the *Jornal de Angola*, the focus lies on cultural issues in Angola and elsewhere (Phaf-Rheinberger, *José Luis Mendonça and the Journal Cultura*).

I will first analyze Mendonça's novels separately and will then situate them within a comparative framework with other literary works from Angola that aimed to break through this traumatic silence and isolation, recognizing 27 May 1977 as an important item in the cultural heritage of building the new nation.

Nkuku and the Kingdom of the Casuarinas

Nkuku, the main character of *O reino das casuarinas* possesses some autobiographic similarities with the author. He is also born in 1955 and an avid reader of literature. Nkuku fought in the first years of the civil war that broke out in November 1975 and had to join the army when president Agostinho Neto called all men under weapons: "*We are at war and it is adamant that every citizen is and has to feel himself a soldier?*" (*Estamos em Guerra e Cada Cidadão é e deve Sentir-se Necessariamente um Soldado*, RC 18, cursive in the original). In the Center of Revolutionary Instruction (CIR) of the People in Arms, these soldiers – farmers, workers, lumpen-proletarians, intellectuals and petit-bourgeois, black, white, mulattos, people from India and albinos (camponeses, operários, lumpen-proletários, intelectuais e pequeno-burgueses, pretos, brancos, mulatos, indianos e kilombos, RC 18) – are prepared for the armed fight, materially and ideologically. For Nkuku, his service as a soldier ends on 11 November 1978. He loses a leg when his tank touches a landmine, now being mutilated for the rest of his life.

On the first pages of the novel, Nkuku (his war name) looks back to this past from the perspective of 14 March 1987, some months after returning to Luanda from his studies of economics at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic. He happens to meet his former comrade in the CIR on the street, Primitivo (his war name), who does not recognize him. Nkuku wonders about his completely deteriorated appearance, looking wild like a "Neanderthaler" (RC 17), and follows him to the place where he lives, to the kingdom under the casuarina-trees on the island situated at the ocean coast before Luanda. Primitivo, four other men, and a woman have gathered there, all suffering from Self-Imposed Amnesia (SAA) as a consequence of traumatic experiences in different situations. The kingdom is an isolated place where these mentally disordered people organize the rules for their conviviality.

Mendonça's narrative is carefully structured. From the beginning, it is clear that weapons and writing are equally important for the plot. The reader does not only encounter a Kalashnikov or an iron harness from the times of colonization but also a block note of A6 format and a school

exercise book, owned by Primitivo. This parallelism suggests that weapons and writing have prominent functions: armed attack and defense *versus* written communication. There are tanks, German machine guns, mines, BRDM cars (light car with a big caliber machine gun), Mirage with bombs, and Portuguese airplanes with bombs, cannons of 105 mm of Krupp, dynamite, a Colt revolver, etc. It is a war-like scenario and, in-between, the reader constantly finds fragments of Primitivo's annotations in his block note and school book, in which his ideas for justice and comments on the existing socialism are addressed. Besides, the plot frequently displays references to texts written by international authors, like Norman Mailer, William Goulding, Irving Wallace, and Pablo Neruda, Berthold Brecht, among others, and by authors from Angola like Pepetela, António Cardoso, or David Mestre, in addition to written letters, quotations of Cicero's *De re publica*, and Primitivo's plan for the organization of the kingdom.

Nkuku tells the story himself as being the author and sometimes speaks directly to the reader in a conversational tone, with many local expressions from Angola. In this way, his *orature* theatricalizes sociopolitical aspects by way of his literary technique. Nkuku himself is not specifically interested in politics, in contrast to Primitivo, who is always engaged with the question of justice in society. Only at the end, in the final chapters of the novel, when we already know many things about Primitivo and Nkuku, Mendonça describes the individual stories of the other inhabitants of the kingdom: the queen was director of a ballet school; the jurist with the Borsalino hat studied in Coimbra, was married and worked at the Ministry of Justice; a Congolese was soldier in the army of the FNLA;⁵ a street preacher of the Bible; and, last but not least, a street vendor of cookies. Nkuku meets a sixth person who suffers from SAA on the street, a former soldier in the army of the UNITA,⁶ who also joins the kingdom. Nkuku himself commutes between his civic life in Luanda and the kingdom, considering himself a detective whose role consists in trying to understand the dynamics of this isolated community situated at the margin of his own city.

The opening sentence of the first chapter already sets the tone for the key issue, around which the plot is organized: "Ten years after the unexpected events of 27 May 1977, the female street vendors still had not recovered the natural right to go out on the streets of Luanda."⁷ Nkuku first focuses on himself and Primitivo, whom he first met in the training camp of the CIR in November 1975. Because Primitivo had his own outspoken thoughts about justice in the newly founded socialist republic, he was very suspicious in the eyes of the ideologically fundamentalist supervisor for being a petit-bourgeois. On 27 May 1977, he was arrested in Luanda and sent to a working camp in the province, staying there for ten long years. On that same May-day, Nkuku was based with his division in Huambo and, listening to the news on the radio, they hurried back to the capital and found the chaos of people arrested without clear criteria, of torture and executions. Nkuku's division, which originally counted 120 soldiers, was now reduced to 40 men. A state of

emergency was declared, raids were frequent, and the “magic voices” of the *semba* musicians David Zé, Artur Nunes, and Urbano de Castro were banned from the radio. Everyone is suspect and this inner tension seemed even more threatening than the war, still going on.

Mendonça’s text leans heavily on corporality, it is very much emphasized. Various erotic relationships (hetero- and homosexual, and orgies), as well as mutilations, sicknesses, and impotence are addressed. Also the physical appearances of the men and especially of the only woman of the kingdom are outlined in detail and portrayed in the drawings at the end. The plot is situated during the Civil War, with its scarcity and exchange economy and the presence of the Cubans all around (Millar 2019; Phaf-Rheinberger 2022). However, quotidian life is portrayed through ironic observations and vivid descriptions of the people. A great number of names of institutions, arms, and political personalities places the story in the proper time line. Within a few pages, Mendonça enlists different historical episodes of Luanda by mentioning the monuments that were formerly placed in the city and are now relocated in the Museum of the Armed Forces, the former Portuguese Fort S. Miguel, built in the seventeenth century:

- the granite statue dedicated to the African and Portuguese Combatants in the Big War from 1914 to 1918, inaugurated in 1937;
- a white marble statue of Salvador Correia de Sá, the captain who reconquered Luanda from the Dutch in 1648;
- the copper statue of Dom Afonso Henriques, founder of Portugal in 1147, inaugurated in the 1950s;
- the bronze statue of Pedro Alexandrino da Cunha, governor of Angola from 1845 to 1848, who sponsored the first journal of the country, *Boletim do Governo-Geral da Província de Angola*, inaugurated shortly after his death;
- another bronze statue of the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão, who explored the coast of Congo and Angola in the 1480s. It was designed by António Duarte and inaugurated in 1952;
- ruins of the statue of Paulo Dias de Novais, the founder of Luanda in 1576, inaugurated in 1968;
- two Lockheed PV-2 Harpoon aircrafts that bombed the north of Angola in 1961;
- a 105 mm Krupp canon from the colonial army.

Notwithstanding mentioning many historical facts about Luanda along these lines, the flavor of the narrative resides in surprising and fantastic elements. Nkuku is able to fly with a pair of wings and understands the language of cats. He has conversations with his Egyptian feline Stravinski, who can play the piano, and sees the life stories of the other members of the kingdom in his dreams in his capacity as a clairvoyant.

Nkuku is the intermediary between the city and the island community, whose isolation is foregrounded even more because Primitivo has now become illiterate: he is not able to read or write anymore. The citizens start discussing a constitution and elections, which implies that people who cannot speak are forbidden to present themselves as a candidate, thus being incapable of exercising their formal duties in a society that communicates through speech. This causes a problem. The former street vendor, who “alone, constituted the silent majority” (RC 287), does not speak and is assigned as the only one who, although he has the right to vote, cannot present himself as a candidate for one of the positions. This leaves him extremely frustrated to the degree that he kills all the others with rat poison. Nkuku discovers this drama after coming back from Luanda on 14 April 1987. Anyhow, this drama was already envisioned by him/the author, when introducing the nickname of this man, Katchimbamba, which means a “bird flying at night and appearing in stories about witchcraft.”⁸ Apparently, his magic spell has a negative effect, and this is confirmed by this tragedy.

Tony and the *Metamorphoses of the Elephant*

In Mendonça’s second novel, *As metamorfoses do elefante* (ME), the day of 27 May 1977 returns as a decisive date. The book contains seven chapters, each one followed by a dream of Hermes Sussumuku, as well as a prologue and an epilogue. The plot is now told from the auctorial position of the writer, sometimes alternated by the voice of “Hermes, the messenger, the wandering spirit” (ME 140). Again, we see the careful organization of the a-linear chronology, which strategy is characterized in the prologue as “coantar,” a contraction of “contar” (storytelling) and “cantar” (to sing), in order to accentuate the preference for music, an enormously important medium in times of anticolonial warfare and its aftermath in Angola (Moorman 2008). The musicians express their criticism in songs, like, for instance in “Chofer de Praça” (Taxi driver of the Central Place, 1968) by Luiz Visconde. The text of the song discusses the fact that the taxi driver refuses to bring his passenger to the *musseque*, because stark rains have flooded the unpaved streets. This text is not as innocent as it seems at first sight; it symbolizes the distance between the white Portuguese driver and the black citizens, living in poor neighborhoods with a very precarious infrastructure (Sousa 2017).

This song is mentioned as a subtitle to the first chapter, “Sorriso” (smile), in which Antonio (Tony) Caiande is going to have his morning coffee in the house of Mãe Zabele in the Bairro Operário on Sunday, 30 August 2020. She is the mother of Joanna, her youngest child, who disappeared at age fifteen in May 1977. Her cousin, a soldier, came to arrest her with twenty-eight other youngsters in the same street, caught in this raid and swallowed up by destiny. They were suspected to be “fraccionistas,” sharing the ideas of Nito Alves. Joanna was promised to Tony as

a future bride and to keep her in his memory, he visits Mãe Zabele every Sunday for the last thirty-three years and is considered to be part of the family. She is also the mother of Hermes Sussumuku, her youngest son, and of José, the eldest.

This time, Mendonça develops his plot in a city in peace, which he chronologically describes for ten days (30 August -10 September 2020), interrupted constantly by retrospectives and quotidian scenes on the streets, with its vendors, beggars, marihuana smokers, mutilated people because of warfare, returnees from Congo, or traffic problems. Again, we have fantastic and surprising elements. Tony can speak with his dog and with a chameleon in his garden. Besides, on the eve of independence in 1975, Mãe Zabele's son Hermes had dreams displayed as traditional fables from Angola, which indirectly predict its future as a republic. The parties who fought against each other in the Civil War are represented by three elephants with the colors of the respective party flags. Hermes, the messenger, had these dreams, when in a coma in the hospital because of a traffic accident. After having told them to his brother José, the mason and freethinker, and hearing his interpretations foreseeing the future disasters, Hermes immediately decides to migrate to Portugal. José, in turn, does not believe in those dreams but is confident of a more prosperous republican future instead.

A mysterious phenomenon occurs in Luanda two days before Tony's visit to Mãe Zabele. A girl sitting in the *candonguero* (ME 15)⁹ starts laughing and this is so contagious that all the people around her also burst into laughter until the whole quarter and parts of the surrounding area are laughing non-stop. Urban life comes to a halt and this alarms the authorities, who call for a state of emergency, building a wall around the people infected with this laughter epidemic. Its reason is unknown and it gets international press coverage. The government seeks help from global organizations. The Security Council of the United Nations Organization (UNO) sends representatives and the World Health Organization, specialized medical doctors. On 5 September, the laughter stops as mysteriously as it began and Mendonça writes:

In this week, at the other site of the wall, a regime prevailed that was not planned but naturally imposed by the virus of laughter, of the equal distribution of capital. A week without crime, in which all food dropped by helicopters was handed out with millimeter-sized precision.¹⁰

Finally, a French medical specialist finds the explanation in politics: the Constitutional Court that had to approve the request for access to the elections of a new party PRA-JÁ SERVIR ANGOLA (party of Angolan renaissance together for Angola to serve Angola), organized by the popular politician Abel Chivukuvuku, rejected this request and, therefore, his followers and admirers started laughing because of the incredible *stress* they felt caused by this dismissal. Such a

massive psychogenic sickness generally appears “in persons who are powerless, it is the ultimate recourse for persons of low status. It is an easy way for them to express that something is wrong.”¹¹

One day after the end of the epidemic, Mãe Zabele calls for Tony to visit her. She writes this down on a sheet of paper because she stopped speaking already a long time ago when hearing stories about tortures after 27 May 1977. But now, she apparently takes advantage of the opportunity to summon Tony to marry and have a family, instead of staying single for the rest of his life. Mãe Zabele dies the day after this conversation, on 7 September, at age seventy-nine. Her funeral, two days later, is an amazing public event because she and her husband are of royal descent from Malange and Lunda. She is celebrated as a real “Mamá Grande.”¹² In her professional life, Mãe Zabele was a dressmaker, who sewed the wedding dresses of 333 young women on her Singer machine, and all these women are present at the state funeral wearing these dresses. Also, the Cardinal, the archbishop, the president, members of the government, multimillionaires and many other people assist. Then, in 2021, Mãe Zabele is even declared Saint Isabel by the Vatican. This enumeration of people of the highest status and Zabele’s canonization as a saint is meant to celebrate the end of a specific period for the Bairro Operário in Luanda, the BeÓ, of that quarter of town that once was a “symbol of national unity and resistance to colonialism” (Nascimento 2017). As a counterpoint to this symbol, Mendonça describes the people who attend the funeral:

Those at this side of the wall are citizens who are used to the situation, governors and family members, functionaries who suck the remainders of the milk of the oil cow, service agents and other soft-spoken citizens fearing for change, religious or simply conservatives, resigned people, always with their mouth shut, such as the workers who watch over the houses and shops of the rich. House maids, car washers and other very poor servants, as well as the street boys who possess nothing, deprived of so much with all those bosses around them, wearing in their souls some traces of the aura of conservatism, or they all have their heart throbbing because of extreme resignation. This group was not infected by the mass psychogenic illness.¹³

One day later, Tony has an illuminating conversation with José, Mãe’s eldest son, who is embittered and became speechless after 27 May 1977, because of having been tortured and imprisoned, besides being accused of being a mulatto. This was the ultimate insult because he descends from a royal Ovimbundu family with possibly some unknown influence of a distant European ancestor. José now starts speaking again and tells Tony that he fought in the guerrilla during the anticolonial war. When he entered Luanda officially, coming from Congo-Brazzaville with the MPLA in 1974, he experienced this as a very emotional and hopeful moment. This makes it logical that José emphatically rejected his own explanation of his brother’s dreams in 1975, after

having interpreted them as a future twenty-seven-year civil war between the different political parties, of corruption and predation of the nation's riches, of sicknesses and hunger. He complains that the current MPLA, the elephant with the red head, does not represent the ideas he has fought for. Now, in-2020, in the course of those last forty-five years, he saw the dreams of his brother Hermes become true.

Fluid Borderlines among the Levels of (Collective) Violence

It is clear that the analyses of the plots in Mendonça's novels have given some knowledge of the consequences of 27 May 1977. In *O reino das casuarinas*, we observed its impact on Primitivo and in *As metamorfoses do Elefante*, it completely changes Tony's life. In this book, number seven is crucial: seven dreams, seven days of epidemics, seven chapters, three times seven in the date of 27 May 1977. Tony comments,

27 May was an internal political conflict of the party in power. What happened after 27 May has nothing to do with that conflict. It was a crime against humanity. An act of state terrorism that perpetuated until 1979.¹⁴

Mendonça published his novels quite recently and, as mentioned before, these events were silenced for a long time in the public opinion. It is only in 2020 that Mãe Zabele and José Sussumuku start speaking again. In real life, to respond to this silence, a group of Angolans founded the association M27, first in Luanda (2001) and then in Lisbon (2005), to push the Angolan government to give information about what happened and about where the victims were buried: their families often lacked a formal certificate of their death. Shortly thereafter, Carlos Pacheco published an open letter (2005) addressed to Pepetela, a well-known and respected writer of Angola (Peres 67-87; Millar 183, n6). Pacheco, a former member of the MPLA, was also imprisoned after 27 May and partly blames Pepetela, at that time Minister of Education, for this disaster. Pepetela himself indirectly answers these accusations by calling attention to the book *Dissidências e Poder de Estado: O MPLA perante si próprio* (2001), written by Jean-Michel Mabeko-Tali. According to Pepetela, Mabeko-Tali analyzes the position of this "constitutive element of the Angolan nation" (2018), the MPLA, in an objective way, without hesitating to touch upon its contradictions and problems, such as dissidences, racism, and 27 May 1977. In 2007, Américo Cardoso Botelho published the book *Holocausto em Angola. Memórias de entre o cárcere e o cemitério. 1977-1980* (Holocaust in Angola. Memories of being between the prison and the cemetery). Botelho had personally witnessed 27 May 1977 and was imprisoned until 1980. He was a Portuguese, sent to Angola in 1975 as a functionary of the Diamang Company (Companhia de Diamantes de Angola), with its head office in South Africa. This company was one of the targets of the political parties who fought for sovereignty in the civil war and Botelho found himself in the midst of the problems.

The series of comprehensive studies and reportages continued with the publication of *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* (2016) by Lara Pawson, a collection of interviews and discussions with people who experienced the repercussions of 27 May 1977. In a second book, *This is the Place to Be* (2016), a fragmentary memoir, Pawson gives insight into her disappointment when she worked as a BBC reporter in Africa. As an admirer of Basil Davidson's book (1974), the famous English journalist who reported about the liberation movements in Africa in the 1970s and was a personal friend of some of their leaders, Pawson detected another reality. Many witnesses told her about disappearances, fear, repression, crime, and injustice, which made her perception of African independence change considerably. Carlos Taveira (2019a+b) wrote a book on his experiences in a Luandan prison and published a novel on the Civil War. In 2020, the Portuguese film director Margarida Cardoso presented her documentary about a young doctor, Sita Diaz Alves (1951-1977), a convinced revolutionary and "fraccionista," who died in the May convulsions. Research for doctoral dissertations was dedicated to this topic (Marques 2012) and some archives are being opened little by little. The president of Angola, João Lorenzo, proclaimed an official revision of the occurrences and presented the Plan of Reconciliation in Memory of the Victims of the Armed Conflicts in Angola (Plano de Reconciliação em Memória dos Vítimas dos Conflictos Armados em Angola) in 2019 and, on 26 May 2021, he declared in an official statement that the government deplored what had happened. In June of that same year, the daughter of the murdered minister Saide Mingas finally received the official certificate of her father's death.

In consideration of this short and by no way complete overview of the painful memorizations of 27 May 1977, it is impressive that Boaventura Cardoso published his novel *Maio, Mês de Maria* (May, Month of Maria) as early as 1997. This lifelong MPLA politician and diplomat, several times serving his country as a Minister or Ambassador, focuses his narration on the search for the disappeared after this May-day (Mata 2006; Millar 3-17). Macêdo characterizes Cardoso's novel as "fantastic literature" (200), because the spirits of the dead communicate with the living. Cardoso points to the political 27 May 1977, of course, but he conceives simultaneously the month as dedicated to the Virgin Maria in the Christian calendar. Cardoso's Maria, venerated in the Church of the Lady of Fatima in Luanda, protects the mothers of the disappeared, who in their devotion practice many syncretistic rituals (Xavier 209-15). José Eduardo Agualusa, in *Teoria geral do esquecimento* (2012), also inserts a chapter on May 77 in his narrative on Ludovica, the Portuguese woman who enclosed herself in her apartment when independence and the start of the civil war. But for her, this date is not particularly important because her isolation from the outside world already started before.

Mendonça focuses on the traumas. These refer not so much to corporal mutilations or warfare, but rather to psychosomatic consequences of the (collective) violence. In *O reino das*

casuarinas, Primitivo's self-imposed amnesia, the loss of his memory of the past, is paradigmatic of the enormous deception to have lived through the republican reality, after having been an idealistic and motivated revolutionary. Only Primitivo and Nkuku witnessed 27 May 1977 personally, but the other citizens of the kingdom equally experienced horrible calamities. The queen lost her child, who was killed by her own family (it was from a black father), she was forced to marry a white Portuguese who escaped to his country after independence, and then she was raped by a group of men; the jurist, an admirer of Cicero's *De re publica* (On the Republic), became mad after losing his job and his family because of having a prohibited relationship with a Cuban woman; the prophet committed the heresy of preaching the Bible on the streets of a socialist state; the UNITA soldier assisted to the mass burnings of Savimbi; and the Congolese soldier of the FNLA lost his mind after the battle of Kifandongo on 10 November.¹⁵ The street vendor of cookies, the less educated, has a special story. When the women of his family took him for a ritual bath with herbs, they discovered that the penis of this tall and strong man was too small to be able to copulate. On top of that, after seeing the film *Sandokan The Tiger* in the cinema *Tropical*, Katchimbamba came across black heads painted on its dancing floor for the whites (forbidden for blacks), and this caused him such rage, that he turned out to be speechless and keeps smiling all the time since then: "...this was his social function, to laugh about everything, to laugh about nothing, he was the one with the biggest laugh I ever had the pleasure to know in my life."¹⁶

To be speechless and, instead, laugh continuously, is a way for the "silent majority" to express themselves in the public space. This is, so to speak, a weapon of defense against invisibility and "social death" (Patterson 2018). Nkuku comes to their support in his capacity of being a functionary at the Ministry of Finances. He writes the proposal "If the ministers would live in the *musseque*."¹⁷ for the economic and financial improvement plan of urban infrastructure. In Nkuku's opinion, it should be discussed whether the center of its politics should be placed in the *musseque*, the poor quarters of town. From that position, the state would depart from microeconomics, from the needs of their inhabitants. The chief of Nkuku's department judges this proposal to be completely insane and Nkuku is immediately dismissed from his function, having to go back to the much less prestigious office where he worked before. But this is not the only political point made in the novel. Mendonça quotes a text by Primitivo, written in his block note in 1979: "About the impossibility of total independence of the African countries" (RC 181-83), asking himself, why there is no socioeconomic progress in the recently independent countries of Africa. One explanation might be the existing economic inequality between the industrial countries and the so-called periphery, from which raw material is extracted and exported. In exchange, they import commodities manufactured elsewhere and do not invest in the production of goods and food for their own citizens. Primitivo foresees that this imbalance will become obsolete when these

peripheral countries develop further: it will produce a global crisis because consumer goods will not find buyers on the global market anymore.

We find such concrete political claims and meanings also in *As Metamorphoses do Elefante*. Mendonça mentions the party of Abel Chivukuvuku, who characterizes PRÁ JÁ Servir Angola as “the pretty girl with whom everyone wants to dance” (Verangola 2021). The Constitutional Court did not allow this party to run in the next elections and its dismissal caused the epidemic. The girl in the *candogueiro* and the other inhabitants from Luanda knew of this decision through television and the author pulls out all the stops to make this epidemic a central event in his novel. Of course, as we will see below, he was inspired by the global impact of the COVID-pandemic and the Berlin Wall. However, by adding many fantastic features around these issues, he makes this epidemic work as a highly urgent matter on a national and international level. The government has to set up a whole new infrastructure to prevent everyone from being infected. They order to build a wall around this mass of contagiously laughing people, which is done by the Chinese, as they are the most efficient and speedy workers to realize such a project. The people inside have to be kept alive and, with the support of international organizations, food is dropped from helicopters. A cordon sanitaire is freed around the wall, and special masks and eyeglasses are distributed, while drones control the people from above reporting their whereabouts to the Center of Public Security (CISP). Again, Africa comes into the picture. The French medical specialist finds an article on the Internet from 9 June 1962 on a similar stress epidemic in Tanganjika. This was another MPI (Mass Psychogenic Illness), which began on 30 January 1962 and continued for a few months. It is explained by the fact that the expectations for independence were so high on the part of the younger generation that they became increasingly frustrated due to the rigidity of the governments ruled by old and traditional men, a “traditional conservatism” (conservadorismo tradicional, ME 128-30) that did not respond to the new ideas. This same thing now happens in Luanda. The frustration of young (and elderly) people because of the lack of progress and prospective makes them express their feelings of embarrassment through this “laugh attack” (surto do riso).

A pertinent aspect is the violence of the National Police problematized in the chapters on the death of the pediatric Doctor Sílvia Andrade Dala on 1 September 2020. He drove in his car without his mask and was arrested by the National Police, who took him to their Police Station, where he suddenly died, supposedly of heart failure. The labor union of medical doctors and a NGO, notwithstanding, defy this explanation from the police and demand an autopsy of the body. The truth is not clarified but the family decides to process the police for finding out what really happened. The author entitles this chapter as “The Real History of Dr. Sílvia Andrade Dala” (A história verdadeira do Doctor Sílvia Andrade Dala), mentioning as a subtitle the song “Ilia” by Bonga.¹⁸

Who Is Telling a Story, Adds a Song to It

In sum, in Mendonça's narratives one finds many aspects of the different levels of (collective) violence mentioned by Senghaas. His main characters, Nkuku and Tony, live in Luanda in times of the Civil War and of a contemporary laughter epidemic respectively. Both are global phenomena situated in Africa and, in both cases, the author positions himself amidst the marginalized people. In the first novel, victims of (collective) violence are founding a more democratic counter-state, isolated from city life, in which the mentally disordered develop their own rules. In the second novel, the author creates another space with an alternative justice within the city behind a wall, where the infected people find equality in food distribution and crime is absent. Mendonça criticizes the power structure of the MPLA, the elephant in a continuous metamorphosis during the last forty-five years so that the current party's politics seem to have become almost inconsistent with its initial goals in the anticolonial struggle. To emphasize this tension between now and then, Mendonça quotes two poems written by Agostinho Neto, the first president of Angola, in full: "Havemos de voltar" (We will return, ME 64-65, dated 1960), and "Crueldade" (Cruelty, ME 71, dated 1949). By way of organizing this permanent strain, Mendonça indicates that the independence of his country—the Dipanda in local speech—, so rich in raw material and people, did not accomplish the expectations symbolized by the Bairro Operário in the past. The psychosomatic consequences of collective violence by state institutions, together with the quotidian violence (sexual violence, lack of freedom of religion, discrimination), have self-imposed amnesia and the laughter epidemic as a result.

Mendonça does not only question these social and political factors, but he is also searching for change, as shown in his proposal for considering the economic demands of poor people and his emphasis on the lack of perspective for the youth, a dramatic and urgent problem in Africa. Young people listen to music everywhere, and the author's critical sound pulls through the lines of his texts by mentioning musicians and songs. Nkuku plays a whole discography at the party for his twenty-first birthday (RC 109-10), with *semba* and Angolan rhythms, African and Brazilian singers, and other interpreters from world music. And the seven chapters in his second novel, with its "coantar," are subtitled with titles of iconic songs by Luiz Visconde, Jovens do Prenda, Artur Nunes, Bonga, Elias dya Kimwezu, Lilly Tchiumba, Santocas and, as the only not-Angolan musician, Manu Dibangu from Cameroon.

According to Lanie Millar, Mendonça is one among a series of writers and filmmakers who conceive the stratagem of their diegesis with a feeling of frustration with the republic, in contrast to the former ideals for post-colonial times. She detects this general sense in her pioneering book *Forms of Disappointment. Cuban and Angolan Narrative after the Cold War* (2019).¹⁹ In Millar's opinion,

this poetics of disappointment constitutes a new formal and affective relationship to the histories of revolution shared across the South Atlantic. I would adopt this formulation of a poetics of disappointment, with a slight modification: it is constitutive for a new formal and affective *critical* relationship to the histories of revolution *and of the republican politics* shared across the South Atlantic, as observed in Mendonça's novels.

Speaking of (collective) violence and looking for analogous literary traditions, we encounter the authors of the so-called *Boom* of Latin American literature in the 1960s and 1970s. In his critique of another long-term governmental party in power, Mendonça's second novel might be compared with *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987), the social satirical story, in which Carlos Fuentes grotesquely depicts the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) and its entourage in Mexico, governing from 1929 to 2000, although sometimes changing its name. Fuentes was a most distinguished author in the decades in which this *Boom* literature achieved international recognition and celebrity, and Mendonça explicitly refers to some others of them, such as Alejo Carpentier (Phaf-Rheinberger 2017b), Mario Vargas Llosa's dictator novel *La fiesta del Chivo* (2000) and, in particular, Gabriel García Márquez. This author was inspired by calamities such as a long-term civil war or massacre in his novel *Cien años de soledad* (1967), describing them with imaginative lightness and an ironic tone. Márquez's masterpiece did not only influence Mendonça profoundly, but also another famous Colombian writer, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, who in an interview with Maya Jaggi (2010) speaks of his "obsession" with the history of his Latin American country:

The novel "can start from a point of not knowing; it can be an act of understanding, investigation, inquisition." ... Novels "give another version, recover truths that have been repressed"... The task is to "make Latin America's past come alive so we can gain some control over our future." (Jaggi 2010)

This also is true for Mendonça and his African homeland. In his poetry, columns and narratives, this Angolan author always creates new linguistic combinations and tropes to express his thoughts in this respect. Of course, his most important readers are the ones in Angola and, therefore, he publishes his novels not only in Portugal but also in his own country.²⁰ The opportunity to debate with his fellow writers, intellectuals, students, and the average reader inside and outside Angola accompanies the path towards democratic options for inner-political and social problems. Mendonça even connects the occurrences in Angola to a planetarian phenomenon, just as threatening for humanity in his country as elsewhere:

You, who are sitting here in this burning wheel, have to feel an itch at the right edge of your hand palm, whereas you hear me reading this message in the computer. Because you have to know that an itch at the hard edge of your hand is a sign that in some extreme part of the multiverse another Sun has just been born and within a

billion of years a blue brain will walk around him, similar to his, and absolutely white with grooves of red blood. The real death of Dr. Sílvio Dala will not even be known to those future thinking animals who circle around another Sun and burn now at the right edge of your hand palm. Within a hundred years, our Earth will burn and we will not even be there any more to tell how it has to be. And that doesn't matter because paper, journals, books, media, politicians and policemen, hospitals, doctors and sick people will not exist anymore. I don't know why we are burning each other here on Earth, when the final fire will burn us all, blacks, whites, mulattos, red and people from India, rich and poor, money, banks, houses, airplanes, fire bombs, political parties and the apolitical people such as Jehova's witnesses, all the splendor of science and art: it will be the end of everything, everything.²¹

This eschatological moment emphasizes the tragic death of Dr. Sílvio Andrade Dala, but it does not appear in the finishing chapters of the novel. The title of the epilogue, in contrast, celebrates life: "Who is telling a story, adds a song to it" (*Quem conta um conto, acrescenta-lhe um canto*, ME 247). Music and musicians are as important as storytelling for young people: they constitute an archive of cultural memory and, in the opinion of Angola-born Ana Sobral, "provide a space to observe intergenerational transmission processes in action" (n. p.).

In this way, Luanda, in Mendonça's novels, is not exclusively a city of violence and traumas, but also of *orature* and musical rhythms, which determine its street cultures. They make his books a "grammar of Angola's quotidianity" (André 25), of this "merchandizing urban ship" (*navio mercante da cidade*, ME 96). They also testify to the existence of vivid observations of the political and sociocultural situation, something difficult to perceive from outside. It is within this framework that 27 May 1977 is becoming part of the country's cultural heritage, accomplishing the motivation of the author to "think about us and again think about us, our Angola" (*pensarmos e repensarmos Angola*. Liberato 2021). Mendonça does not intend to explain (collective) violence as Senghaas does, but, as a creative writer, he digs out in full the entangled consequences instead and claims, escorted by other authors, action groups and publications. It will finally be an integral element of an "affective community," thus contributing to the "reorientation of history" (Chaves 2010; Arenas 2011) after independence in literary narratives and, in the end, to the rehabilitation of the victims and their families in reality.

Notes

¹ I will quote from this 2014 edition, with the abbreviation RC.

² I will quote from this 2022 edition, with the abbreviation ME.

³ “Mientras que el afecto refiere a una intensidad, un punto de encuentro entre cuerpos que provoca un cambio en el gradiente de energía o ... “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” ... , una emoción o un sentimiento “is a *recognized affect*, an *identified intensity*” ... A diferencia del afecto, la emoción es una categoría reconocible, identificable. Por ello, es posible postular una taxonomía de las emociones mientras no existe una taxonomía de los afectos” (2022, 16).

All translations from Portuguese and Spanish into English in this article are mine.

⁴ FAPLA, People’s Armed Forces of Liberation; MPLA, People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the party of Agostinho Neto.

⁵ FNLA, National Liberation Front of Angola, the party of Roberto Holden.

⁶ UNITA, National Union of the Total Independence of Angola, the party of Jonas Savimbi.

⁷ “Dez anos depois dos inesperados acontecimentos do 27 de Maio de 1977, as quitadeiras ainda não haviam recuperado o direito natural de andar pelas ruas de Luanda” (RC 15).

⁸ “Katchimbamba-pássaro nocturno, objecto de algumas históricas de feitiço” (RC 132)

⁹ A mini-bus and collective taxi. At the same time, it is a driving public disco because the newest music is played continuously and very loud.

¹⁰ “Foi uma semana em que imperou no outro lado do muro o regime não planificado, mas naturalmente imposto pelo vírus do riso, da distribuição equitativa do capital. Uma semana sem crimes, em que toda a comida lançada pelos helicópteros era milimetricamente repartida” (ME 127-28).

¹¹ “... a doença psicogénica em massa «geralmente ocorre em pessoas sem muito poder, é o último recurso para pessoas de baixo *status*. É uma maneira fácil para eles expressarem que algo está errada»” (ME 131).

¹² This hyperbolic style of description seems to be inspired by Gabriel García Márquez’s narration of the funeral of Mamá Grande (2014).

¹³ “Os do lado de cá do muro são cidadãos habituados à situação, governantes e familiares, funcionários que mamam os restos do leite da vaca petrolífera, agentes dos serviços e outros pacatos cidadãos com medo da mudança, religiosos ou simples conservadores e resignados, de bico calado, como os operativos que guardam as casas e lojas dos ricos. Empregadas domésticas, lavadores de carros e outros serviços paupérrimos, bem como os rapazes de rua sem nada, de tanto privarem com os bosses ou em torno deles, trazem na alma parte da aura do conservadorismo, ou têm o coração pulsátil de extrema resignação, Este grupo restrito não for atingido pela doença psicogénica em massa” (ME 131-32).

¹⁴ “O 27 de Maio foi um conflito político interno do partido no poder. O que aconteceu após o 27 de Maio não tem nada que ver com esse conflito. Foi um crime contra a humanidade. Um acto de terrorismo do próprio Estado, que durou até 1979” (ME 61).

¹⁵ The battle of Kifandongo among the MPLA and the FNLA was lost by the latter and crippled the military force of the FNLA-party for several months.

¹⁶ “... esse era a sua função social, rir de tudo, rir de nada, era o maior ridente que eu jamais tive o prazer de conhecer na minha vida,” RC 24.

¹⁷ “se os ministros morassem no musseque,” RC 239-44.

¹⁸ This episode bears a personal note. Mendonça, member of the Writer’s Union of Angola, stepped out of the organization in 2018 when one of its guards was tortured and murdered at a police station. Mendonça was the only one who openly expressed his disgust and criticism, in contrast to all the other members of the UEA.

The song “Ília” by Bonga Kuenda was released by Vaya con Dios in 2004, and its first lines are the following: Gone is the man / Who loved his land / More than day / If his heart had to leave / His soul was to stay.

¹⁹ In her book, Millar mentions Mendonça once when referring to his poetry on p. xxxv.

²⁰ Mendonça, as well as Cardoso, published their novels first in Portugal and then in Angola. In the Angolese edition, *O reino das casuaras* had a different title, *Se os ministros morassem no musseque*, and the text was revised. See Works Cited.

²¹ “Você aqui sentado nesta roda de fogueira deve estar a sentir uma comichão na borda direita da palma da mão, enquanto me ouve ler esta notícia no computador. Pois saiba que comichão na pele rija da mão é sinal de que nalgum extremo do multiverso um outro Sol acaba de nascer e dentro de trilhões de anos ao seu redor vai caminhar um cérebro azul como o seu que é absolutamente branco com estrias de sangue vermelhas. A morte verdadeira do Dr. Sílvio Dala nem sequer será conhecida desses futuros animais pensantes a rodar em torno de mais um Sol e a arder-lhe agora na borda direita da palma da sua mão. A nossa Terra arderá dentro de cem anos, e nós nem estaremos aqui pra contar como há-de-ser. Nem vale a pena, porque não haverá papel, jornais, livros, mídia, políticos e polícias, hospitais, médicos e doentes. Não sei por que é que aqui na Terra estamos a nos queimar uns aos outros, se o fogo final vai nos queimar a todos, pretos, brancos, mulatos, amarelos e indianos, ricos, pobres, o dinheiro, os bancos, as casas, os aviões, as bombas de combustível, os partidos políticos e os apolíticos, como as testemunhas de Jeová, todo o esplendor da ciência e das artes, tudo, tudo acabará” (ME 84-85).

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