



Between nation, post-empire, and world-literature

African and European institutions in the worlding of African lusophone literatures case studies: José Eduardo Agualusa and João Melo

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Abstract

African Lusophone literatures are largely a Portuguese product: the very construction of literary corpora through book editing and printing was mainly led by Portuguese publishers before and after independence. Other non-African institutions (universities, literary agents, critics) were largely responsible for that process of canonization in the Portuguese-speaking world, with repercussions in Africa itself.

In the worlding of these already constituted African literary archives through translation, the grip of European agencies is even stronger: more than half of the published translation passes through the mediation of a single, Frankfurt-based literary agency. More than half of these books were funded by a translation support programme paid for by the Portuguese state.

In this state of affairs, this article wishes to carry out a reflection on the institutional situation in which such literatures are produced, appear in book form and travel inside and outside the Portuguese-language literary space(s). It is my opinion, following and adapting Pascale Casanova's suggestion, that a single literary work, in this specific case, can assume a threefold position: a national one, a specific position inside the Portuguese-language literary space and, finally, a world-literary one, thus oscillating between the dimension of nation-state, the post-imperial language community and the World Republic of Letters.

I will resort to two case studies, exemplary of two divergent trajectories: José Eduardo Agualusa, possibly the most resonant example of internationalisation of an Angolan author; and João Melo, which appears to have a stronger national positioning and a much weaker international one.

Keywords Lusophone African literatures · Literary circulation · Post-imperial dimension · National literary space

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Pascale Casanova wrote poignantly about the role national arenas played all along in literary history and continue to play today in world-literary consecration. Her theorized *République mondiale des lettres* (Casanova, 1999) amounts in fact to a transnational literary field which authors enter only after positioning themselves in their national spaces. As a corollary, “each writer’s position must necessarily be a double one, twice defined: each writer is situated once according to the position he or she occupies in a national space, and then once again according to the place that this occupies within the world space. This dual position, inextricably national and international, explains why—contrary to what economic views of globalization would have us believe—international struggles take place and have their effects principally within national spaces; battles over the definition of literature, over technical or formal transformations and innovations, on the whole have national literary space as their arena” (Casanova *apud* Damrosch, 2014, pp. 199–200).

Lusophone African literatures as we know them, certainly as canons but also as epistemological units, are largely—in institutional terms—a Portuguese product. The very construction of literary corpora through book editing was mainly led by Portuguese publishers before and especially after African independence. Moreover, other non-African institutions, such as scholars, literary agents and critics were largely responsible for the canonization of these corpora in the Portuguese-speaking space, with repercussions also in African national literary fields. When it comes to the worlding of a segment of these already constituted literary archives in translation, the grip of European agents is, possibly, even stronger. Just to point out a few telling examples: the majority of published translations from independence up to the present date were made through the mediation of a single Frankfurt-based literary agency and a large amount of these translations were funded by a support programme paid for by the Portuguese state (see Bucaioni, 2020).

In this state of affairs, the present article wishes to carry out a reflection on the institutional situation in which such literatures are produced, appear in book form and circulate inside and outside Portuguese-language literary space(s). In my opinion, an author or a single literary work can assume, in this specific case, a threefold position in this field: a national one inside the specific literature in which they were written; a position in the Portuguese-language literary system and, finally, a world-literary one; thus oscillating between the dimension of nation-state, post-imperial literary space and world-literary system. In this way, these works gain a different perspective in each one of these spaces. African agents and institutions seem to have been more worried by the internal construction of a national literary field, while the responsibility for the world-literary dimension, both inside and outside the Portuguese-language literary system, was largely left to ex-metropolitan and other northern-global institutions.

Reflections on the complex status of African authors writing in post-imperial languages and on their positioning towards their public (national, African, global) have emerged as soon as African literary production in these languages started. The famous *querelle* about the language of African literatures in the Anglosphere, championed by the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o on the side of those who advocated for the emergence of literatures in non-colonial languages, and by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe in the field of those who promoted the use of English as a both legitimate and effective way to build authentic African literatures is still unresolved.

It continues at least in the guise of reflections on what actually African literatures are, on who is to be legitimately considered an African author and on the writing horizon of African writers today. Almost forty years after the publication of *Decolonising the mind*, by Ngũgĩ (1986), something has been done, but much is also still lacking in the way of building solid publishing spaces in many sub-Saharan countries, capable of promoting the publication of national literatures and of projecting them onto the international stage. Attempts at standardising African languages as literary koinés and building trans-African networks of translation without the mediation of ex-metropolitan publishing centres have largely been also ineffective, leaving the general landscape essentially unchanged.

As many recent scholarly works suggest (Ducournau, 2016 and 2017; Wa Ngũgĩ, 2018; George, 2021; Harris, 2020 and Hodapp, 2020), African authors in recent years still struggle with some of these long-standing problems. Should an African author write in the language of the ex-colonial power? Will they have more chances to be read (both nationally and abroad) if they publish in the global North? Are African authors exclusively published abroad—and sometimes living for many years outside their country of origin—still to be considered culturally African or do we need a different category, such as Afropean/Afrod descendant, as many have recently suggested? (see Pitts, 2019 and Miano, 2020 for the most recent and intense reflection on the Afropean concept) The astounding success recently awarded to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example, who, as a Nigerian writer, was internationally acclaimed only after her work has been consecrated in the USA, has revived some of the decades-old polemics on African authenticity and on African national literary spaces and their relation to world-literature.

Following Casanova, it is quite expectable that African authors, as other writers from any periphery of the world-literary system (“space” in her terminology) gain the specific conscience of their peripherality and tend to overcome it by directing themselves toward the centre of the world-literary system in search of a wider readership and a more solid consecration (a “*littérisation* certificate,” in Casanova’s terminology). This movement is usually aimed at centres which more often than not coincide with ex-imperial capitals. African literatures today—in English, French and Portuguese—do not look very different from what they looked twenty or thirty years ago for what concerns their publishing, consecrating and canonizing structure. The vertical relationship between ex-colony and ex-metropolis remains the norm in the literary field, and proves to be more productive than horizontal trans-African connections. The role of selection, consecration and anthologisation is largely played by centres located in Europe and/or North-America. On the other hand, it is very uncommon for literature to circulate between nations on African soil. It is still more frequent for an Angolan or Mozambican author to read and be read, to influence and to be influenced by authors who write in Portuguese (be they European, Brazilian, or African) than by a South African and/or Namibian author, for example. The contrary is even rarer, given the hyper-centrality acquired by English as a literary language worldwide and the still important position occupied by French, while Portuguese continues in a marginal position (see Braz, 2014 and, implicitly, Beecroft, 2015 and d’Haen, 2016 among others). At any rate, for an Angolan book to be read, for example, in English-speaking Africa, it would still probably need to be published

before in Lisbon, then be noticed by a British or American publisher and be printed in translation in the United Kingdom or in North America, and be imported as a foreign product back to Africa. This situation is exactly what our data show happened with the totality of published translations of these literatures into English: out of 44 total publications, in fact, only two have been published on African soil, while 25 of them were published in the United Kingdom and 16 of them in North America.

Pascale Casanova's theorization on world-literature has been and continues to be both enthusiastically acclaimed and bluntly criticized in the last two decades from the first appearance of her book, as the forthcoming collective monographic publication dedicated to her legacy testifies (Sapiro & Ungureanu, 2022). The most relevant reaction from the Portuguese literary field is Helena Buescu's, in her chapter for the *Routledge companion of world literature* (2012). For what concerns this article and my work, I must take into account these reactions, especially because they come from the main scholar who introduced the theoretical concept of world literature in the Portuguese academic arena. Buescu's and her team's work (which found a more complete outlet in Buescu & Mata, 2017; Buescu et al., 2018 and Buescu & Valente 2020), revolves around a view of world literature that one could define very near to David Damrosch's. The systemic theorization on world-literature is mainly bypassed in this school, privileging a solid expansion of the scope of traditional comparativism, in which Eurocentrism is overcome by the inclusion of many non-European classic and contemporary literary traditions. This panoramic work, in effect, can be seen as an importation into the Portuguese academic and didactic field of an English-Speaking concept (and object, at the same time): the reference literary anthology, whose most notorious examples can be found in the catalogue of imprints such as Norton or Longman. This importation attempt is noteworthy especially because it happened in a book market and in an academic circuit which, as it is a general norm outside the Anglosphere, had worked until then without such an instrument. For what concerns this article, nevertheless, the systemic view on world literature is paramount as a theoretical background to any attempt at literary theory and criticism. Under the application of system theories to literature one gains a clear view of the inequalities and the unevenness of the world-literary system, especially in the case of (semi-) peripheral literatures.

Inocência Mata's intervention on world-literature applied to the African space (Mata, 2013) is also relevant here. Her contribution focusses on disciplinary problems involving the isolation of African Lusophone literatures against the background of the Portuguese-language literary system, but does not mention the problem of their translation and their presence (or the related question of literary fame) at the level of world-literary system. This is quite common, since the history of circulation and reception of literary works in translation is almost non-existent in the field of Lusophone African literary studies in Portugal.

While the world literary dominance of English makes so that the balance between intranlations and extranlations in and from this language is always to the advantage of the latter, with a constant disproportion between texts which flow from English to other languages, outnumbering movements in the opposite direction, this has conse-

quences also in the African translation field.¹ Despite old and new initiatives that aim to contrast both the scarcity of inter-African translations and the dominance of certain languages to the detriment of others,² the general translation landscape continues to be centred in the global North and the tension lines governing literary exchanges continue to be largely directed to and mediated by ex-imperial centres.

This phenomenon, truth be said, has proved to a certain extent difficult to avoid: literatures are built inside a language and use that language—both with its cultural legacy and its material institutions—as their tool. Structures which preside publication, circulation and consecration in a language space also inevitably follow the language choice, which in this way reveals to have an institutional aspect and not merely an aesthetic or political one. Publishing markets and literary fields used to take centuries to be erected and stabilized—notwithstanding wishful thinking and the amount of effort allocated—and to accumulate that symbolic capital Bourdieu and Casanova refer to.

By and large, and as it happens also to English- and French-speaking African writers, Portuguese-speaking ones have relied on Portuguese structures in order to attain national and international recognition. Even before African independence, the role played by Portuguese institutions in the building of African literatures was extremely significant, as illustrated by the example of the Casa dos Estudantes do Império, consensually reported as a centralizing agency for young anti-colonial African intellectuals in the 1960 and 1970 s. That institution, indeed, favoured the meeting of young intellectuals from the then Portuguese African colonies, and it was in its premises that anti-colonial ideas, theories and literature circulated for the first time in the Portuguese environment. The episode of the Sociedade Portuguesa de Escritores' Prize to Luandino Vieira's short-story book *Luuanda* (1965) and the subsequent persecution by the Portuguese political police is also telling. The author was in that moment already imprisoned in the Tarrafal concentration camp at Cape Verde, for political reasons, where he would continue to be until 1972, and the Portuguese literary institution's decision to award one of the most prestigious literary prizes to an anti-colonial dissident was countered by the use of brutality by the colonial regime, which culminated with the extinction of the Sociedade itself. These two well documented occasions testify to the fact that, even in the more brutal years of the colonial regime, some Portuguese literary and cultural institutions managed in certain instances to escape censorship and to play a relevant role in the institution of African intellectual and literary fields.

After the Carnation Revolution, many Portuguese agencies continued to prove essential to the building of an African literary canon: publishers such as Sá da Costa, Edições 70, Vega, Dom Quixote and Caminho made the history of African literatures in Portuguese. Edições 70 and Sá da Costa, especially, made an immense effort in order to publish African literary and essayistic material immediately after the Revo-

¹ The dominance of the English language in the world translation field is well studied by many scholars, among which Venuti (1995) and Heilbron (2010).

² Such as, for example, the literary collective Jalada Africa, which supports direct translation of African literary works into other African languages, including both ex-imperial languages and local ones (<https://jaladaafrica.org/>).

lution: both imprints promoted collaborations with the newborn African states and their cultural agencies: they published and printed in Portugal books intended for and in some cases paid for by these agencies. Sá da Costa, in the years following the revolution, composed a literary and essayistic catalogue on African themes, including anti-colonial literature, with a book list encompassing, for example, Ruy Duarte de Carvalho, Hélder Proença, Agostinho Neto, Corsino Fortes, and the famous panoramic anthology of African Lusophone poetry by Mário de Andrade, among others. Sá da Costa, for instance, published in translation, among others, essays by Basil Davidson, Samir Amin, Pierre Jalee and Yves Benot. *Edições 70*, in their website, describe their connection with Africa as follows:

So, in 1976, *Edições 70* began a process of intense cooperation with the cultural agents of the new African Lusophone countries (especially Angola and Mozambique), which allowed, in a decade's time, the dissemination of many authors and works which represented those countries.³

Editorial Caminho, on its part, played a seminal role in building an impressive collection of African authors since the 1990s, with a continuous campaign of literary scouting, mediating between African national spaces, Portugal and the rest of the world. Caminho appeared regularly with a stand at the Frankfurt book fair and also included in its entrepreneurial structure two parallel imprints in Angola (Nzila) and Mozambique (Ndjira), with a partial superposition of literary titles with the Portuguese catalogue.

Up until the beginning of the new century, and for some years into the 2000s, Caminho was without any doubt the main responsible for building a published constellation of African literary works in Portuguese, including dozens of authors and dominating this segment of the market. In their catalogue, under a special book series called *Outras Margens*, or “other shores,” Caminho published the more accomplished and praised African authors of the younger generation, such as Mia Couto, João Melo, Ana Paula Tavares, João Paulo Borges Coelho, Paulina Chiziane, Conceição Lima, Germano Almeida and Ondjaki. At the same time, older names of the previous generations found their continuity in this catalogue, such as Luandino Vieira, and other more obscure, or less translated authors, such as Albertino Bragança, completed Caminho's “extended archive” of African literatures in Portuguese. The two only great African authors to be published outside of Caminho's catalogue were Pepetela and José Eduardo Agualusa, both edited by Dom Quixote. While Pepetela continued to publish his most recent work in this imprint, Agualusa moved on to Quetzal. After the turn of the century and up to the present date, Caminho continued to publish new works by already represented African authors, but essentially failed to go further in its traditional role of author-revealing publisher. The last African names consecrated by this imprint were in fact the Angolan Ondjaki, who began to publish

³ In the original: “Assim, em 1976, *Edições 70* iniciou um processo de intensa cooperação com os responsáveis culturais dos novos países africanos de expressão portuguesa (em especial de Angola e Moçambique), que permitiu, no espaço de uma década, a divulgação de muitas obras e autores representativos desses países.” <http://www.grupoalmedina.net/?q=node/7> (webpage consulted on August 31st, 2022).

prose in their catalogue in 2001 (*Bom Dia Camaradas*, or *Good Morning, Comrades*) and the Santomense poet Conceição Lima, who appeared in Caminho for the first time in 2004, with *O Útero da Casa*.⁴

For what concerns the internationalisation of these literatures, being published in Portugal seemed to be almost a pre-condition: as our data shows,⁵ out of almost 430 published translations, the number of those whose originals were only published in Africa is negligible (six). At the same time, Portuguese public institutions are also involved in the translation process: Direcção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas (part of the Ministry of Culture) and Instituto Camões (part of the Ministry of International Affairs) support the translation of Portuguese authors worldwide including African authors. This can be considered an ambiguous stance in post-imperial times, even if at any rate one with a clear institutional meaning: provided that the publishers involved in the first publications are Portuguese, these books can be considered a Portuguese industrial product and the revenues of this inclusion in terms of symbolic and financial capital revert largely to Portuguese companies.

The most translated African authors are Mía Couto (93 publications), José Eduardo Agualusa (89), Pepetela (47), Ondjaki (26), Luandino Vieira (23), Germano Almeida (20) and Paulina Chiziane (14). Out of 429 monographic publications, the first two names alone amount to almost half of the total, while these seven names together sum up 316 publications, or almost three quarters of the total. All of them are represented in the international markets by the same literary agency—Mertin Literarische Agentur of Frankfurt.

Brazil, on the other hand, has played a surprisingly minor role, until recent years, in the internationalisation of these literatures, being a very relevant secondary market for literary products that were firstly selected, edited and published in Lisbon. It is not to be forgotten that Brazilian academia, however, played an important role in the scholarly consecration of the Lusophone African canon, with some university centres working on the study of these literatures uninterruptedly from the 1970s. After the approval of Law 10.639/2003, Brazil made compulsory the teaching of African (and Afro-Brazilian) literatures in many courses both at high-school and university level, which produced a new interest also by Brazilian publishers on Portuguese-language African material. Nowadays it is no longer rare to find African titles widely available in the Brazilian market which are not present in the Portuguese one, thanks to independent imprints such as Kapulana of São Paulo, which published, among others,

⁴This is probably due to material reasons: the annual or biannual “scouting” journey to Angola and Mozambique of the chief editor of the imprint, Zeferino Coelho, came to a halt around 2011, after the financial crisis hit Southern Europe, as Coelho himself stated in a conference hosted by our research project at the University of Lisbon (May 25th, 2021), available for consultation here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCEvLaVzpuM>.

⁵My data on translation and publication of Portuguese-language African literatures abroad, collected during my Post-Doctoral research work at the University of Lisbon, are available for consultation in an open access article hosted by the journal *Mulemba* of Rio de Janeiro here: <https://revistas.ufjf.br/index.php/mulemba/article/view/39812/21645> Provided that this article’s data are outdated (end of 2019), I integrated them with new data which are being collected by the PhD Candidate Dênis Augusto da Silva (whom I thank) in the framework of our collective research project *AfroLab: Building African Literatures. Institution and Consecration inside and outside the Portuguese-language space 1960–2020*. PTDC/LLT-OUT/6210/2020. The complete set of data is still to be published.

Pepetela, João Paulo Borges Coelho, Aldino Muianga, José Luandino Vieira, Ana Paula Tavares, alongside essayistic work but also literary works translated from other languages.

In this state of affairs, recalling Casanova's suggestion, African authors writing in Portuguese can be said to have a threefold positioning:

- one national position in their African national literary system, whose relevance varies from country to country, from the relatively vast Angolan literary field to the very small one of São Tomé and Príncipe;

- one positioning inside the broader Portuguese-language literary system, which African authors enter in the moment in which they are published in Portugal. In some cases, this post-imperial dimension is very relevant for an author's trajectory. The nature of this space is ambiguous: authors move inside the sphere of their writing language and their relationship with the Portuguese and the Brazilian public, institutions and publishers in a situation felt neither completely "domestic," as the national one, nor actually "foreign."

- one world-literary positioning in translation. Writing in a language that is at the same time one of the most spoken European languages worldwide and a literary peripheral one, these authors, together with their Portuguese and Brazilian peers, are strongly encouraged to attain consecration in translation into English, French and other central or (semi-)peripheral languages. In some cases, this *littérisation* process seems to be a goal *per se*, as showed by both the support of Brazilian and Portuguese governmental agencies and the internal reactions to this: the translation of a Portuguese author is commented, registered and cheered upon in the domestic critic circuit, while there are very few information about the real reception of these authors abroad, let alone selling data. The translation and publication process in a more central world-literary location, in this way, acquires the status of a consecration in itself, notwithstanding the real conditions of these translation operations—i. e. if an author is published by a major or minor imprint in the target field, if foreign publishers actually manage to build a solid author image in their market and to promote the distribution of their works over the years.

This threefold positioning leads to some consequences. First of all, there is an intertwining—and some ambiguity—between the national and the post-imperial dimension: as we have seen, some Portuguese institutions consider these authors sufficiently "domestic" to appear alongside Portuguese nationals. In this way, African countries continue in their subaltern relationship with the ex-imperial centre. Even literary works which can be considered "national" relatively to an African country, in terms of content, setting and place of enunciation, tend to be not totally "national" in terms of publication and readership construction. An Angolan author, for example, even if their literary work is deeply rooted in their country and desires to build a national readership, inserting their work in a political, aesthetic and literary history that is relevant to the Angolan literary field, at the same time does not forget to make some effort to be published in Portugal. Many of these works are published in Lisbon for the first time, obtaining an "original" publication which is not national in the strictest sense.

The inclusion of these works in the Portuguese publishing system has many effects, among which a wider visibility inside the Portuguese-speaking space. Even if

Portuguese and Brazilian book markets are divided (for many reasons, among which the spelling divergence between the two language variants),⁶ publication in Portugal carries visibility in the academic field both in Portugal and Brazil and it also means a chance to be noticed by international literary agents and publishers, i.e. the chance of being selected for translation. Conversely, one can say that the absence of publication in Portugal usually ends up in the remoteness of this possibility.

As we saw, most translations' rights from Lusophone African literatures have been processed by a single literary agent. This agency's staff travels every year to the Lisbon Book Fair and to other international book fairs in Europe, in order to contact with authors, while they do not usually visit African countries. In this way, Caminho, with its African network (Ndjira/Nzila), had an irreplaceable role in literary gold mining in Africa, finding good literary material to be published there and back in Portugal and constituting an effective bridge between the African literary fields and the Portuguese and international literary system.

Given the operation of these processes, when African authors enter the Portuguese publishing field, they also enter a transnational post-imperial literary field, and are awarded a special place in the book market. In fact, while it is not so easy to find even the most consecrated African authors who write in other languages both in Portuguese and Brazilian commercial bookshops, African literary material originally written in Portuguese has long retained its space in these shops' shelves. When Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, for example, no Portuguese translation of his was available in the book market—this translation process is ongoing, both in Portugal and in Brazil specifically *because* of the Nobel Prize, which, evidently, took by surprise Portuguese-language publishers on both sides of the Atlantic; but also highly consecrated African authors such as Chinua Achebe, Ousmane Sembène, or Léopold Sédar Senghor are hard to find, if you find them at all, in the Portuguese commercial book market.

When African Lusophone authors enter the Portuguese publishers' catalogues, they are included in book lists together with other Portuguese-writing authors and in this way their Africanness is somewhat blurred. The role played by the language is paramount here: most agents (literary agents, foreign publishers and translators themselves) are not specialized or even mostly focussed on African literatures, while their centre of interest can be broadly defined as "Lusophone literatures." These works, then, more often than not, enter the international market in translation—or, at least, present themselves to the international market—primarily as Portuguese-language literary works. In this, the post-imperial condition reveals its heavy weight on the contemporary African literary production in its transnational circulation.

Even if blurring their African characteristics, this can also be seen as beneficial to Lusophone African writers. They can in this way benefit of the structure built by the Portuguese State and literary field in order to promote their literary production abroad. However, this also perpetuates the peculiar post-imperial relationship on a

⁶Portugal and Brazil, along with the other Portuguese-speaking countries, tried to unify their ortographies, enforcing starting from 2009 an Ortographic reformation devised in the 1980s. The Ortographic reformation, however, failed its main objectives: Portuguese and Brazilian new ortographic standards do not coincide perfectly, and some countries, like Angola, have never ratified nor applied the reformation. In this way, the book markets continue separated.

literary level and reinforces the vertical links between ex-colonised and ex-coloniser. One effect of this is that translations of Lusophone African authors rarely end up in imprints or book series especially devoted to Africa, as is the case of the Heinemann African Writers Series in English (which hosts eight translations from Portuguese) and of *Présence Africaine* in French (with one published translation from Portuguese). Out of 429 published translations, only nine have been published in a context focussed on African literatures, while the vast majority of them appear in generalist catalogues, or in publishers which are specialized in Portuguese-language literature, alongside Portuguese and/or Brazilian colleagues, as it is the case of *Almaviva* in Sweden, *Metailié* and *Chandeigne* in France, or *Urogallo* in Italy.

The transnational archive of Lusophone African authors' translations is not evenly distributed. Few names are the main beneficiaries of these translation ventures, as we have seen by the number of translations published for each author. Some of these writers have attracted persistent attention by one publisher and/or one translator in some countries, with a continuity meant to build a strong authorial image, while in other places they have not. An example of this is the presence of some specialized imprints in France, such as *Metailié*, focussed on Portuguese-language fiction and which invested in the construction of an author image for many Portuguese and African writers (*Metailié* published nine titles by Agualusa and two by Ondjaki, for instance). Agualusa's work in Italian, on the other hand, is pulverized in many imprints: while *La Nuova Frontiera* published his novels for some years, *Urogallo* focussed on short prose, being the most conspicuous publishers, with other titles dispersed in various different imprints.

At any rate, no Portuguese-language African author has attained a far reaching fame in translation, both in depth (quantity) and time (duration), given that no one of them entered the circuit of major publishing in any European or American market. Agualusa's Independent Foreign Fiction Award (2007, for the novel *O Vendedor de Passados*, translated into English as *The Book of Chameleons*), and Mia Couto's Neustadt Prize (2014) amount to the highest honours any African author writing in Portuguese has ever attained on the international literary stage.

On the opposite side of the international consecration score, there are writers who have been surprisingly left behind, João Melo and João Paulo Borges Coelho being the most telling cases. Both of them have been building a remarkable literary work in the last three decades, both of them have been persistently published by *Caminho* in Portugal and attracted scholarship on their works, but both of them have somewhat surprisingly failed to attain a translation score which could win them an international readership, a world-literary fame of sorts and, possibly, the awarding of international prizes.

We will turn to two case studies we consider exemplary of these contrasts: José Eduardo Agualusa and João Melo. Both authors were born in Angola; they belong to the same generation (born in 1960 and 1955, respectively) and both of them have an outstanding publishing positioning inside the Portuguese-language literary system. However, their trajectory diverged drastically in what concerns readership and, more interestingly here, translation. While Agualusa is one of the most translated Lusophone African authors, João Melo has so far managed to attract just three translations into Italian, published between 2008 and 2018, and the first two translations into

English are under way. In 2023 two translations will be published: *Angola is wherever I plant my field*, a short-story anthology with material taken from Melo's books of 2004 (*The Serial Killer*) and 2006 (*O Dia em que o Pato Donald Comeu pela Primeira Vez a Margarida*), to appear in the US in the inaugural catalogue of Iskanchi Press; the second one, to be published in the UK, under the title *And suddenly the flowers whitered*, is another short-story selection by the translator Cliff Landers.

Agualusa, after studying agricultural science in Lisbon, started a career in journalism and began publishing fiction books in 1989, with the historical novel *A Conjura*, set in a colonial Luanda at the turn of the 20th century. He moved on through the years to become one of the most important contemporary Angolan writers. With more than a dozen published novels, many re-impressions, an impressive number of translations and a series of prizes both inside and outside the Lusophone literary space, Agualusa is today the most visible and most consecrated contemporary Angolan writer by far. He disputes with Mia Couto of Mozambique the title of most translated and most appraised Lusophone African author abroad. Agualusa has been himself a globe-trotter and a traveller, embodying the figure of a cosmopolitan writer: he lived for many years in Lisbon, Portugal, in Brazil and now lives in Mozambique. Especially during the 1990s and the 2000s he travelled constantly in order to take part in book launches in every country where he had been translated. It is not difficult to understand how such a figure can be apt for attracting the attention of both the international public and publishers: a sub-Saharan author available for *tournées* in Europe and North America, with such a profile capable to interact with the public is exactly what most published need in order to promote their product.

His own writing is itself in great part ready for internationalisation from the start: while a considerable part of Agualusa's literary work revolves around Angola, its old and recent history, re-enactment and mention of national historically important moments, his work also spans various territories and cultures, from Goa, India (*Um Estranho em Goa*, or *A stranger in Goa*), to various Portuguese and Brazilian locations, as in *Quando Zumbi Tomou o Rio* [*When Zumbi took over Rio*], but also *Nação Crioula* [*Creole*] and *A Rainha Ginga* [*Queen Ginga*], and less obvious ones, especially in short prose. Much of his prose manages to be easily readable, even when it revolves around national historical dramas, such as war and the scares of colonialism, making of him a palatable author both for those looking for the "postcolonial exotic" taste (Huggan, 2001) and for professional readers. His influences span from Bruce Chatwin to Jorge Luis Borges, through Fernando Pessoa, with whom he inaugurates a fecund dialogue, and Jorge Amado, alongside many references to specifically Angolan figures (such as Viriato da Cruz, Agostinho Neto) so that the international readers may find themselves at home in the cross-literary references. In this way, Agualusa dialogues both with the so-called Western canon—or, at large, with a global tradition originally centred in Europe—, and with the national Angolan dimension. Parts of his work also share a dimension encompassing the globality of the Portuguese language, concerned with the language and its variation, its cultural and sociological situation in various locations of the earth and its relevance and appropriation seen from the global South. Running from Brazil and Portugal to African and Asian places with a Portuguese imperial legacy, Agualusa roams the Portuguese-speaking world and expresses his concern for the language and for its cultural transcontinental

dimension. In a certain sense, Agualusa, even more than Mia Couto, has managed to champion the postcolonial exotic wave of the 1990 and 2000 s, giving the western public what it demanded, “translating” his African reality in forms and frames that were comprehensible for the international public and literary environment.

João Melo, journalist, poet and prose writer, but also politician (he has been MP and then Minister of Culture of Angola), places himself at the opposite side of the internationalisation spectrum. A poet published in Portugal since 1985 by Caminho—and with the consecration of a generous choice of his poems included in the INCM’s publication *Antologia da Nova Poesia Angolana (1985–2000)* of 2001 —, Melo began publishing short prose in 1998, with *Imitação de Sartre e Simone de Beauvoir* and can boast today 22 monographic publications, including poetry, short stories and a novel just published in Portugal (*Será Esse Livro um Romance?*, or *Would it be a novel?*, published by Caminho in 2022).

Together with Agualusa, Mia Couto, Germano Almeida, Ondjaki and Paulina Chiziane, Melo is one of the most prolific and most interesting Portuguese-language African authors, and is active since 2000. However, unlike the other names in this list, the internationalisation of his literary work is incipient. The scarcity of these translations and their belatedness in comparison with the author’s literary career in Portuguese are stunning, when compared to Agualusa’s trajectory in translation.

Melo’s short stories feature several important aspects. Post-modernism is the most appropriate portmanteau term in order to describe the whole of his prose in short. His short stories are all focussed on the dimension of contemporary Luanda and Angola, composing a vivid representation of his contemporaneity, with the prevalent use of humour and some experimental literary techniques. Melo also dialogues with the so-called western tradition, citing many internationally known authors and characters, often in counterpoint with Angolan ones. If Melo portrays vices and virtues of contemporary Luanda with its characters, this can be not object of immediate interest for the international reader, given the relative peripherality of this cultural context, which risks to place Melo’s prose in a cultural void. Afro-pessimistic narratives which still dominate some sectors of the international readership may also weigh here: many readers just want to read about an Africa they have already constructed in their background—made of misery, displacement, dangerous emigration and not of corrupted Afro-metropolitan generals, prostitutes, and street-savvy urban characters. All this can be an hindrance when it comes to internationalization.

Melo, unlike Agualusa, writes mainly—if not exclusively—for a national audience, carving deep into the problems of contemporary Angolan society; this choice, if understandable, can make his texts opaque to the international public. In a way, his being “more African” possibly makes Melo less readable abroad than Agualusa.

Worries (or claims of injustice) about being “too African” for an author to attain an international readership seem to make sense, unfortunately, based on these case studies. An important question about peripheral writing on the world-stage revolves around this “mandatory typicality” necessarily attached to writings from various world-margins and from the global South in general. The centre of the world-literary system seems keen to receive literary novelties and instances in general only when sufficiently marked with their cultural origin (the exotic in the syntagm “postcolonial exotic”), in this way shutting down the right for peripheral authors to write on dif-

ferent themes. At the same time, however, being opaque for the international reader, in terms of themes, settings but also language and literary forms, seem to be an hindrance to the international circulation of these literatures.

This reflection leads us again to the problem of Africanness: what is legitimate to label as “real African” in the light both of the postcolonial exotic and of Afro-pessimistic narratives? Following Casanova, we can see how Agualusa, with a weaker national position, has been active since the beginning of his career in the post-imperial dimension, skipping the national one. Given his publishing career, which began in Lisbon, we can understand him as an Angolan author institutionally born in Portugal. Melo’s voice, with a stronger national positioning, possibly also as a consequence of his role as a politician and a journalist active in Luanda, reaches the centre of Angolan contemporary society, but his post-imperial and international positions are weaker. He has a presence in Portugal, given that he continues to be published by one of the most powerful publishers of the country (Editorial Caminho), and visits Portugal regularly in order to give speeches and launch books. In translation, however, he is almost absent, if not for marginal and ephemeral enterprises.

In conclusion, and considering both case studies and theory, a good national readership and a solid publishing positioning both in Africa and in the ex-imperial centre does not necessarily help the African author to emerge in the World-literary system, and under certain circumstances it even hinders it. A mediation of ex-metropolitan agents and institutions is paramount to approach the centre of the World-literary system, giving these works a double dimension even before being translated into other languages, or a hybrid status between their African belonging and the post-imperial editorial status.

Starting from this post-imperial dimension, some authors are selected for translation, while others are not. Possibly, the effort by the author himself and by the Portuguese publisher or literary agent is not devoid of relevance, we can see however that being published by a relevant Portuguese publisher can lead to very different outputs. We see thus how World-Literature, thought as literary works circulating outside the borders of their culture of origin, can be at the same time a corpus, a theoretical problem, but also a positioning. The contemporary circulation of new literary works and authors, especially when they come from peripheral world-locations, must apparently accomplish a strict set of rules, among which horizon and writerly techniques are not indifferent. In this way, an African author writing in Portuguese is still bound to be inserted in this threefold structure in which the national dimension, to a certain extent, opposes itself to internationalisation, and in the very moment of writing, they must measure themselves with choices to which European writers can easily avoid to be confronted with.

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