The return from Africa: Illegitimacy, concealment, and the non-memory of Portugal's imperial collapse

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Abstract

Decolonization resulted in more than half a million Portuguese settlers giving up their life in Africa. Most of them headed to Portugal, where they were called *retornados* (returnees). As living reminders of an illegitimate history, they do not fit into the dominant post-imperial historical narratives in Portugal and have until recently been invisible within the public arena. This article explores the memorial vacuum left by the collapse of the Portuguese empire and the return, while also addressing the present-day resurgence of *retornados'* memories in Portuguese society. For these purposes, the article is based on the concept of non-memory, a concept which relates to gaps in the social memory that arise from the concealment of certain problematic historical events regarded as illegitimate or shameful for the myths and ideologies of national consciousness. Although it focuses on the Portuguese case, this article is placed in the wider context of the memorial place of the end of the empire in postcolonial Europe.

Keywords

colonial return, non-memory, Portugal, Portuguese decolonization, Portuguese *retornados*, (post)colonial memory

Introduction

As the extensive literature on the subject has shown, the celebration of collective history—its achievements, triumphs, glories, and heroes—is the predominant way of legitimizing identity narratives, following the pattern consolidated by the modern processes of nation state-building. It is no wonder, then, that historical events that do not fit into the grand narratives of celebration and collective pride are expunged from the public arena, forcibly silenced or simply ignored. "Conspiracies of silence" (Zerubavel, 2006) are sometimes established through a tacit agreement that can even link highly asymmetric social paths. They serve to silence the traumas of the past that lie behind public memories. They are "difficult legacies," as Sharon Macdonald (2009) calls them,

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"dissonant heritage," in the words of Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), of wars and massacres, and stories of abuse, exploitation, and repression that so often shame history. The more problematic these legacies are, the greater their ability to destabilize undisputed narratives of collective identity, bringing its ambiguities, blind spots, and black holes to the surface.

The legacies of colonialism are particularly expressive in this regard. As an integral part of the building of European nation-states, the European colonial projects served as irrefutable sources of national pride for the colonizing countries, thus imagined through their imperial extensions. But this is also a history of exploitation, racial and gender violence, massacres, population displacements, slavery, and war. Not falling under the epic narratives of conquest, civilizing mission, and expansion designed by colonizing nations, they are legacies swept under the carpet of the great national history, pushed into the dusty cellars of museums, and omitted from schoolbooks in an attempt to purge their embarrassing connotations with the colonial.

The invisibility of the negative legacies of colonialism in the public arena of the former colonizing nations signifies not only the lack of a historical awareness about the negative impact of colonialism on the colonized peoples, but also a detachment from its consequences for the people of the colonizing metropolis, especially those linked to the end of colonialism. Such consequences included wars of decolonization and the sudden repatriation of hundreds of thousands of settlers once the colonies in Africa and Asia became independent (Smith, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to look specifically at the non-memory of Portuguese decolonization and return, while placing this phenomenon in the wider memory of the empire in Portuguese society. Because the formulations of national identity are so strongly linked to an honorific representation of Portuguese imperial history, the evils of colonialism have practically been expunged from the public memory. For many decades and through several regimes until today, in the arenas of memory sponsored by official bodies, in school, in exhibitions, on state occasions, and in the media, the empire remains an undisputed source of collective pride (Peralta, 2011). In order to maintain its mythology, this apologetic memory has as its reverse the non-memory of the shameful facets of Portuguese colonialism, such as slavery and forced labor, but also the embarrassing circumstances that resulted from decolonization, as was the case with the return from Africa.

To this end, this article is based on the concept of non-memory, introduced by Maria Hirszowicz, Elżbieta Neyman, and Piotr H Kosicki in an article published in the *International Journal of Sociology*. According to the authors, "Social non-memory is determined not only by the forgetting of unobjectivized individual experiences but also by the tendentious blocking of certain elements at odds with ideology or political strategy" (Hirszowicz et al., 2007: 76). This non-memory blocking is, as they explain, wider than mere forgetting or repressing in the Freudian sense. It is not just about the violent and forcible erasure of memories by the state, nor does it necessarily mean amnesia. Non-memory relates above all to gaps in the social memory that arise from the concealment of certain problematic historical events regarded as illegitimate or shameful for the myths and ideologies of national consciousness.

Despite the volume of population involved in Portugal's colonial return and the enormous consequences of these migrations for the migrants themselves and for Portuguese society as a whole, there has been a surprising lack of memory in public sphere in Portugal concerning this issue, which has nonetheless been counteracted by a memory boom in the last years, mainly in the field of cultural production and literature. This article will explore these workings on the public memory of the return, while also seeking to address the individual memory-work of *retornados* (returnees) themselves. The work presented here is based on life-history interviews of individuals who experienced the return at first hand as well as research on websites and analysis of media and written sources. Approximately, 50 interviews were conducted in various parts of mainland Portugal, covering different areas where this population has been accommodated, different socio-economic profiles, and different personal trajectories.

Portugal's imperial collapse and the return from Africa

The date 25 April 1974 is when Portugal celebrates the "Carnation Revolution" which overthrew the dictatorial regime that had governed Portugal since 1926. With the overthrow of the dictatorship, the new revolutionary government put an end to the colonial wars that the New State's (*Estado Novo*) colonialist regime was waging on Africa on three fronts—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau—against the self-determination movements organized in the territories colonized by the Portuguese, and the country finally joined the wave of decolonization started in the wake of World War II (WWII). The Portuguese Empire, which had been the first European maritime empire, was now the last of the empires to be dissolved (Pinto, 2001).

Shortly after 25 April, the terms of independence of the African colonies and the transfer of sovereignty were negotiated with the liberation movements that were fought against the Portuguese troops (Oliveira, 2017). The atmosphere of the negotiations was peaceful and the government of Portugal was extensively involved in and supportive of the process whereby sovereignty was transferred, in terms of both government representation and military surveillance. It was also hoped that the white settler populations living in these territories would be able to remain in the newly independent countries.

The reality, however, proved to be less harmonious, and soon conflicts erupted on the streets between different political groups and populations. As daily life became progressively marked by fear and violence, panic took root and the mass exodus of the Portuguese started to develop. Most were at first reluctant to leave, but a scenario of civil war and widespread violence, with looting, attacks, expropriations, and imprisonment carried out by members of the liberation movements against members of other movements and/or targeting the white settlers and mixed-race people, made flight seem inevitable. Some fled to South Africa and to other African countries governed by white minorities such as Rhodesia and Namibia. A huge number was rescued from the outbreak of Angolan civil war by an airlift operation that involved the Portuguese army and civil aviation, with the support of American, Russian, British, Belgian, and German air companies. Around 260,000 people were evacuated from Angola between mid-July and November 1975, on the eve of independence of the new country. At the peak of the airlift, an average of 7000 people arrived at Lisbon airport every day (Kalter, 2016).

It is estimated that between 500,000 and 800,000 Portuguese settlers and their descendants left their homes in Africa as a result of decolonization. Even if these figures are not certain, we are surely looking at a very large number of people, especially if we keep in mind that in 1975 the metropolitan Portuguese population was just over 9 million inhabitants, making this the greatest migration resulting from decolonization in relative terms.[1] Moreover, in contrast with the *Pieds-Noirs* from Algeria, who went to France, a politically stable and economically developed society, in 1975 Portugal was a poor country that had lived almost 50 years under the tight grip of a conservative and dictatorial regime and was then living a radical economic, social, and political transformation.

The metropolitan Portuguese suddenly saw them arrive by boat and plane, carrying trunks with all they had been able to save in the confusion of flight. Many people, especially those who came via the airlift, arrived destitute, fleeing the war and violence that prevailed in the colonial territories, with the clothes they wore and all their possessions left behind. In addition to the significant material costs, their migratory experience was emotionally stressful. Sometimes, families were split up and children were separated from their parents. They came to Portugal in a state of shock, with only uncertainty about the future. There, they had to adapt to the land and climate, to create new social relations, to learn new patterns of behavior, and to find somewhere to live and a way to survive.

Upon arrival, they received a welfare subsidy provided by the state and were sent to the homes of relatives, or in the absence of this, to *bed and breakfasts* (B&Bs), hotels, prisons, camp sites, or

any other facilities that could serve as a lodging to the many thousands who arrived every day, in a gigantic rescue and relief operation provided by the Portuguese state. Given the fact that most of them had migrated to the colonies only from the 1950s, these people preferably established themselves in Portugal, making use of still unbroken kinship ties to provide shelter in the former metropolis.[2] But some refused to stay in a country in which they did not feel they belonged and where they realized it would be impossible to regain the level of life they had enjoyed in the colonies. They chose to follow the well-trodden paths of Portuguese emigration such as the United States, Canada, Brazil, and the countries of central Europe which already had a well-established Portuguese emigrant community, like France, Switzerland, and Luxembourg (Peralta et al., 2017).

Stigma and fracture

In Portugal, they were called *retornados* (returnees), a name coined as a result of the establishment by the Portuguese state of the *Instituto de Apoio ao Retorno de Nacionais* (Institute for Support to the Return of Nationals) (IARN) in 1975, an organization created to support the arrival and integration of this population. In the "hot summer" of 1975, Portugal was in the midst of a deep and turbulent process of social and political change and dealing with serious tensions between left-wing and conservative political factions. In this context, the sudden arrival of these repatriates was received with hostility and resentment. Soon, the name *retornado* acquired a pejorative sense and became a stigma. Metropolitan Portuguese were overwhelmed by 13 years of wars in the colonies and *retornados* were regarded as people for whose privileges so many young people had lost their lives in the conflict in Africa, and they quickly became the scapegoat of Portuguese colonialism. They were accused, sometimes openly and at other times more by insinuation, of being colonialists and exploiters of black people, of being those against whom the revolution was undertaken, and of being those who enjoyed the privileges of an oppressive and exploitative ruling class.

Moreover, in a poor country with an almost non-existent social welfare state, *retornados* were seen as competitors in a very scarce housing and job market, while the metropolitan Portuguese felt outraged because they had access to special support from the state, had free accommodation, sometimes in five-star hotels, and enjoyed preferential access to the labor market. Although, legally *retornados* had their citizenship fully recognized by the revolutionary government, a large portion of the Portuguese population did not allow them this legitimacy, not accepting that the state should grant these newly arrived Portuguese equal citizenship rights and special benefits with a view to integrating them into Portuguese society.

Furthermore, in a society that had been closed in on itself throughout decades of dictatorship, *retornados* were seen as foreigners, if not as invaders. There was surprise at their clothes, usually far more colorful, and less decorous, than those worn by their fellow citizens of the metropolis, the different words they used, and their more permissive social relationships and sexual practices. They were regarded with suspicion, and accused of having brought harmful practices to Portugal such as prostitution and the consumption of cannabis and of being responsible for the spread of "tropical" diseases, especially sexually transmitted diseases. They, in turn, viewed the metropolitan Portuguese with disdain, considering them conservative, backward, and with a negative mind-set, in an encounter marked by tensions, hostility, and mutual mistrust. They were "internal strangers," as Stephen Lubkemann (2003) called them,

> inasmuch as their inclusion as part of the Portuguese *civitas*—their legal status and consequently rights as citizens—was broadly acknowledged, while at the same time their membership in Portuguese *societas* (…) was placed in question in everyday forms of social interaction. (p. 76)

One interviewee, born in Angola and coming to Portugal while still a child, makes this stranger-hood very clear in the following words:

> While I was growing up, I was always hearing people talk as if we lived in a world apart. I had a clear idea as a child that we were not really part, that we were a little stranger here … In school, I sensed—I don't know how—despite having white skin, that I was automatically detected in some way. I realise now that it even had to do with the clothes we wore, we were a bit more colourful than people were here. It seems that there was an accent we had that we didn't really notice, but, apparently, it was identifiable. There were words that we used that were not from here … I realised that we were from a different culture. I felt this for a long time.

> Portuguese white man, born in Angola in 1973, settled in Portugal in 1975.

These words are evidence of a cultural and social clash that lasted for a long time. But the fracture resulting from the arrival of these repatriates goes far beyond these daily-life interactions. It also reflects various political and ideological ambiguities in relation to the legacy of Portugal's colonial history and the place occupied by these former settlers in this history. The normative and colloquial meanings of the term *retornado* encompass this ambiguity. The term presupposes the idea that the individuals embraced by it "returned" to the nation of origin whence they had migrated to the colonies. Many rejected this classification because many had already been born in Africa and therefore could not "return" to a place where they had never been before.[3] However, for the most part it was actually a return, since the heyday of the migratory movement to the colonies—particularly Angola and Mozambique—happened only in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s (Castelo, 2012).

But the scope of this classification goes far further than this. Designating these people *retornados* was to consider that they were returning to their homeland as former settlers from a territory they occupied and exploited and as beneficiaries of the colonial system. It was precisely for this reason that many of these people rejected the name *retornados* for its implicit connotation with colonialism. They would rather have been regarded as refugees of the civil wars between the liberation movements and as victims of decolonization, therefore being entitled to have their suffering acknowledged. However, both the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner's Office for Refugees (UNHCR) in Portugal and the Portuguese Government of the day decided that these migrants could not be deemed refugees under international law, as they had not crossed an international border, but had moved within an imperial area in decline as citizens of the country of destination, and therefore they could not be considered refugees under the Convention of Refugees of 1951 (Kalter, 2017). Although calling them *retornados* may have acknowledged their Portuguese citizenship, thus minimizing the adverse reactions of the metropolitan population, their non-recognition as victims of the historical process had the effect of laying the whole "burden of colonialism" on their shoulders (Ovalle-Bahamón, 2003: 166). Rejecting this status, many *retornados* still today do not see themselves in this category, which they regard as inaccurate and insulting, as in this passage from an interview with a man born in Mozambique:

> Coming here to Portugal was not at all pleasant because we were received with disdain. We were called *retornados*. Many were not *retornados*, as it was my case. My parents, yes, they were, but not me. I was born in Mozambique. I am not a *retornado*. I am a refugee. That's the right term. But because of that disdain, they labelled us all *retornados*. Because they used to say:—"You were there exploiting the blacks and now you've come here to take our jobs!"

> Portuguese white man, born in Mozambique in 1953 and settled in Portugal in 1975.

Integration and assimilation

Despite the social disaster heralded by the sudden arrival in the former metropolis of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, within a few years this population became practically invisible. It was as if these people had been perfectly diluted in the host society. The number of *retornados* housed on account of the Portuguese state declined by 77.5% in 1979 in relation to the peak of housing needs registered in 1976, and the total expenditure by the government in the operation to support their integration fell by 90% over the same period.[4] In 1981, the IARN was extinguished and *retornados* who remained unemployed and homeless were handed over to Portugal's social security system.

Politicians and the media alike remember this as an exemplary instance of integration, a success that may even be considered miraculous. The existence of family ties and support networks in Portugal, the action of the Portuguese state in supporting the integration of this population through several programs,[5] together with the economic growth resulting from the accession of Portugal to the European economic market in 1986 are all factors that have contributed to this successful integration, and the truth is that, especially since the mid-1980s, *retornados* have gradually become invisible in Portuguese society. There is no record of it being affected by high unemployment rates, or being distinguished by factors of social marginalization (Dias, 2017). Furthermore, the fact that these people enjoyed full citizenship, spoke the language, and did not stand out from other Portuguese people by virtue of skin color, since the majority was white, greatly facilitated their dilution in the host society (Lubkemann, 2003).

Indeed, the issues of citizenship and race ultimately proved critical in this process of integration. Once the colonies became independent, the Portuguese Nationality Law[6] was amended to regulate the right to Portuguese nationality. Repealing the criterion of land and promoting the criterion of blood, the Law restricted Portuguese citizenship to individuals born and living in the former Portuguese territories in Africa who could prove their European ascend. The white *retornados* and/ or those of white ancestry became full citizens, while people belonging to other phenotypes and cultures were, with a few exceptions, largely excluded. But a significant number of black, mixed-race, and people of Indian origin also came to Portugal in 1975. They were subject to differing degrees of integration into Portuguese society, highly constrained by the phenotype factor.[7] These people, unlike the white *retornados*, were increasingly seen as immigrants and non-Portuguese, demonstrating the maintenance of colonial social categories and their respective racial hierarchies in postcolonial times.

In addition to race, class was also a decisive factor for their integration in Portugal (Lubkemann, 2003). In fact, their different social trajectories had a significant influence on the material conditions of their return and subsequent integration in the former metropolis. Although labeled with the single comprehensive social category of *retornado*, these individuals are part of a socially very diverse population (Hoefgen, 1985). Many settlers were originally from the poorer regions of Portugal, and most were engaged in farming and had low levels of education, while there were also large numbers of well-educated individuals from urban centers.[8] There were rich settler families, rural capitalists, colonial administrators, merchants, missionaries, poor farmers, people involved in trade, and even people of mixed ancestry and local elites with affinities to the colonial power. There were as many returns as there were *retornados*, and their integration in Portuguese society surely depended more on the social and economic capital that was available to each of them, than on their inherent resilience and individual ability to cope with this sudden displacement, as it is so often claimed in political and media circles alike (Kalter, 2018).

Moreover, despite their apparently successful integration, a more thorough analysis shows many instances of maladaptation that deserve attention. *Retornados* often have ambivalent feelings

in relation to Portugal and, despite usually expressing their patriotism and loyalty to the home country, they often say that they see themselves as exiles in Portugal and still feel displaced against their will from the places they regard as their homeland—the former African colonies. Also, most of their accounts are still full of resentment against the politicians they deem responsible for their misfortune, who they consider have deceived and betrayed them before the interests of the Marxist African movements with whom they colluded. They also often mention feelings of inadequacy, which have persisted until today, in relation to the Portuguese population, to social life, to the climate, and to social habits, comparing life in Portugal with the joyful and free lifestyle they say they used to enjoy in the colonies.

Although there are acute differences among *retornados*, their arrival in Portugal represented a process of downward social mobility, relative to the parameters of life in the colonies, which, in general, was not reversed with time. As has been widely documented in studies of various displaced populations (e.g. Gans, 2009), whether migrants or refugees, slipping down the social scale and losing status are often accompanied by feelings of shame and humiliation, and also considerable psychological disturbance. *Retornados* often recall this fall with great anxiety and resentment, casting the blame on the politicians who oversaw decolonization, rarely recognizing the aid provided by the state and never reflecting upon their own historical condition as settlers in a colonial society they profited from and exploited:

> I came with two children … without anything. With nothing at all! One day I was in my house and the next I was being sold like sheep … I had my life. They destroyed it! I ask only this question: what harm did I do to these crooks to get here with nothing? I had a good, stable life. And then I had to depend on the Red Cross. I had to wait for hours at the IARN for them to give me something. Some sandwiches and a few bottles of water. For them to give me five thousand escudos.[9] Do you think that I, having the life I had, would lose my dignity for five thousand escudos?

> Portuguese white woman, born in Mozambique in 1945, settled in Portugal 1975.

The sudden fall in the social scale, the loss of status and privileges, and the relocation to a frequently hostile social environment often resulted in divorce, separation, and many other family disruptions, with cases of drug addiction, alcoholism or prostitution. In many instances, oral accounts also express the difficulties of leaving the past behind and accepting the material and emotional losses resulting from the return. Thus, these accounts fundamentally question the thesis which became hegemonic in postcolonial Portugal about the miraculous integration of *retornados* into Portuguese society upon their return:

> Because if you ask me if I have adapted, I might not have done so. I am still living out what I experienced there. I don't have a moment when I'm not remembering. When I go out there on the street I remember, when I am in meetings, I remember. I am always remembering. It's 40 years later. This is intrinsic, this is within us.

> Portuguese white man, born in Mozambique in 1955, settled in Portugal 1975.

National identity and the illegitimate memory of the return

With the country immersed in a revolution, the tremendous impact of the sudden arrival in Portugal of thousands of displaced people from the former colonies did not receive the political and media attention that one might have expected. The subject of the *retornados* was considered of secondary importance compared with the profound political, social, and economic upheaval and the ideological

polarization which the country was going through. Also, *retornados* were the "embarrassing reminder" of colonialism, the executors of a story that, as Frederick Cooper (2003) observed, "no longer had legitimacy in the decolonising world: they were people who had no right to exist" (p. 169). Their claims for social recognition thus often went unheard.

In the early years of the Portuguese democracy, there was some public debate on the issue of *retornados*, with the publication of writings by influential thinkers such as António José Saraiva (1975) and Eduardo Lourenço (1976) and news items in the press (Góis, 2017). However, from the early 1980s the *retornados* virtually vanished from public discourse. Their integration was considered complete and IARN had become extinct. Decolonization was irrevocable, and the whole national community was being reimagined so as to leave the fascist and colonialist past behind and move forward to a democratic "European destiny" (Pinto and Teixeira, 2004). In this context, a kind of "prescriptive forgetfulness," as Paul Connerton (2008) called it, fell upon *retornados*. The narrative of their miraculous successful integration into Portuguese society had precisely this prescriptive effect. Compensating feelings of loss with ideas of "success" and "conquest," this narrative prevented the appearance of potential divisive narratives that could jeopardize social coexistence. But at the same time, it also contributed to the invisibility of *retornados* and to the inhibition of a critical memory of the return.

The democratic stabilization and the social and economic development of the country, especially after Portugal joined the European Union in 1986, further cultivated this growing invisibility. The two major narratives that came to underpin and sustain Portuguese identity in the democratic period definitively left *retornados* out of the picture. First, the narrative of the empire and the Discoveries, inherited from colonial times and soon redeemed in the postcolonial period, according to which Portugal was the discoverer of the New World and the author of an exceptional colonialism, more tolerant and humane than what was practiced by other colonial powers. Second, the narrative of the "Carnation Revolution," which freed the country from the yoke of the dictator and the oppressed peoples from the whip of the colonizer. According to this narrative, Portugal left its colonial and undemocratic past behind to become a European nation, distancing itself from a history increasingly repudiated throughout the world, particularly by Europe.[10]

The narrative of Portuguese imperial exceptionality and the narrative of the Revolution both excluded *retornados*, who became "a living accusation thrown into the face of the whole nation," as the essayist António José Saraiva accurately diagnosed in 1975 (Saraiva, 1975: 7). If both Portuguese colonialism and decolonization were that exceptional, why did *retornados* exist in the first place? The impossibility of dealing with this contradiction resulted in the social invalidation of the experiences of *retornados*, who were left out of the mainstream discourse of history and memory of the new postcolonial nation. It also resulted in the non-incorporation of the return itself into a body of knowledge collectively imagined, shared, and accepted as part of the history of Portugal. Neither memory nor forgetfulness is an unmediated reproduction of the past. Each is an appropriable, politicized, and mediated object (Argenti and Schramm, 2010). Because of these particular social and political factors of memory mediation, the return and *retornados* fell silent for a long time, receiving no particular attention in the public and media sphere.[11]

Yet, over the course of the last decade or so there has been a spectacular increase in the public visibility of the memories of the return in Portugal. Testimonies, memoirs, novels, TV series, films, and exhibitions suddenly burst into the Portuguese cultural sphere. Some of these include commercially motivated productions, increasingly attuned to the market of colonial nostalgia for the lost empire[12] or quasi-epic tales of flight from the colonies and arrival in Portugal, aimed at edifying the image of *retornados* in Portuguese history.[13] A good example of this rehabilitation is the public broadcaster's prime-time television series *Depois do Adeus* (After Saying Goodbye), (2013). Based on a fictional plot around the Mendonça family—a family of *retornados* from Angola—the

series explores the harsh times experienced by *retornados* when they arrived in Portugal as well as their struggle to integrate in Portuguese society, while at the same time expounding the anarchy of post-revolutionary Portugal and desacralizing the revolution (Pinheiro, 2015). At a time when the country was immersed in an economic and financial crisis and controlled by the center-right coalition government of Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho (2011–2015)—himself a *retornado* from the former colonies, like many members of his government—this rehabilitation of the image of the *retornados* as victims of decolonization entailed a criticism of the left-wing politicians who were behind the revolution and represented a major shift in the country's memory politics since 1974. The crisis conjuncture, with harsh austerity measures imposed on Portugal by the European Union, has also contributed to a loss of confidence in the democratic institutions of the country and in the European project as a whole, leading to a nostalgic yearning for the imperial past (Peralta and Jensen, 2017). In this context, *retornados* are often represented as entrepreneurs who, through their own initiative and effort, have not only managed to overcome their difficult circumstances, but have also helped to change Portugal for the better.[14] Very accommodating to a neoliberal agenda, this narrative often depicts *retornados* as better educated people who had built a modern and prosperous society in the colonies and who have contributed to the modernization of an underdeveloped and backward country after coming to Portugal. This interpretation overlooks the fact that many *retornados* were poor and illiterate people who had left the former metropolis for economic reasons and were often treated disparagingly in the colonies as "second class Portuguese" or "second class whites" (Padilha, 2002). More importantly, it doesn't take into consideration the fact that they prospered in the context of a colonial system based on the exploration of local resources and the widespread use of cheap—if not free—labor.

But the recent boom of *retornados'* memories also went the other way around. At the same time *retornados* were used to back political conservative discourses, their memories were also part of more complex and intellectually demanding productions, which not only call for a deeper appreciation of the whole experience of these people, but also demand a more self-reflexive and engaged appreciation of the country's colonial past. The most relevant examples of these works are the narratives *Caderno de Memórias Coloniais* (Notebook of Colonial Memories), by Isabela Figueiredo (2009), and *O Retorno* (The Return), by Dulce Maria Cardoso (2011), which were publicly acclaimed and had several editions.[15] Both authors are daughters of settlers who returned from Africa while still children. Their works belong to a body of literature authored by a descendant generation engaged in coming to terms with their parents' repression and need to silence the violent past, and with the absence of historical narratives about that shared violence (Kidron, 2012).

Even though a number of works have been written by *retornados* over the years, describing memories of their lives in Africa or of the return itself, they usually enjoyed limited circulation. Just to give an example, a novel published in 2004 with the title *Os retornados* by Teresa Pizarro had almost no media echo and seemed to have failed to capture the attention from the academia (Pinheiro, 2015). The narratives by Figueiredo and Cardoso, in contrast, besides being successes in terms of sales, were published by prestigious publishing houses and soon became part of the preferred readings of Portuguese literary and postcolonial studies, thus crediting the return as an event worthy of being remembered, thought over, and problematized as part of the colonial legacy of the Portuguese empire (Ribeiro, 2012). Even if, and in stark contrast with this complimentary reception, these works were sometimes received with hostility by the *retornados* themselves, especially the book by Isabela Figueiredo with its blunt accusation of racism and colonial violence being perpetrated by the *retornados*, who repudiated this depiction.

Along with these literary works, an increasing amount of systematic research has also been carried out on the return. Although there was academic research on the return over the years, with some works published from the earliest years after the event,[16] until very recently the return has

never been affirmed as an autonomous field of study with a body of work consistent with the importance of the phenomenon in Portuguese society and history.[17] It is revealing that the first public conference on the memories of the return only took place in December 2017, and it was in Geneva, Switzerland. Only in March 2018 did the first public conference on the subject take place in Portugal, in the University of Lisbon.[18]

This recent boom in the memory of the return, after years of almost invisibility in the public sphere, results from the upsurge in the country of a context favorable to the recovery of the memory of the *retornados*, be it the economic crisis, the political conservative drive or even the more than 4 decades that have passed since decolonization. It is also related to two discrete movements or tendencies that in recent years have also become apparent in Portuguese society and that have contributed to breaking the "dialogical forgetting" on the return (Assmann, 2010). On the one hand, the upsurge of a growing market of colonial nostalgia explores the subjectivities of the *retornados* as former settlers in Africa. On the other hand, Portuguese colonialism has become a bourgeoning topic in the intellectual, artistic, and academic milieu, with an increasingly hot debate around its wrongdoings. Within this movement, the historical experience of the return is liable to be accommodated in the cultural meanings which, in diverse ways, make up the Portuguese postcolonial condition.

Invisibility and concealment

Andrea L Smith (2003) asks at one point in her ground-breaking volume dedicated to the "invisible migrants" of decolonization, "What happens to individuals when the wider narrative that gave meaning to their world can no longer be told?" (p. 27). In relation to *retornados*, what happened was concealment. In the heat of events, their action had resulted in tangible forms of claim and affirmation. Public demonstrations took place, some of which resulted in clashes with the authorities, such as the forcible seizing of buses in Lisbon's Downtown and the occupation of the Bank of Angola,[19] or the conflicts with the military police in Rossio, a square where many *retornados* used to gather to demonstrate their grievances.[20] They also formed associations in defense of their interests, such as the Commissions of the Overseas Displaced Persons, the Refugees of Angola, the Displaced from Overseas, the National Overseas Fraternity Movement, and the Portuguese Refugee Association,[21] and in February 1976 they created a political party—the *Centro Social Independente* (Independent Social Center) (CSI). They also created their own media outlet—the journal *O Retornado*—founded in 1975 to voice their problems and claims, which proves that there were identity claims made by *retornados* in light of their biographical rupture. However, within a few years all these had disappeared. Both the aforementioned commissions and the CSI disintegrated and vanished from the political space. By the early 1980s, *O Retornado* was no longer being published. Finally, with the winding-up of IARN in 1981, the category of *retornado* was erased from Portuguese institutional life, and although the term continued to serve to identify this population colloquially, their existence practically disappeared from the national public space. According to some, the deinstitutionalization of the category of *retornado* by the state with the disappearance of the IARN seems to have gone hand-in-hand with the "de-communitization" of this population (Dias, 2017). In fact, *retornados* did not constitute a political force or an affirmative movement with a distinctive identity, in contrast, for instance, to what happened with the *Pieds-Noirs* in France (Jordi, 2003).

Also, although they harbored resentment regarding the politicians who oversaw decolonization, blaming the left for their misfortune, their protest was negligible in the national political and public arena. Again, in contrast to what happened in France with the *Pieds-Noirs* and their association with the French extreme right (Eldridge, 2010), it is not clear from the interviews I have been

conducting with *retornados* that they can definitely be associated with the ideological field of the radical right. Instead, it seems that in the field of party choices too, *retornados* became diluted in the general centrist political tendencies of Portuguese society.

Finally, *retornados* seem to have dismissed any action to assert a proper memorial field in the public sphere. Several publications were in fact authored by *retornados* over the years, giving descriptions of their daily life in the African colonies, their forced return, and their arrival in Portugal. Most of these works were published by now vanished publishing houses and had limited circulation.[22] Their remembering has been mainly confined to more or less private meetings, such as dinner parties, picnics or gatherings, taking place once a year or every 2 years.[23] At these meetings, old friends, neighbors, and schoolmates meet again, and to the sound of songs and tastes from the African past, they give expression to a nostalgia for the life they left behind.

These meetings began shortly after the return. Realizing that decolonization was irreversible, *retornados* quickly resigned themselves to the idea that they had come to stay. As a result, they invested in the transposition of African imaginaries into a commemorative space where broken ties could be reestablished and a sense of community regained by reference to the lost "land." One of these first meetings is the *Encontro dos Inseparáveis da Huíla* (Meeting of the Inseparables of Huíla), a meeting of former residents of the province of Huila in southern Angola, who to this day reunite every year in Caldas da Rainha, Portugal. In the sixth year of the meeting, in 1983, the then president of the organization was already able to assert that "Today, we *retornados* (we are proud to call ourselves that!) are man and Portuguese with a whole soul, and give life to the hymn."[24] And in 1985, 10 years after the return, it was accepted that history will not be reversed: "The tide of history is accepted and we are proud of what we have left behind … waiting for our journey of longing to be accepted."[25] Faced with the irreversibility of the course of history, not a distinctive and separate *retornado* identity, but a resigned "journey of longing" for the lost Africa is thus lamented. These meetings thus ended up working for these thousands of people as occasions of symbolic integration in the Portuguese national community, while reiterating their affective belonging to another territory and another time—that of colonial Africa.

These meetings are therefore, above all, nostalgic events and not political affirmations of identity. Indeed, at these moments of social interaction among *retornados*, there is an explicit avoidance of issues regarded as ideological, such as that of Portuguese colonialism, decolonization or the return. This kind of positioning is supported by the idea, even today stated by the interviewees themselves, that the Portuguese settlers in Africa constituted a non-politicized population that acted in accordance with the moral order of a colonial society, without ever discussing the assumptions on which this order was based. They thus dismiss any responsibility for the support of the colonial project itself. Even though concrete ideological positions are often verbalized in the interviews, in these more communal moments they are explicitly avoided. As a matter of fact, it is even common for gatekeepers to give speeches with indications that the meetings are festive occasions, not meant for ideological grandstanding. Instead, with the intention of being a re-creation of the picnics and binges of colonial times, these meetings have a markedly festive character. Sounds, flavors, and colors transmit an exoticized imagery of belonging, inhabited by docile racialized *Others*, and are generally represented as fertile, harmonious, and beneficial. A "lost paradise" that cannot ever be regained except as longing. Accordingly, the statements collected at these meetings are filled with feelings of nostalgia for this African idyll and—mainly—for the loss of the colonial lifestyle.

This idealized Africa also often lives in *retornados'* private and domestic space. Their homes are very often filled with memorabilia: African blackwood carved figures, hunting prizes, spears, and other "indigenous" artifacts. They are usually objects acquired after arriving in Portugal, to decorate their homes, as part of a nostalgic repertoire that signals an *interior* identity, which is reproduced in the domestic environment, but which rarely has expression in the public space.

Some culinary practices are also part of this repertoire, such as "typical" African dishes like *muamba*, which were introduced in the familiar menu, particularly on festive occasions. Again, these are practices of nostalgia that retrieve the most exoticizing and stereotyped traits of a "typical African culture" to bolster its practitioners' sense of symbolic belonging to an African past, and to reproduce its imaginary to the family group.

Notwithstanding, in the public space or even in the space of their everyday, professional or other sociabilities, *retornados* have gradually omitted their course and their condition. Despite their huge number in Portugal even today, it is very common to be a colleague or friend of a person for years without knowing that he or she is a *retornado* or a *retornado* descendant. They often opted to not talk openly about this issue, like this man I interviewed who answered as follows when I asked him why he does not talk about his colonial past:

> People don't understand. I can have an open conversation, but as people are imbued with the spirit of the information that the TV puts out, that the radio puts out, that the commentators give out, these preconceived ideas, it's hard for us to have any conversation. Therefore we don't talk about it because people don't understand.

> Portuguese white man, born in Mozambique in 1955, settled in Portugal 1975.

Because of the stigma they suffered and their urgent need to integrate and move on with their lives, they willingly or resignedly (self-)concealed their *retornado* identity for so long that eventually they forgot to openly talk about it. But the concealment to which *retornados* voluntarily submitted themselves should not be seen as a repression, instead as a strategy of integration on their part. In face of the irrevocable loss of their homelands, they just wanted to get on with their lives and integrate into Portuguese society as best they could. Being white and speaking the native language, they preferred to distance themselves from their colonial past because drawing attention to a distinctive identity would accentuate their marginality, not their integration. As Frederick Cooper (2003) observed, "They traded not on their distinctiveness, but on their assimilability" (p. 183). In this process, they strategically chose to conceal a past which, if asserted, could result in increased social ostracism. Memory is not only an instrument to be used in the construction of imagined communities, but also a highly selective relational strategy that serves the interests of the present. *Retornados* chose to conceal their memories so as to become part of the community that welcomed them as citizens, remembering along with the anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013) that "subjection should be considered on a par with agency, a human strategy for survival" (p. 19). As is clear from this account of a *retornado* from Angola, they had no alternative:

> It's finished for me. I closed my memory. I don't even remember anymore. It's all over, God forbid if we didn't forget, we had to forget. We had to move on, we had no alternative.

> Portuguese white woman, born in Angola in 1954, settled in Portugal in 1975.

But again, in recent years there has been an enormous upsurge in the visibility of nostalgic memories of *retornados* with the development of websites and Internet pages generated and fed by them. In a first phase, the memory of *retornados* arrived at the web through personal and collective blogs, as it is the case of the blog *Bravos "Retornados," Refugiados, Deslocados, Espoliados ...*[26] created in 2008. But it was Facebook that greatly expanded the possibilities of sharing and rebuilding this memory. There are today many Facebook pages of *retornados* and in most cases the long-established *retornados* communities have now created their own page on Facebook. Many of these

pages are specific in terms of region, city, place of work or school in the colonies, but there are also larger, more generalist communities, such as the Facebook group *Retornados e Refugiados de Angola*,[27] created in 2010 and today having more than 30,000 members. Although their content may vary according to their specificities, these virtual communities also form a network of communities of former settlers, with many interactions and mutual references to their respective pages.

These pages inaugurated a new phase in the transmission of the *retornado* memories. After being stuck for decades in the relative invisibility of private or semi-private spaces, *retornados* entered the media circuit for the first time as a result of a change in the attitudes toward them, but also for a willingness to share personal memories, at a time when they are reaching an old age. These pages are mainly used to publicize the initiatives of these communities, such as meetings and social gatherings, to share memories and photographs of the time in Africa or to reunite family, old friends, and colleagues, separated by the return. The representations and meanings conveyed here are not unlike those conveyed in the meetings: an idealized and exoticizing representation of Africa and colonial times, a benevolent interpretation of Portuguese colonialism, the demand for a festive ethos to mediate interactions, and an explicit avoidance of ideological statements in relation to the colonial past or decolonization. In this way, *retornados* also use these pages to rehabilitate their own image in the eyes of Portuguese society and to get rid of the stigma of being colonialists and fascists that previously fell upon them. There are, though, some instances when their publicized political-ideological neutrality is broken by the irruption of angry outbursts, usually against the politicians who had carried out decolonization or against the governments and regimes of the now independent African colonies. On the occasion of the death in 2016 of Mário Soares, the former Prime Minister and President of Portugal held to be the main responsible for decolonization, there were many manifestations of rejoicing in these pages, showing that the return from Africa and decolonization is still a contested and emotionally charged memory field.

However, research on the universe of *retornados* pages on Facebook shows that, at least until now, the content selected to represent their memory is based primarily on a visual, nostalgic, and uncritical representation of Africa and the colonial life. They convey a nostalgic revivalism that, although it is the mode of memorial representation favored by *retornados*, also points to a broader Portuguese post-colonial nostalgia that has been burgeoning in recent years. It is ever more present in the growing publishing market of colonial nostalgia and in the consumption of *Lusofonia's* music and food, as well as in modes of post-colonial-chic consumption, which reproduce a rather objectified cultural depiction associated with the lost Africa. Together, they make up the Portuguese imperial nostalgia that, fueled by state-fostered myths of racial equivalence and intercultural contact, exploits "a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (Rosaldo, 1989: 88).

Conclusions

What are the consequences of this non-memory of Portugal's imperial collapse? First, it affects the *retornados* themselves. Without questioning their complicity with the colonial project, they were nonetheless too easily made the scapegoats of Portuguese colonialism. By simultaneously casting guilt on the *retornados* and mystifying their integration into Portuguese society, politicians, intellectuals, and opinion makers alike have prevented the development of a mature debate on the wrongdoings of Portuguese colonialism. At the same time, they delegitimized and invalidated the lived experiences of the *retornados*, treating them as pariahs in the eyes of society. This caused great resentment and anger among *retornados*, who often say that they felt mistreated once they no longer served a purpose in the colonial enterprise. As a result, they opted for a strategy of concealment in their public and social interactions, often restricting the expression of their *retornado*

identity to family interactions and more private social spaces where they nurture a resigned nostalgia for the lost empire. They thus carry a divided subjectivity, as their accommodating strategy of integration often harbors huge resentment toward the left-wing politicians who carried out decolonization and toward the metropolitan Portuguese who mistreated them upon their return. In this sense, *retornados* expound the 4-decade-old tension present in Portuguese society between left-wing and conservative tendencies, as was made clear by the recent memorial boom around the memory of the *retornados* when Portugal was plunged into a financial crisis and a critique of the revolutionary democratization of the country came to the surface. Their own entry into the media space of the web has not given full expression to these tensions, though. Instead, in today's many *retornados* Facebook pages, we find echoes of a rather objectified nostalgia for the lost Africa and colonial times, in accordance with the imperial mythologies that still prevail in today's Portugal inherited from the colonial past.

Second, this non-memory has consequences for the lack of debate and discussion about the troublesome aspects of imperial history. Unless there is an acknowledgment that Portugal's empire was also colonial, just like other colonizing nations, the myths of civilization that exempt the Portuguese from their historical responsibilities will be perpetuated. The colonial-era mindsets and colonial social categories are also perpetuated, with their respective racial hierarchies which permeate Portuguese society today. And while there is a growing academic and intellectual debate on these issues, an uncritical and nostalgic representation of the colonial past increasingly mediates public understandings toward Portuguese colonialism, further contributing to the non-memory of Portugal's imperial collapse.

But instead of being understood as a parochial feature of Portuguese national discourse, this non-memory should be placed within the broader scope of European imperial projects and legacies. Colonial rule, together with its ensuing categorizations and mythologies, albeit their national specificities, was a shared European project, as was also decolonization and the transformation of former European imperial powers into post-imperial nation-states. Not only borders, previous economic relations and citizenship rights had to the redesigned; also, whole communities had to be imagined anew, most often on the basis of a memorial display still putting empire at the center of national identity definitions. Usually based on delusional visions of imperial grandeur and civilizing mission, several national imperial-memory afterlives very much resemble each other and together give evidence of Europe's overall inability to come to terms with imperial demise (Buettner, 2016). It thus comes as no surprise that at the present moment of global crisis, former European imperial nations resort on past imperial fantasies to deal with the demands of today's neoliberal globalized economy. In this matter, United Kingdom's Brexit can be read as a faithful reflection of the persistence of imperial mentalities and the lingering of a colonial-era dualism between dominance and submission, according to which European Union's demands of compromise would compare poorly with Britain's past imperial rule of the world (Beaumont, 2017). In this overall conjuncture, *retornados* too seem to have gained a second life, most often as testifiers of a rather nostalgic and biased version of the colonial past, but also as initiators of a more complex debate on the legacies of colonialism, which still exert an influence on cultures and social relations, not only in those countries like Portugal that have had a colonial empire, but also in Europe as a whole, which was, as Benoit De L'Estoile (2008) said, shaped both objectively and subjectively by the imperial experience.

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Notes

1. The only statistic available on these return migrations was compiled by the sociologist Rui Pena Pires, from the 1981 Population Census, according to which Portugal received 471,427 repatriates from the former colonies (290,504 from Angola—61.6%, 158,945 from Mozambique—33.7%, and 21,978 from other colonies—4.7%) (Pires, 1984). However, Pires himself considers that these numbers are not accurate since they do not include *retornados* who emigrated or were deceased in the meanwhile or those who had not been registered (Pires, 1999: 185).

2. In 1973, only 35% of the white population of Angola and Mozambique had been born in the colonies (Castelo, 2012).

3. Approximately, 40% of those so-called *retornados* were born in Africa (Pires, 1984) and many had never even visited Portugal.

4. Institute for Support to the Return of Nationals (IARN), Relatório 1—Relatório de Actividades 1979, AHU_ACL_IARN.

5. Through subsidies for accommodation and food, mechanisms conducive to their integration into the labor market (such as the *Quadro-Geral de Adidos*) or the creation of credit granting programs (such as the *Comissão Interministerial de Financiamento a Retornados* (CIFRE)).

6. Decree-Law 308-A of 24 June 1975.

7. Lubkemann (2003) estimates that 25,000–35,000 *retornados* were of African descent (p. 89).

8. Pires' study indicates that settlers, who had been born in Portugal and actually returned to the former metropolis, were originally from the following provenances: 32% were from the North of the country, 36% from the Center, 20% from the Lisbon region, 9% from the South, and 4% from the Azores and Madeira archipelagos (1999: 186).

9. Around 25€ in today's currency, but representing around 700€ in 1975, taking into account the changes in the Indexes of the Consumer Price, and based on calculations made with the use of the following statistical tool: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ipc

10. This did not prevent Portugal from voting, alongside the United States and the United Kingdom against the rest of Europe and several dozen countries around the world, against a UN resolution for the liberation of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid in South Africa, in 1987, when Cavaco Silva was the Prime Minister of Portugal.

11. According to Isabel A Ferreira Gould (2008), literary writing—notably the 1988 novel *As Naus* (The Return of the Caravels), by António Lobo Antunes—has early "decanted" the voices and subjectivity of *retornados*, which nevertheless have remained suspended for a long time.

12. For example, the journalistic account of settler life stories in Ana Sofia Fonseca, *Angola Terra Prometida* (Angola Promised Land), 2009 and Rita Garcia, *Luanda como Ela Era* (Luanda as She Was), 2016.

13. For example, *Rita Garcia, SOS Angola: Os Dias da Ponte Aérea* (SOS Angola: The Days of the Air-Bridge), 2011 and Catarina Canelas, *A Hora da Partida: Angola 1974–1975* (The Time of Departure: Angola 1974–1975), 2017.

14. The most comprehensive example of this reading was the book *Os Retornados Mudaram Portugal* (The Retornados Changed Portugal) published by the journalist Fernando Dacosta in 2013, a development of an earlier version that had been published by the same author in 1984 entitled *Os Retornados Estão a Mudar Portugal* (The Retornados are Changing Portugal).

15. Figueiredo's text has been published in English by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and is available to free download, and Cardoso's novel has also been published in English by Quercus Publishing.

16. For example, Pires (1984), Hoefgen (1985), and Lewis and Williams (1985). For a complete list of academic works on the return, see http://tracosdememoria.letras.ulisboa.pt/en/library/

17. Illustrative of this recent status of this theme in the academy are the projects "Narratives of Loss, War and Trauma: Cultural Memory and the End of Portuguese Empire," a Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (Foundation for Science and Technology) (FCT)-funded project coordinated by Elsa Peralta and the European Research Council (ERC)-funded project "Memoirs," coordinated by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, which although larger in scope also addresses the issue of the return.

18. Colloque Retour d'Afrique: Perspectives, December 7/8, 2017, University of Geneva; Conference Narratives of Loss, War and Trauma: The Return from Africa and the End of Portuguese Empire, March 27, 2018, University of Lisbon.

19. *Diário de Notícias*, 17 October 1975.

20. *Diário de Notícias*, 25 September 1975.

21. Comissão dos Deslocados do Ultramar, Comissão dos Refugiados de Angola, Comissão dos Desalojados Ultramarinos, Comissão do Movimento Nacional de Fraternidade Ultramarina; Associação dos Portugueses Refugiados.

22. Although a few did come to have a considerable commercial circulation, for example, Guilherme de Melo, *A Sombra dos Dias*, 1981.

23. These meetings tend to reunite people previously belonging to a specific place in Africa—a neighborhood, a town or a district. But there are also meetings of former students of a school or of workers of a certain company, among others.

24. *Os Inseparáveis do Lubango*, 1983, Porto, p. 1.

25. *Os Inseparáveis do Lubango*, 1987, Porto, p. 17.

26. www.retornadosdafrica.blogspot.pt

27. www.facebook.com/groups/R.R.ANGOLA

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Elsa Peralta holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Lisbon. She is a researcher at the Centre for Comparative Studies (CEC), Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, Portugal. Her work draws on perspectives from anthropology, memory studies, and postcolonial studies and focuses on the intersection between private and public modes of recall of past events, in particular of the colonial past. She coordinates the research line "Legacies of Empire and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective" and is currently working on the research project "Narratives of loss, war and trauma: Portuguese cultural memory and the end of empire." Peralta is the author of books, edited volumes, and several academic papers and chapters. She curated the exhibition "Return—Traces of Memory," produced by the City Council of Lisbon.