





ARTICLE

The Luso-African Literary World: Introduction

Stefan Helgesson¹  and Marcello G. P. Stella² 

¹Stockholm University, Sweden and ²University of São Paulo, Brazil

Corresponding author: Stefan Helgesson; Email: stefan.helgesson@english.su.se

Abstract

With reference to the five articles in the special issue, this introduction reflects on the relative absence of Lusophone African literature from the mainstream of African literary studies. Because of the insular and backward nature of Portugal's colonialism, the protracted wars in Angola and Mozambique, and the sheer magnitude of the postcolony of Brazil as a center for the reception of Lusophone writing, this literature has followed a path of its own. However, although a fair amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the early anticolonial and nationalist generations of writers, this special issue updates the account of the Luso-African literary world by looking also at current developments in publishing (locally and abroad) and reception, especially in Brazil.

Keywords: Lusophone African literature; Sociology of literature; Angola; Brazil; Mozambique; Portugal

Once described as “the first written, the last discovered,” African literature in Portuguese has always remained in a state of exception and marginalization.¹ To take one high-profile example, the list of “Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th Century,” compiled in 2002, did take note of this body of writing, but as a junior partner.² Ten titles originally composed in Portuguese were included in the list, alongside forty-five in English, twenty-nine in French, six in Arabic, two in isiZulu, two in Afrikaans, and one each in Yoruba, isiXhosa, seSotho, Gikuyu, Acholi, and kiSwahili. (In some instances, translations are listed, which blurs the boundaries between languages.) The larger historical scandal here is of course the extremely low number of titles in African languages, but that is a separate matter. If we remain focused on Portuguese, its minority position should be clear

¹ Gerald Moser, *Essays in Portuguese-African Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Studies, 1969).

² “Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th Century,” *African Studies*, (https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/global/virtual-libraries/african_studies/books.html).

—and it hasn't really changed. The most recent three years' output (volumes 50–52) of the leading journal *Research in African Literatures* is instructive in that regard. Excluding review articles, this journal averages ten articles per issue. Of the approximately 120 articles published from 2019 to the winter issue of 2022, only two focused on Lusophone writers: Luís Madureira's article on the Mozambican novelist Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa and Dorothée Boulanger's article on subalternity in the Angolan novel.³ The crushing majority of articles had an Anglophone orientation, a fair amount (twelve or so) looked at Francophone works and contexts, and a rising number of articles engaged with different aspects of African-language literatures.

This kind of a counting exercise can seem simple-minded, but it warns us not to homogenize the status of “colonial” languages in African (and Africanist) contexts. The success and dominance of English is beyond question and will simply reinforce itself in the years to come. Francophone writing is holding its own, and there seems to be a growing and encouraging sensitivity to the localized multilingualism of African literatures. Portuguese, however, is virtually absent, which reproduces an old pattern of in-betweenness that Boaventura de Sousa Santos once saw as characteristic of Portuguese colonialism (occupying the positions of Prospero and Caliban at the same time), and that seems to have been carried over into the Anglophone scholarly field's relationship with Lusophone literature.⁴

Seen from a combined postcolonial and world literary perspective, power relations in the field of African literature are of course overdetermined by any number of material and institutional factors. Hence, the massive overrepresentation in scholarship of the formerly colonial languages English and French is not simply a *misrepresentation*. It should instead be thought of as an aggregate result of the long-term, uneven conditions of book publication and distribution as these have been shaped in the crucible of colonialism, embattled decolonization, and latter-day globalization.

Portuguese is an integral part of this history that has shaped Africa as we know it, yet the point we wish to stress in this special issue of *PLI* is that the trajectory of Portuguese needs also to be considered separately from various other historiographies of “African literature.” This insistence on separateness is partly a consequence of the marginalization sketched out previously, but it is also an affirmation of the self-sustaining scale and temporal depth of what we call here “the Luso-African literary world.” This, after all, is the mystery of moving between languages: what from the outside is easily ignored or dismissed is, from the inside, a universe unto itself.⁵ This separateness does not in any way

³ Luís Madureira, “Chronicles from the ‘Vulture Kingdom’: The Postcolonial State in Question in Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa's Historical Fiction,” *Research in African Literatures* 50.1 (2019): 150–73; Dorothée Boulanger, “Expanding the Present: Utopianism and the Celebration of the Subaltern in Angolan Literature,” *Research in African Literatures* 52.1 (2021): 1–18.

⁴ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Inter-Identity,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 39.2 (2002): 9–43.

⁵ And here it seems germane to mention the multi-volume initiative on the “literature world” of the Portuguese language. This project proceeds precisely from the understanding of language as a

mean that Portuguese is somehow exempt from implication in the violence of colonialism—quite the contrary. Our point is simply that an exploration of its discrepant history and divergent transnational coordinates will yield different results from the more familiar Anglophone lens on African literature. Such an exploration brings, not least, the growing importance of Brazil for Luso-African literature—and for the international reception of African literature generally—into view.

A striking feature of the Portuguese-speaking case is that the reorganization of the political and literary spaces around the common language took place at times of sociopolitical transition in all countries involved: 1975–2002 was an extended period of armed conflicts in Angola and Mozambique; in 1985 Brazil began to emerge from twenty-one years of dictatorship; and between 1975 and 1986 Portugal was still a fledgling democracy seeking to join the European Union. Stark inequalities among the countries notwithstanding, the valorization of the common language became possible to adopt as a unifying agenda when the PALOP countries (*Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa*) began to see the language as a spoil of war taken from the colonizer, Brazil betted on the language to strengthen its position on the global stage with attempts to have Portuguese recognized as an official language in international institutions and Portugal, finally, saw the culturalist turn of its former colonial spaces as a possible asset to position itself as a major player in the European concert. This alignment, as seen in this special issue, generated in the long run more benefits for Portugal and Brazil that have become mediators for the transnational consecration and circulation of African literature in Portuguese. Despite the current prominence of Brazil, which has nurtured a more decolonial approach to these texts and authors, Portugal remains its rival. Brazil's policies to encourage translation and literary dissemination remain less cohesive and enduring than the Portuguese, even if it has more prominent universities and pays more academic attention to African literary production. On the African side, these mediations imply, to a large extent, the absence of awards, translation policies, and incentives for their own cultural diplomacy, depending on Luso-Brazilian initiatives, largely to have their authors and works presented to the world.

The “singularities” of Lusophone African literature—to use Nazir Ahmed Can's term in the first article—can, of course, also be traced further back in time. The retrograde nature of Portuguese colonialism turned the major colonies of Angola and Mozambique into culturally isolated and fragmented territories with exceptionally low literacy levels. After 1975, the revolutionary governments of the MPLA and FRELIMO heavily promoted Portuguese as the language of national cohesion, ironically making it far more entrenched than it had ever been in the colonial period. In addition, the wars that both countries suffered under in the 1980s and 1990s, with their resulting massive internal displacements, accelerated the process of “Lusophonification.” When refugees gathered in the cities, Portuguese was often the only common language available, thereby reinforcing

universe of its own. Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Inocência Mata, eds., *Literatura-mundo comparada: perspectivas em português*, vols. 1–2 (Lisbon: Tinta da China, 2018).

its viability. The degree to which the urban centers of Mozambique and especially Angola have become Lusophone today, and the effects this has on the countries' cultural affinities and self-projection, are easily underestimated.

Being the concern of a small, mainly urban minority, written literature in Portuguese should not, however, be thought of primarily as an outcome of this belated sociolinguistic breakthrough for the language. Rather, the culture of letters has historically been in an avant-garde position, *prefiguring* Portuguese as one possible linguistic future for the prospective nations of what we already have referred to as the PALOP. This abbreviation, which occurs with some frequency in the articles presented here, refers to Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé, and Príncipe, five extremely heterogeneous countries with distinct literary trajectories and linguistic dynamics. The islands of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe became populated mainly with slaves when the Portuguese colonized them in the sixteenth century. The linguistic drama here plays itself out between a long-established "standard" Portuguese and varieties of Creole—the language of the majority—that only quite recently have begun to make their way into writing. The prefiguration of Portuguese as a future national language was therefore of greater consequence on the mainland, especially in the vast, multilingual territories of Angola and Mozambique. Hence, we have the early proto-nationalist groupings of poets and intellectuals in 1940s Luanda and Maputo (then Lourenço Marques), but also in the Casa dos Estudantes do Império in Lisbon, where students from all over the Portuguese empire gathered in the 1950s and could compare their experiences of Portugal's colonial rule. These Black, White, and *mestiço* "young intellectuals"—*novos intelectuais*—belonged to an infinitesimally small minority in their respective countries, yet their impact on future developments would be out of all proportion to their numbers.

There is a familiar roll call of author names from this post-1945 period. In Angola, it includes Agostinho Neto, António Jacinto, and Mário Pinto de Andrade, and in Mozambique, poets such as José Craveirinha and Noémia de Sousa, but also dissident Portuguese intellectuals such as Orlando de Albuquerque, Orlando Mendes, and Virgílio Lemos. Political activism and literary writing often went hand in hand, arguably forming part of a longer and lively African tradition of writer-activism.⁶ As a case in point, Castro Soromenho, although not really belonging to the Luanda circle, achieved with novels such as *Terra Morta* (1949) and *Viragem* (1957) some of Africa's most uncompromisingly anticolonial narratives. Emerging slightly later, José Luandino Vieira (so much a Luandan that he took on the city's name) would combine, at great personal cost, direct participation in the anticolonial struggle with a formally innovative writing project. *Luuanda* (1965) and *Nós, os do Makulusu* (1969)—among other works—have achieved the status of classics for their bold stylistic amalgam of Portuguese, Kimbundu, and local modes of storytelling.

⁶ Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire and Madhu Krishnan, "Creative Writing as Literary Activism: Decolonial Perspectives on the Writing Workshop," *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 7.1 (2021): 97–115.

At the time of the wars of liberation, this literature was “fundamentally about the construction of a national Angolan identity,” as Ana Mafalda Leite has expressed it.⁷ This statement can be extended to the Mozambican writers and their commitment to *moçambicanidade*, but needs also to be considered dialectically in conjunction with the strongly internationalist tendency of this literature. In light of the recent surge in research on “third world” culture and the Cold War, it must be stressed that especially the Angolan writers of this period participated in socialist internationalist networks.⁸ And beyond the socialist sphere, there was a remarkable openness toward a range of transnational cultural contexts.⁹ We are confronted then, as Can discusses in his article, with an unusual literary-historiographical profile: more deliberately national, even *nationalist*, than most other literatures in Africa, but also more broadly cosmopolitan in orientation.

The year 1975 marks, for obvious reasons, a dramatic turning point in this history with, once again, a number of different outcomes. In Angola, as recounted in Marcello Stella’s article, literature was enlisted wholesale as a cornerstone in the edifice of the new nation. The work of Angolan writers appeared in massive print-runs made possible thanks to strategic deals with Portuguese publishers. Books could be cheaper than vegetables in a country with few readers. It was ultimately an unrealistic policy that folded as the MPLA-UNITA conflict—with Cuba and South Africa as key participants—intensified in the 1980s and the revolutionary fervor of the MPLA gave way to a viciously croneyist, corrupted mode of governance. Pepetela, one of Angola’s most famous writers, managed to encapsulate this transition, first, in his early, hopeful guerilla novel *Mayombe* (1979) and, later, in his novel of disillusionment, *A geração da utopia* (1992).

In Mozambique, literature entertained a more oblique relationship with FRELIMO’s national project. Not only was FRELIMO delayed—compared to Angola—in setting up official institutions to support literary production, but Mozambican writers were also less involved in the inner circles of power (Luís Bernardo Honwana’s role as minister of culture notwithstanding). Literature, in the Mozambican case, would often provide an alternative to the vantage points of government dictates and socialist dogma. José Craveirinha, the gray eminence of Mozambican poetry, was early to satirize the political failures of FRELIMO in “The Tasty ‘Tanjariques’ of Inhambane,” and the new generation of young male writers that emerged in the journal *Charrua* in the 1980s (including Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, Armando Artur, and Eduardo White) was far more individualistic and modernist in temperament than might have been expected in that Marxist-Leninist phase of Mozambique’s decolonization.¹⁰

⁷ Ana Mafalda Leite, “Angola,” in *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*, ed. Patrick Chabal (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1996), 123.

⁸ Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Peter Kalliney, *Aesthetic Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

⁹ As discussed in Stefan Helgesson, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature: Modernists, Realists, and the Inequality of Print Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰ Stefan Helgesson, “The Little Magazine as a World-Making Form: Literary Distance and Political Contestation in Southern African Journals,” in *Literature and the Making of the World*, eds. Stefan

These internal shifts in the 1980s were accompanied, as Marco Bucaioni shows in his article, by a change in the international circulation and reception of African literature in Portuguese. With 1990 as an approximate cutoff date, the earlier solidarity-based interest among European readers gave way not just to a more market-driven logic but also to a change in aesthetic preferences. “Magical realism” and Anglophone postcolonial writing had attuned readers to alternative modes of narration that could be found among the new generation of writers, including Ana Paula Tavares, José Eduardo Agualusa, and, most prominently, Mia Couto, the internationally most successful Luso-African writer ever. It seems, however, that the era of Mia Couto—following Bucaioni’s account—is coming to a close and that the previously successful institutionalization of “African literature” by a handful of publishers is being replaced by a focus on “Black writing.”

At approximately the turn of the millennium, Lisbon was unquestionably the main center for the publication and wider distribution of these writers. Portuguese publishers—especially Caminho—set up branches in the PALOP and actively sought out new writing to market in Portugal and Europe. This networking, under conditions of unevenness, is a crucial aspect of the Luso-African literary world. One needs therefore to consider the systemic interrelations not just among different agents and functions in the literary field, but also the different poles of the Portuguese-speaking world in order to make sense of its literary dynamic. Marcello Stella’s article, which builds on current data from the PALOP, showcases the vitality of independent publishing as a counterweight to the all-too-familiar imbalances and Western-centric biases of book production. This is a further sign that the former centrality of Lisbon as an international mediator of these literatures has weakened and might, paradoxically, also make it harder for readers on the outside to access new writing from the PALOP. In terms of literary relations among the PALOP, the most dramatic shift registered in Stella’s article concerns the current vibrancy of Mozambican publishing compared to the apparent slump in Angola—which reverses the situation in earlier decades.

The other major change within the Luso-African literary world concerns reception. Although Helena Doval’s article about the scholarly reception of Mozambican literature apparently confirms not just this literature’s marginal position, but also the imbalance between knowledge that is externally produced and the local conditions for nurturing literary criticism in Mozambique, this should not obscure the implications of what Bano and Can discuss in their article, “Brazil—A New Republic of African Letters?” What we see here is the emergence of an externality that is significantly different from the more familiar relationship between African literature and European and North American centers of knowledge production.

For many years, in the Lusophone circuits of knowledge dominated by Portugal and Brazil, *literatura africana* essentially referred to the work of Angolan,

Helgesson, Helena Bodin, and Annika Mörte Alling (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 215–47. For Craveirinha’s poem see José Craveirinha, “The Tasty ‘Tanjaries’ of Inhambane,” trans. Michael Wolfers, *Portuguese Studies* 3 (1987): 200–04.

Cape Verdian, and Mozambican authors. Work by Portugal-based scholars such as Manuel Ferreira, Ana Mafalda Leite, Pires Laranjeira, and Inocência Mata, and by Brazilians such as Benjamin Abdala Júnior and Carmen Lucía Tindó Secco, all contributed to the shaping of a distinct discursive network in relation to which African literature *not* written in Portuguese was external. More recently, however, Brazil has become a veritable hotbed of Africanist literary scholarship. This development has also changed and expanded the conception of *literatura africana*. A key factor behind this shift, as mentioned in several of the articles, was a law passed by the first Lula government in Brazil in 2003. Law 10.639/03, as it is known, decreed that secondary schools in Brazil must include African history and culture in their syllabus. In a vast country such as Brazil where, frankly, Africa had largely been absent from the institutionalized intellectual agenda (when not subjected to racist stereotyping), this translated into a major shift in the knowledge economy.¹¹ One of the most astonishing initiatives, mentioned by Helena Doval, has been the founding, in 2008, of UNILAB in Ceará, Brazil, a federal university dedicated specifically to connecting Luso-African and Afro-Brazilian communities. Half of its student body is enrolled from other Portuguese-speaking countries, not least in Africa. If we add to this the new Afro-Brazilian readerships that have discovered writers such as Paulina Chiziane from Mozambique, we clearly see the emergence of a very different type of world literary circulation and consecration than the one typically associated with Paris, New York, and North–South relations.

It is worth noting that these five articles, almost unintentionally, make something of a methodological statement. This special issue emerged initially out of an informal conversation between us two editors during the pandemic. Our discussions resulted first in a couple of online workshops and eventually in the idea for an issue, the precise content of which evolved as we moved forward. The final combination of articles presented here therefore has an even more pronounced sociological profile than originally planned. Contrary to standard practice in *PLI*, the keen reader will notice the number of tables and diagrams that accompany the articles, as well as the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. This speaks in its way to an observation that Graham Huggan made in a recent article about his own path-breaking study, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, from 2001. Having embarked, some twenty years ago, on “the sociology of postcolonial literary production,” Huggan claims to have lacked the perseverance to sustain the “quantitative analysis and empirical endeavour” needed to produce authoritative sociological knowledge.¹² For that, he suggests that he—and many postcolonial scholars—are too easily distracted. Such an account fails to do justice to the meticulous research of scholars such as Sarah Brouillette, Caroline Davis, Corinne Sandwith, and Chris Bongie, among others, but Huggan might be onto something all the same.¹³ If literary critics could irreverently be described as the grasshoppers of the academy—agile, keen to

¹¹ Not counting pioneering scholars such as the aforementioned Abdala Júnior and Tindó Secco or a historian such as Luiz Felipe de Alencastro.

¹² Graham Huggan, “Re-evaluating the Postcolonial Exotic,” *Interventions* 22, no. 7 (2020): 808.

¹³ Huggan, “Re-evaluating the Postcolonial Exotic,” 808.

appreciate the pleasures of reading—sociologists and book historians are the laborious ants. In the postcolonial field broadly, it is critics that have led the way, whereas researchers with a more empirical bent risk being seen as bores. It is however problematic to think of these different methodological inclinations as necessarily *opposed* to one another or to see literary studies as a zero-sum game where “criticism” gains only if “sociology” retreats, and vice versa. Ideally, the different approaches may strengthen one another; we can become better critics if we have a more grounded understanding of the social underpinnings of literature, and sociologists stand to learn from the forms of readerly attentiveness refined by critics.

Given that sociology as a discipline was first tailored to suit the needs of Western nation-states—also in the interest of administrating European colonies—transposing its methods to a postcolonial agenda comes with its challenges.¹⁴ Besides the glaring fact that a singular focus on *books* will often prove problematic, the trappings of book-historical inquiry—national archives, national bibliographies, statistical institutes—are often lacking or underfunded in the postcolonized world. That said, the articles in this special issue show what can be done also when employing fairly established sociological methods in combination with postcolonial theoretical angles. They stand out from the mainstream of postcolonial scholarship by virtue of working both closely with and at a distance from their literary material. Most importantly, their topical focus on African literatures in Portuguese as seen mainly from a Brazilian horizon, make them a particularly unusual contribution to Anglophone postcolonial scholarship. The Luso-African literary world today—this seems to be one of the strongest points conveyed by this special issue—is closely connected to, and perhaps even dependent on, the academic and literary fields of Brazil. Indeed, as the final article by Can and Bano shows, this extends beyond our initial point of departure: the Portuguese language itself. Today, African writers from various parts of the continent find a career-enabling readership in Brazil, including an academic reception that is, arguably, less troubled by histories of dominance and neocolonial relationships than the reception in the North. This makes it necessary also to tweak conceptions of the “world republic of letters” accordingly. There is nothing *necessarily* static in the world-literary relations encapsulated in Pascale Casanova’s phrase.¹⁵ On the contrary, despite her own emphasis on Paris, her point was also that new centers emerge over time and literary values will accumulate differently. This, it seems, is what we are witnessing in relation to the Brazilianization of African literature.

Competing interests. none

Author biography. Stefan Helgesson is Professor of English at Stockholm University and a senior research associate in English at Rhodes University. His research interests include African literature, Brazilian literature, translation theory, temporality, and world literature methodologies. He is, most

¹⁴ Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

recently, the author of *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022) and coauthor (with Mads Rosendahl Thomsen) of *Literature and the World* (2020). Earlier works include *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature* (2009) and the edited volume (with Pieter Vermeulen) *Institutions of World Literature* (2016).

Marcello G. P. Stella has a master's degree in sociology from the University of São Paulo and is a doctoral candidate at the same university. He has been a visiting researcher at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Centre européen de sociologie et de science politique - CESSP) and at Maison Suger (Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme).

Cite this article: Helgesson, Stefan and Stella, Marcello G. P. 2023. "The Luso-African Literary World: Introduction." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, 139–147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2023.5>