

The Writer's Craft: Reading Luandino Vieira's Stories through *Papéis da prisão*

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Abstract: In this article, I use José Luandino Vieira's *Papéis da prisão* (2015), a collection of the notebooks that Vieira kept during his incarceration under the Portuguese colonial regime, to read some of the writer's fictional narratives. Bringing textual examples from *Papéis* and literary works, I show how the book discloses references to real people and facts hidden in Vieira's stories, while also constituting a metatextual reflection on them. As it follows the evolution of Vieira's language, style, and themes from behind the scenes, *Papéis* emerges as an essential part of the writer's craft, allowing us to cast a renewed look upon Vieira's whole literary project. Finally, *Papéis* reveals the extent to which Vieira's literature was influenced by the author's prison experience, an aspect still underexplored to this day.

Keywords: Angolan literature, prison writings, history, fictional narratives, writing of the self

In November 1961, Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira was arrested in Lisbon by the PIDE, the political police of the Estado Novo. He was soon sent to Luanda and tried together with his friends, the poets António Jacinto and António Cardoso, who had been arrested shortly before. They were all sentenced to fourteen years in prison,¹ accused of committing crimes against state security.

¹ Vieira and Jacinto were released for good conduct in 1972, almost two years before the end of their sentence. However, they were not allowed to return to Angola and had to settle in Lisbon and report regularly to the police. In 1973, Jacinto escaped from Portugal and joined the MPLA (Movimento

In prison, Vieira did not renounce literature, and it was during this time that he wrote most of his oeuvre. He had the habit of taking notes on scraps of paper that, eventually, he assembled to create artisanal notebooks that he succeeded in smuggling out of prison. In 2015, more than forty years after leaving Tarrafal prison camp, Vieira published these notebooks with the title *Papéis da prisão: Apontamentos, diário, correspondência (1962–1971)*.² The book reproduces the content of Vieira's prison notebooks, which comprises annotations on the most diverse subjects, as well as drawings, maps, letters, scraps of newspapers, drafts of literary projects, notes received from fellow prisoners, lyrics of popular songs, short stories in Kimbundu, and more. The book was welcomed by scholars and civil society, as it contributes to an open debate on Angola's colonial past, while also strengthening studies on Vieira, who is considered one of the fathers of Angolan literature and among the most important contemporary writers in Portuguese.

As they contain references to facts, people, dates, and the like, Vieira's prison notebooks may also be a precious source for historical research. However, considering the issues of self-representation and reliability inherent to all pieces of life-writing, special attention is needed when handling *Papéis* as a historical record.³ It is important to acknowledge that *Papéis*, though grounded in real-life events, does not necessarily adhere to reality. Rather, it is the elaboration of a lived experience, an exercise in writing, and sometimes a way to experiment with different narrative voices.

Popular de Libertação de Angola) in Algeria. Vieira stayed in Portugal until 1975 when, after the Carnation revolution, he went back to Angola. Cardoso was not granted the privilege of an early release. During his detention at Tarrafal, Cardoso frequently rebelled against prison authorities and was punished with extended periods in isolation. He had his prison sentence extended, so that he would have spent another three years in prison after 1974 if Tarrafal hadn't been closed on May 1, 1974. For more information, see the interview Cardoso gave to historian Dálila Cabrita Mateus (Mateus, *Memórias do colonialismo*).

² Hereafter referred to as *Papéis*. The book was edited by a team of researchers composed of Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Roberto Vecchi, and Mónica V. Silva, who worked under the supervision of Vieira himself.

³ It is also important to consider the difference between the actual notebooks and *Papéis* as a book, which involves a retrospective gaze on the material contained in the notebooks, and on Vieira's entire carceral experience. This implies that the material in *Papéis* is assembled according to criteria established by the author in the present, decades after his release from prison.

If one were to identify a common purpose behind Vieira's prison notebooks, it would be that they were a support for memory. As the author wrote in the brief presentation that opens *Papéis*, he knew, as soon as he was arrested, that he would have to put his life on hold for several years and that from then on, it was necessary for memory to replace it (*Papéis* 9). Throughout his incarceration, almost daily, Vieira took notes on his thoughts, and on things happening around him that he did not want to forget. He was moved by both personal and political reasons, but also by the awareness that this material could come in handy for his literary projects. According to interviews with the writer, collecting literary material was what ultimately motivated his effort and the risks he took in creating, writing, hiding, and smuggling the notebooks out of prison. As Vieira says:

Para ser sincero, era material literário. Porque no fundo de todo, mesmo lá quando chegava ao fundo de mim, a conversar com o António Jacinto à volta do campo, eu chegava sempre à conclusão que a única coisa que eu posso dizer que sou é escritor. Aquelas anotações, os cadernos, são parte do ofício do escritor. (Scaraggi 228)

In this article, I focus on Vieira's prison notebooks as tools used by the writer to craft his stories, as his own workshop of creative writing.⁴ Following the evolution of Vieira's literature from behind the scenes, *Papéis* discloses references to real people and facts hidden in Vieira's stories, while also constituting a metatextual reflection on their themes and style. This allows us to cast a renewed gaze upon Vieira's literary project of the 1960s and early 1970s, the writer's most productive years.

That Vieira wrote most of his literary works in prison⁵ is probably one of the best-known facts of his biography. However, how prison shaped his literature is still an underexplored subject, despite the numerous stories that are set in or make references to carceral environments.⁶ This is due in part to the difficulty of finding

⁴ In this regard, see also the book review published by Diogo Ramada Curto in the Portuguese newspaper *Público*.

⁵ For a complete bibliography, see Topa 143–73.

⁶ Several of Vieira's works are set in prison or refer to carceral experiences, for example, the novel *João Vêncio: Os seus amores* and the short stories "O fato completo de Lucas Matesso" and "O exemplo de Job Hamukujá" (*Vidas novas*), "Estória do ladrão e do papagaio" (*Luuanda*), "Muadiê

information on Vieira’s imprisonment before the publication of *Papéis*, when only a few anecdotes had been shared in scattered interviews. Moreover, some interpretations of this “close proximity between imprisonment and literary creation” (Chabal 30) seem to rely on the idea that in prison—severed from the world, with plenty of time and no distractions—writers can completely dedicate themselves to their art. However, the long-standing idea that prison is a suitable place to write literature (Brombert) tends to oversimplify the reality of incarceration and ignore the violence that is constitutive of the carceral system. See how Vieira remembers his conversation with Manuel Lopes during his visit to Tarrafal in May 1970, when the Cabo Verdean writer—out of ignorance, in his words—considers Vieira’s work:

Falou do valor desta experiência para mim e como sempre o desconhecimento fê-lo afirmar que o ambiente é bom para o trabalho. Sorri-me de modo a que deve ter percebido—ficou um silêncio constrangido. (*Papéis* 956)

I propose to read *Papéis* together with Vieira’s fictional works on the premise that literature written in prison should not be seen exclusively as a metaphoric “evasion” to other places, a way to transcend one’s immanent condition, but as a creative act that reinterprets the author’s prison experience and is intimately interwoven with it. Letting one text enrich and enlighten the other, readers can appreciate the extent to which Vieira’s literature was influenced by material circumstances, such as the environment, the constraints of everyday life, the people he met, the conversations he had, and so forth. To begin, I consider how different locales of incarceration reflect upon Vieira’s production as a writer and how this leads to formulating more general assumptions on his literary project.

Luanda fica longe

Gil, o Sobral e o Barril” (Velhas estórias) and “Kinaxixi kiami!” (Lourentinho, Dona Antónia de Sousa Neto & eu).

Vieira spent roughly three years in different prison establishments in Luanda before being deported to Tarrafal⁷ in August 1964. Upon his arrival, together with Jacinto and Cardoso, at what was officially known as the work camp of Chão Bom, Vieira was initially placed in a separate cell and denied contact with other inmates, of whom he could catch but a brief glimpse. On August 19, 1964, six days after arriving at the camp, he wrote in his notebook:

Por um buraco da porta, vi os angolanos. Impressão geral: boa...
Parecem todos devidamente adaptados, mas sem alegria nenhuma.
Domingo (16) à noite muito tempo cantaram as nossas cantigas
mas nem uma alegre. Era dramática a maneira (e o tempo) como
cantavam “Oi oi mama, Luanda fica longe”. (*Papéis* 549)

As *Papéis* shows, the arrival at Tarrafal was marked by feelings of disorientation and bafflement, and Vieira lived his first days there as if in a weird dream (548). Then, he proceeded to thoroughly describe the camp, its structure, the living conditions, the discipline imposed on prisoners, the plants and animals he saw there, and so on. By narrating and describing the environment, Vieira tried to make sense of this new reality and come to terms with it. However, he soon realized that his deportation to Cabo Verde represented a point of rupture with his previous self:

19-08 [1964] Mais adaptado vou caindo em mim. Aumentam as
saudades de tudo, mas sobretudo a falta de notícias da K.,⁸ rói-me
por dentro. Sinto porém que, mesmo com elas, não serei mais o
Zé da C.C.L.⁹ Quebrou-se na verdade, qualquer coisa de muito
valioso em mim. (549)

⁷ The prison first opened in 1936 under the official name Colónia Penal do Tarrafal to house Portuguese political opponents of the Estado Novo. Owing to the poor living conditions and the unrestrained use of force by the guards, Tarrafal became infamously known as the “slow death camp.” In 1954, thanks in part to international public pressure, the penal colony was closed, only to reopen in 1962, after the beginning of the colonial war. Responding to a new strategy of discursive legitimation (Barros 98–99), the Portuguese regime changed the prison’s official name to Campo de Trabalho de Chão Bom. In this second phase, Tarrafal became a kind of elite prison camp, housing mostly intellectuals or prisoners from Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Cabo Verde who were considered to play a prominent role in nationalist movements (Lopes 20). Living conditions improved and corporal punishment became less common, although isolation, lack of medical care, poor nutrition, and idleness took a heavy toll on prisoners’ mental and physical health.

⁸ Throughout *Papéis*, Vieira’s wife Linda is identified by either the letter L. or K.

⁹ Cadeia Comarcã de Luanda.

At Tarrafal, far from their families, their country, and daily contact with their people, prisoners were confined to a prison in themselves (Ribeiro and Vecchi 1049). It was a time of isolation and withdrawal whereas, while detained in Luanda, Vieira could claim to have “a full life” (*Papéis* 860), despite the poor conditions and brutality of the prison guards. In Luanda, Vieira received visits from his wife and son; dedicated himself to literature; and spent time with other inmates collecting popular songs, hearing the stories told by common-law prisoners, working for the underground networks that constituted a bridge between prisoners and their comrades and allies on the outside. Though the image of the prisons of Luanda that emerges from *Papéis* is far from positive,¹⁰ the years he spent there were a period of relative calm and confidence in the future for Vieira, and one in which the social interactions he enjoyed kept him confident in the final victory.¹¹

These years correspond to literary works that have an overall optimistic approach and that are more clearly politicized. The main purpose of the stories written in this period is to denounce the discrimination and violence that characterized colonial society: like classic tales and fables, they were intended to transmit a moral message, which was both an invitation to raise awareness about the struggle and a call to action, to resistance. I am referring in particular to the short stories collected in *Vidas novas*,¹² but the same description also applies to the novella *A vida verdadeira de Domingos Xavier*.¹³ The structure of these stories is rather simple, as is the language used to write them, while the protagonists are brave men and women who, as “good Angolans” (*Vidas novas* 113), heroically defy colonial authorities, regardless of the violent repercussions they might suffer. Think of the main character of the story “O exemplo de Job Hamukujaja,” inspired by and dedicated to Godfrey Nangonya, a nationalist who was incarcerated in the Pavilhão Prisional da PIDE in Luanda, and with whom Vieira exchanged

¹⁰ While at Tarrafal corporal punishments were rare, in Luanda Vieira observed several episodes of torture, which made him describe one of the institutions as a “realm of terror” (*Papéis* 317).

¹¹ In a fragment dated March 1, 1963, Vieira reports on some students who had been arrested. Seeing the young generations joining the struggle made him confident about the final victory over colonialism: “Não há dúvida que não podem nada contra nós!” (*Papéis* 156).

¹² The short stories collected in *Vidas novas* precede the project of the prison notebooks, as they were written in the Pavilhão Prisional da PIDE, in Luanda, between June and July 1962.

¹³ The novella was completed just a few days before Vieira’s arrest, when the author was already aware that he could not publish it in Angola or in Portugal.

information and notes (*Papéis* 81–89). Although *Papéis* shows how Vieira was sometimes critical of his friend’s attitude and behaviors, Godfrey’s literary transposition is nothing but heroic: the main character of this short story is a fearless nationalist who bravely faces a torture session without revealing any information, and who succeeds in convincing his white fellow prisoner to behave in the same way.

—Não confesseste companheiro! ... —Não confessa Mário!
Aguenta, companheiro. É assim a nossa luta.... Virado no chefe
pequeno e fraco, gritou-lhe: —Não fala comigo! Você na minha
terra ninguém que lhe deixa falar.... —Nega, companheiro! Nega
e vamos agüentar! Podem-nos matar, não faz mal, companheiro.
Somos milhões na nossa terra, a nossa luta é justa! (*Vidas novas*
111)

Notice the tone of the narration and the fact that, apart from the introduction of expressions reminiscent of an Angolan way of speaking (“Você na minha terra ninguém que lhe deixa falar”), the language is plain and clear, still close to standard Portuguese. As Vieira himself admitted in his notebooks, during this phase of his literary activity he valued “quantity over quality,”¹⁴ as literature had to serve above all a political purpose: contributing to raising awareness about the struggle for independence of the Angolan people. His stories were, as Mário Pinto de Andrade described them, “a sociological portrait of resistance” (Laban et al. 223).

The stories later included in *Luuanda* and *Velhas estórias*¹⁵ were the last ones that Vieira wrote in Luanda, in 1963 and 1964 respectively. If compared to his previous works, they show higher degrees of complexity in terms of both structure and language, with a style closer to orality and the introduction of untranslated expressions in Kimbundu, such as the proverb found in the story “Vavó Xíxi e seu neto Zeca Santos,” which opens the collection *Luuanda*: “Sente, menina! Mu

¹⁴ In a fragment dated January 20, 1963, taking notes right after finishing a story, Vieira writes: “Mas agora quero dar-lhe uma boa revisão, fazer o m/ conto mais acabado, pois que é preciso sempre velar pela qualidade, mesmo quando a quantidade é o fim primeiro, provisório. Como estou satisfeito e feliz!” (*Papéis* 102).

¹⁵ The stories published in 1974 in *Velhas estórias* were written in the Cadeia Comarcã in Luanda, but they were revised and edited between 1964 and 1967, when Vieira was already at Tarrafal. Because of the circumstances behind their conception and subsequent revision, *Velhas estórias* acts as a sort of bridge between the two periods into which I am dividing his literary production.

muhatu mu ‘mbia! Mu tunda uazele, mu tunda uaxikelela, mu tunda uaku-suka” (24).¹⁶ These elements show how Vieira benefitted from his increased familiarity with Angolan languages and cultures, which readers of *Papéis* can knowingly associate to his cohabitation with prisoners who were native speakers of Kimbundu.¹⁷ The stories also change at a formal level, as the writer was determined to improve and refine his style:

25-2-63 ... Estive a pensar que preciso de melhorar a m/ linguagem, elevando-a de modo a poder descrever situações, ambientes e personagens mais ricos e complexos, mas sem a tornar ininteligível ou menos concreta e sem perder a base popular ... (para isso era preciso trabalhar muito ... e a preguiça!) * ... Domínio do trabalho literário—e não ser eu o instrumento. (Papéis 151–52)

Mastering the Literary Work

With his deportation to Cabo Verde, another phase of Vieira’s incarceration began, a period of profound isolation and withdrawal. The optimism of the first years faded to make room for a more detached attitude, as revealed by bitter notes and commentaries left in his prison notebooks. Nevertheless (or, perhaps, also because of this), the time spent at Tarrafal corresponded to a period of intense literary activity. Indeed, it was not easy for Vieira to get used to the new environment, nor to create the conditions to dedicate himself to writing. At first, he felt he could not progress with his work and restricted his activity to correcting and editing some of the stories written in Luanda. This attitude would gradually give way to a renewed disposition toward writing.

¹⁶ The translation can be found in a fragment dated February 19, 1963, in which Vieira writes: “(Tradução livre do que está: O sexo da mulher é como a panela! De lá sai o que é branco, sai o que é preto, sai o que é encarnado...) [Sundu é mesmo a palavra-asneira, porque o termo mais científico é mbumbu]” (Papéis 150). The idea of associating female genitalia with a cooking pot comes from another prison anecdote, specifically from a joke made by some prisoners to an inmate who came from the province of Zaire and didn’t speak Kimbundu (Papéis 44).

¹⁷ Vieira affirms that in prison he improved the little Kimbundu he had learned as a child, both by practicing with other inmates and by studying it on written texts, including the Bible: “Fui melhorando o meu quimbundo falado, péssimo, de criança, da infância, com o quimbundo teórico das traduções dos protestantes e com esses meus professores de três regiões do quimbundo, fui aprendendo, corrigiam-me. E com os mais-velhos que me iam dando o vocabulário. Fiz mesmo cadernos e fui estudando pela Bíblia. Fui estudando com textos” (Ribeiro and Vecchi 1064).

18-[6-1965] ... Sinto que toda a perplexidade deste ano (Ag. 64/Ag 65.) que me preocupava e anulava o trabalho de escritor se está tranquilizando, amadurecendo e sinto que esta experiência me foi muito valiosa, ainda que me tenha feito recuar um pouco na confiança em mim mesmo. A culpa era do meu idealismo, de um pouco de abstracionismo. Os homens reais são mais difíceis de amar. (673)

If it is possible to identify a shift in Vieira's literary production from Luanda to Tarrafal, the profound impact of the writer's deportation is also visible in his notebooks. Whereas in the first nine notebooks it is common to find long annotations and detailed descriptions, the notes taken at Tarrafal are sometimes reduced to their minimum requirements. The text becomes drier and more concise, with one single entry collecting different references to facts, people, and thoughts, often expressed very schematically, with just a few words.¹⁸ Moreover, as he withdrew more within himself, themes such as childhood memories and oneiric recollections gained a certain predominance in the notebooks. It is interesting to notice that, concurrently, Vieira wrote a series of stories around the adventures of a gang of children living on the shores of the Kinaxixi lagoon, stories that present a high degree of intertextuality, with recurring characters, events, and settings. Incorporating elements of his own biography into his literature, Vieira created a literary universe populated by the legendary beings of Angolan folklore, together with characters inspired by his childhood memories, his carceral encounters, and the figures that appeared in his dreams.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, see this note taken in March 1968: "20-3[-1968]—(1) Mais um mês. Chegarei aos 35? | (2) Sempre em dúvida, sempre a oscilar, toda a vida a querer escolher, sempre sem certezas nenhuma, dá cabo da vida e nada faz, a sua vida é inútil (típico peq. burguês). | (3) Catambolo—pequeno musseque sob três coqueiros solitários (há tb. um com este nome no B.I.)" (Papéis 847). However, despite a tendency toward conciseness in the notebooks written at Tarrafal, Papéis is extremely heterogeneous and does not respond to any fixed scheme or established pattern.

¹⁹ In the notebooks written at Tarrafal, Vieira regularly writes about his dreams and the feelings they arouse in him. Often involving female figures, these dreams were overall painful and frustrating, but could nevertheless be a source of inspiration for the writer. See, for example, the case of Urânia, a girl from Luanda whom Vieira barely knew, but who sometimes appeared in his dreams and in his notebooks. Vieira creates an elusive and mysterious character with this name in the short story "Memória narrativa ao sol de Kinaxixi," whose beginning reads: "U ur ura Urano Urânia—um soletorado nome só e é a verdade mesmo? Ou lhe nasci ainda, mentira de minha vontade, sonho?" (No antigamente, na vida 57).

The writer's literary activity during the years of Tarrafal is not only intense but radically original. From *Nós, os do Makulusu* to "Estória de família," the narratives written at the camp of Chão Bom are strikingly different from his previous works. Characters are not reduced to types, heroes or villains, but are represented in all their complexity, while the political message is rarely explicit or didactic and, in any case, does not prevail over other aspects of the story. Moreover, the structure of these stories does not follow a linear pattern, as Vieira upsets conventional chronological narratives and incorporates experimental techniques. Likewise, following and radicalizing the path already traced in *Luuanda*, his literary language becomes more and more experimental: Portuguese syntax is clearly marked by the influence of Kimbundu, and neologisms and words obtained by mixing morphemes of different languages abound. This created an insurmountable gap between Vieira's works and canonical Portuguese literature, a gap the writer was well aware of: "Sexta, 30[-4-1971] * ... Deitado, subitamente imaginando o Macandumba²⁰ na sua forma definitiva veio-me o pensamento: 'não tem nada a ver com a literatura portuguesa!'" (*Papéis* 974).

Vieira's use of language had a political drive, as it was meant to demonstrate the uniqueness and independence of Angolan culture, a requisite for political independence. At the same time, it was also rooted in literary and aesthetical conceptions, which emerged or evolved during the time of his incarceration. In this regard, the encounter in prison with the literature of João Guimarães Rosa was certainly a turning point. In a fragment dated May 25, 1971, Vieira dwells on the peculiarities of his own literary style and his connection with the Brazilian writer, about whom he writes: "A sua leitura foi um choque, uma revelação, uma espécie de encantamento que sacudiu no fundo de mim o que lá havia de latente e mais concorde com a m/ natureza" (977). Reading and studying Rosa's work, Vieira found a legitimation for the literary project he had in mind: mingling the elements of different languages that were part of the linguistic landscape of Angola, without mocking how people talk or aiming at realistic representation, but rather inventing a new expressive medium. Although he incorporates lexical and syntactic elements of Kimbundu and other languages, Vieira is not interested in reproducing a naturalist register since, as he declared, an audio recorder could have done that better than him (Laban et al. 27). Instead, he worked creatively with language,

²⁰ Macandumba is a collection of three short stories written at Tarrafal prison camp between 1970 and 1971, eventually published for the first time in 1978. See Topa 166.

employing wordplays throughout the text, building neologisms, and adulterating words. Starting from a multilinguistic context such as that of the prisons of Luanda and the Tarrafal camp, and drawing from his imagination, as well as from his personal recollections, Vieira forged a language that is his very own.

Silences and Their Implications

Guimarães Rosa's influence is palpable also in Vieira's adoption of experimental techniques, such as that of the dialogic monologue, which characterizes many of Rosa's works, including his masterpiece, *Grande sertão: Veredas* (1956). Vieira implements this particular technique both in the novel *João Vêncio: Os seus amores* and in the novella "Kinaxixi kiami!," written at Tarrafal in 1968 and 1971 respectively.

"Kinaxixi kiami!," which in Kimbundu translates as "my Kinaxixi," is the story of Lourentinho and how he happened to end up in prison. The *estória*²¹ is constructed around different temporal levels: it begins in the present, with Lourentinho talking to someone in his prison cell. The story soon moves on to another level, that of the past, with the account of the protagonist's adventures. Lourentinho tells of how he roamed through the country and discovered Angola, although his adventures started in Luanda, on the shores of the Kinaxixi lagoon, right in the center of the mythical universe created by Vieira. The text is a perfect example of the continuity that exists among some of the stories Vieira wrote at Tarrafal and, right from the beginning, it reveals a dense network of intertextuality.²²

²¹ In Portuguese, there is a subtle but substantial difference between the words *história* and *estória*: they both convey the general meaning of "story" (meant as fictional narrative), but while the first is also used to talk of History, the second alludes to "a narrative of popular and traditional origin" (*Dicionário Houaiss da língua portuguesa*, Editora Objetiva, 2006). Luandino chooses the word *estória* to define his narratives, which are created under the sign of orality, a hallmark of traditional Angolan narratives. However, notice that in the fragment of September 1, 1963, the work is still described as a "novella." It was the encounter with Guimarães Rosa's literature that made him opt for the word *estória*. As Vieira declared: "I had written these stories when a friend of mine ... brought me work by what he termed a 'great Brazilian writer'. He gave me the book, *Sagarana*, by Guimarães Rosa, where I saw written the word I had chosen to call my novellas. They were not actually novellas ... and they had a form totally connected to orality. The word was 'estória' ... I finally had a way of designating my type of narrative" (Ribeiro 32).

²² Notice, for example, the references to Candinho, Dinito, Xôa, Zeca, and Xana, some of the children who appear in the stories of *No antigamente, na vida*, a collection of three short stories all set in the surroundings of the Kinaxixi lagoon.

As mentioned, the novella consists of a dialogic monologue, meaning that the presence of another interlocutor, though silent, has a role in the construction of the narrative. “Silêncio seu, assim, é segurança de cartão-e-imposto, autoriza vadiar a uso—não tem cipaio de rusgar por musseque do pensamento” (*Lourentinho* 12), says Lourentinho, praising his interlocutor’s attention and feeling at ease to begin his tale. Soon identified as a white man from Luanda, the figure of the man who listens quietly to the other’s story makes one think of Vieira himself, inscribing the author’s own experience of incarceration into the narrative. Indeed, the text overflows with autobiographical references,²³ which are reinforced at the end by the addition of the date and location of writing: “Tarrafal, 28-6-71/6-7-71” (68). However, critics have failed to make this connection both in the case of *Lourentinho* and in that of the novel *João Vêncio: Os seus amores*. This last work, written in just a few days in the summer of 1968, is a long conversation between a prisoner, João Vêncio, and a silent interlocutor. Alfredo Margarido sees in this interlocutor a “white and Portuguese lawyer” (63), whom the Black prisoner reduces to silence, subverting the customary colonial hierarchy of speakers. In line with this interpretation, Steven Buttermann claims that the very structure of the novel

consists of a man convicted of a crime relating his “story” ... to a white Portuguese attorney. An inversion of the silence imposed upon traditional African orature.... However, it would be false to assume that the authority has been totally muted, for our protagonist is still *responding* and is therefore to some extent *directed* by the questions, comments, affirmations and occasionally, criticism of the attorney-ethnographer. (202–3)

These examples demonstrate the extent to which the analysis of a literary work can change when one considers Vieira’s own experience of incarceration and the impact it had on what he wrote. In fact, there is a great shift in perspective whether we consider João Vêncio’s interlocutor as an attorney-ethnographer or as a prisoner, one that shares the same condition of violence, abuse, and deprivation of

²³ Vieira even places his own date of birth in the plaque that Lourentinho finds next to a *mufumeira* tree: “E rocei meus olhos, dei os passos e arranquei: gravado a fogo, em tábua do rijo pau-ferro, se lia o que o tempo me guardava: Kacy Bombax - 4/5/1935” (*Lourentinho* 26).

liberty suffered by the narrator. Imagining that the interlocutor is a literary counterpart of Vieira himself—that is, a prisoner just like João Vêncio—means removing the distance that separates the two characters and observing how the relationship between narrator and narratee²⁴ emerges from a pact of solidarity and companionship that would not subsist had one of them been an attorney, an “authority.”

By introducing his silent counterpart in the novel, Vieira is positioning himself among those who did not conform to the way of life imposed by the colonial rule and who were therefore punished. He is not looking down upon his characters; rather, he is positioning himself as part of an incarcerated community that was nothing but the Angolan nation. Vieira perceives himself as part of this national community and, through his literary work, he takes on the role of its interpreter. The cultural material that he collects while living with prisoners coming from different regions of Angola stood at the base of his literary practice, so that at most he could be defined as an auto-ethnographer, as the author is always, implicitly or not, included in the picture he draws.

Although Vieira’s fiction is not conventionally autobiographical, his stories are driven by an autobiographical impulse, as he systematically integrates real-life elements into his fiction. This is also a means by which the writer gives new meaning to the otherwise absurd experience of being cut off from life for more than a decade. In the entry dated May 30, 1969, after describing the events of that day at Tarrafal, Vieira writes that he hopes he won’t forget those years and concludes: “Memória, memória, não me atraícoes e vai peneirando tudo para que o essencial, o típico fique—e os anos perdidos assim sejam anos ganhos” (*Papéis* 896). What the writer expects to gain at the end of this process is literary material—“at least one character” (896)—the one thing that can turn his miserable experience into something meaningful.

From Kinaxixi to Angola

Let us go back to “Kinaxixi kiami!” and delve into it a little more, as the novella is significant to understanding how the comprehension of Vieira’s fictional works is enhanced by elements that emerge from *Papéis*.

²⁴ As explained in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, “the term ‘narratee’ ... designates the addressee of the narrator, the fictive entity to which the narrator directs his narration” (Schmid).

The story of Lourentinho, main character and narrator of “Kinaxixi kiami!,” is indissolubly connected to the story of a tree, a *mufumeira*, that saved him from drowning during a sudden flood when he was just a child. From that moment, every time he happens to be near a *mufumeira*, Lourentinho goes through some kind of life-changing experience. His mother believed the tree was inhabited by the spirit of a *kianda*—a kind of mermaid or water spirit typical of Angolan folklore—but Lourentinho is convinced that the tree is actually a part of himself, a soul made of his own soul. When he grows older, Lourentinho leaves Luanda and travels extensively throughout Angola.

Interposing his narration with comments of amazement such as “Angola é grande, irmão” (*Lourentinho* 39), he describes to his interlocutor the different landscapes he saw and the different people he met during his wanderings: Cuanhama shepherds, women of the South speaking Umbundu, black *assimilados*, both generous and wicked Portuguese settlers, a German man looking for cobras and fortune: in other words, a whole human mosaic spread throughout the vastness of Angola. In this regard, the story constitutes an exception within Vieira’s production, as it exceeds the limits of Luanda to include the whole country. Although partially set in the mythic universe that Vieira creates around the Kinaxixi lagoon, the story exceeds the boundaries of the city to include diverse geographic, linguistic, cultural, and human landscapes. A list of toponyms allows the reader to follow Lourentinho’s itinerary and recreate in the text a map of Angola:

Para o Sul, cruzeiros dos suis, sempre mais a fundo, Luanda
ficando longe, mais perto do coração. Amar maior é sempre para
lá. Corri Cela e Chela, laranjais de Camacupa ... (23)
Mas fugi—a pé para Caluquembe. Aí, evitei rota batida dos
Quilengues. De boleia, por picada: Bissapa—até na estrada para
onde o sol se nasce. Cusse; Cusse, Cuíma; Cuíma, Huambo.
Deixei terras sulenhas. No Dondo, voei de jipe.... Angola é
grande, irmão! nuvens—de Kinaxixi nunca mais via, viagem ia ...
(39)

Unlike characters of other stories by Vieira, Lourentinho does not seem to be politically conscious, nor is he involved in any political movement. Nevertheless,

his story conveys a crucial political stance. As Michel Laban recalls, the story evokes “the diversity of Angola, a diversity in which each one can find his own place, regardless of one’s ethnic or cultural origins” (104). Mapping the Angolan territory, its richness and diversity, is in itself a political claim, a proof of the existence of the nation. Moreover, the awareness of such diversity is linked to Vieira’s own experience of incarceration, since it was in prison that he had the opportunity of getting in touch with people coming from different regions and different backgrounds. Talking to them, collecting their stories, Vieira absorbed new layers of Angolan culture, which he later reversed in his literature. Leafing through *Papéis*, one can see how Vieira respected and admired his fellow prisoners’ skills as narrators, and to what extent he was inspired by them:

Quarta 24[-3-1971] * ... O Sousa Alfredo e a sua extraordinária sabedoria natural. Dava um grande narrador. Vou tomando nota do que me conta: por exemplo a história do alemão que andava a comprar cobras e lagartos com seus vidros e palavras. Comentário: “Póp’la! O mundo tem pessoas!” “Angola é grande, mano!” (969)

Seg. 7[-6-1971] * ... Conta S. Alfredo, ex-guia, natural dos Dembos, Cambeji—espertíssimo com uma experiência notável e uma cultura integradíssima no seu ambiente. Que nos anos 50 percorreu a região dele um alemão c/ seus ajudantes carregando vidros e vidros cheios de cobras. Que pagava todas as cobras que lhe levassem—e por bom dinheiro. Só as queria vivas, ele mesmo ensinou a caçá-las. Um pau, forqueta. Depois um laço. Até as mulheres—trad. inimigas das cobras—as caçaram. Surucucu 500 escudos! E a famosa cobra vermelha foi um show com o homem a rir na sua algaravia alemã aquimbundada—pagou 1500 escudos. Que levou um rapaz da região depois, com ele—o Mateus para a Alemanha. (979–80)

In the novella, Lourentinho will literally use the same expressions that Sousa Alfredo used. Likewise, many details of Sousa Alfredo’s account—such as the price the German used to pay for each snake, or the fact that he took a local boy

back to Germany with him—pass from the notebooks to the story, from real life into fiction.

The story, however, does not draw from a unique source, but encompasses different elements that Vieira had been collecting since the beginning of his experience in prison. Indeed, as early as 1964, Vieira had been taking different notes on both the folkloric *kiandas*²⁵ and the *mufumeira*.²⁶ The very idea of a *mufumeira* inhabited by a supernatural spirit appeared for the first time in a conversation that Vieira had with a prisoner named Anastácio, while they were both held at Luanda's Cadeia Comarcã, roughly seven years before "Kinaxixi kiami!" was written.

8-VII-64 Hoje de regresso do Hospital e sabendo que eu vivi no Kinaxixe (vinha a falar disso) um preso o Anastácio, perguntou-me se eu me lembrava da árvore que não queria sair qdo. acabaram com a lagoa. É o caso de uma gde. mufumeira que nem o tractor derrubou. Segundo o povo a cada golpe deitava sangue e o tractorista acabou por virar o tractor e morrer esmagado debaixo dele (isto é verídico). Que a árvore—concluí eu, vendo logo ... — era a casa de uma quianda ... —Ah! O sr. Graça sabe, é mesmo kangola (mukua-ngola=natural de Angola). E depois a conversa virou para quiandas e miondonas etc. (530–31)

In the epilogue of "Kinaxixi kiami!," one finds Lourentinho who, as a sort of Angolan Ulysses, longs to return to his Ithaca, to Luanda, to the Kinaxixi lagoon. When he finally succeeds in returning, he finds out that everything has changed: wild urbanization and industrialization destroyed the city and made his *musseque* unrecognizable, his mother died, his friends are gone. The Luanda of his childhood no longer exists and, although the *mufumeira* still endures on the shores of the lagoon, it is now in great danger: one of Lourentinho's childhood friends, now an engineer devoted to the logics of progress, wants to tear the tree down as it stands in the way of his plans of modernizing the neighborhood. The engineer does not

²⁵ See, for example, the information collected on the *kianda* both in Luanda and at Tarrafal at pages 414–15, 584, and 831 of *Papéis*.

²⁶ See in particular the fragment dated May 1, 1967, in which Vieira explicitly declares that he is collecting information for his story: "(2) Para a estória da sereia do quinaxixe: nome científico da mufumeira é kacy bombax" (796).

stop when people tell him that the tree is inhabited by a spirit, nor when the *mufumeira* inexplicably starts to bleed, and not even when one of his workers dies while trying to cut it down. He is forced to stop when, at the end, Lourentinho gets on the tractor and, instead of pointing toward the tree, runs over him, smashing his legs and possibly killing him. This is the story of how Lourentinho ends up in prison, but it is also the story of how he saved himself, saving the tree that held a part of his own soul.

The ending of the story is, again, covertly political as it poses a series of thorny questions to the readers: is the recourse to violence licit when what we love is in danger? What are we willing to risk in order to protect what we consider most valuable? And, finally, are we prepared to suffer all the consequences of our acts? Unlike characters of previous stories by Vieira, Lourentinho is not a heroic figure, yet the calm and dignified way in which he accepts his prison sentence turns him into an example: “Eu? Aprendiz de vida—seta doida em procura do meu alvo: sereníssima paciência na alma, para o corpo só livre disciplina” (*Lourentinho* 68).

Discipline and patience can once again be linked to Vieira’s actual experience of imprisonment and, more broadly, to qualities that all political prisoners must cultivate in order to survive in prison. For Vieira, literature was part of the discipline he imposed on himself: “eu escrevia por disciplina, disciplina literária” (Scaraggi 243). This discipline involved patient work on his language: far from the principle of quantity over quality that he had adopted in the first years of prison in Luanda, the stories written in Tarrafal, of which “Kinaxixi kiami!” is the last, are few but complex. As mentioned, they also make a more subtle political claim: beyond heroic figures like Job Hamukuaja, these stories seem to claim that all Angolans—even *malandros*²⁷ like João Vêncio and apolitical people like Lourentinho—can and should participate in the nationalist struggle, because it is a struggle not only for political independence, but also for the assertion of Angolan culture.

Conclusions

²⁷ In an interview with journalist Alexandra Lucas Coelho, Vieira describes what inspired him to create the character of João Vêncio, once again confirming the fact that he drew on real-life elements to create his stories: “João Vêncio? Eu conheci um meio libertino na Cadeia Comarcã de Luanda, em 62–63, quando estivemos lá, e depois ia ouvindo sobretudo do Mendes de Carvalho, dos enfermeiros, relatos de personagens que tinham esse lado meio pícaro, meio malandro, meio delinquente, e isso tudo foi-se juntando.”

The connections between Vieira's prison notebooks and his fictional works testify to Vieira's creative use of real-life elements taken from his own experience of incarceration. Identifying all these connections in *Papéis* would be virtually impossible, since the amount of written material, corresponding to more than a decade of a man's life and writing, is not only voluminous, but also particularly dense. Focusing on the novella "Kinaxixi kiami!" and the novel *João Vêncio: Os seus amores*, I have pointed out some cases that I believe are representative of Vieira's working method, illustrating how some elements pass from real life to the pages of the prison notebooks, and from there to literature. *Papéis* is a privileged observatory of the author's working process, offering unique insights into his writing method and capturing the recurring ideas, themes, and obsessions that populate not only the pages of his notebooks, but also those of his fiction. A reading that combines *Papéis* and the works of fiction Vieira wrote in prison allows us to critically reexamine the writer's literary project. *Papéis* can work as a counterpoint to the reading of Vieira's works of fiction, as it brings light to elements that help situate them in their context and grasp the processes that shaped them. Certainly, reading Vieira's literary works without having a precise picture of the context can be a fully satisfying aesthetic experience, and the fame and recognition achieved by Vieira long before the publication of his prison notebooks confirm this assumption. A reading that contemplates *Papéis*, however, can reveal original aspects and disclose unexpected connections between fiction and reality, between the writer's prison experience and the experiences he put into his stories, becoming a key to developing new approaches to Vieira's literature.

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