



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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*the behaviour of being* | 2017 | Pauliana Pimentel

## LIVES BEYOND THE PALE

Miguel Cardina

Wars exceed their historical limits. Their shrapnel wounds continue to bleed over time, producing public and private mechanisms of resignification and silencing. The disruption of war lives on and touches people who themselves have no direct experience of it, through their personal, affective and/or familial proximity to people who do. If this (post-) memory is always in essence a reconstruction of the past based as much, if not more, in dialogue as in erasure, it points to a private realm where these memories circulate (or not).



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For years, the memory of the colonial war existed in a space between public silence and domestic whispers. But that was here in Portugal, in the then-metropolis and in the families of former soldiers. What happens, however, when we take the ‘children of war’ to be those men and women in their 40s and 50s in Angola, Guinea, and Mozambique, who have never met their fathers, the Portuguese soldiers who left them behind? In this respect Catarina Gomes’ recent book, *Furriel não é nome de pai. Os filhos que os militares portugueses deixaram na guerra colonial*, [Furriel is not your father’s name. The children Portuguese soldiers left behind in the colonial war] breaks new ground.

Gomes calls her work a “post-report” in the sense that the book is based on previous journalism carried out in Guinea-Bissau and Angola for the newspaper *Público*. Through her focus on this topic of war-babies, Gomes became actively involved in searching for parents and for children. She received emails and phone calls, approached people, joined up pieces of the puzzle. The abandonment experienced by these children is palpable in expressions used to categorise them alongside Portuguese ex-combatants, such as “children of the wind” or, in Guinea-Bissau, “luso left-overs.”

No-one knows how many of these people exist and Gomes doesn’t try to give a comprehensive account. She starts from a few exemplary cases, mainly in Guinea, and paints a portrait in magnetic prose which respects the complexity of its subjects. Some dominant observations inform this portrait. First, the sexual encounters that produced the babies are generally presented as devoid of violence or interest. Second, the children’s light skin causes social and often familial ostracism because it testifies to their mothers’ intimacy with the colonizer. Third, the fathers themselves mostly try to forget and resist making contact, aware of the potential impact of the discovery on their families and reluctant to make these children their heirs.

This situation motivates the children to find their fathers, to make sense of the gaps in their history and find new possibilities in life. Getting Portuguese citizenship emerges as a mirage. Gomes asks: “does it make sense that Portugal grants nationality rights to those who were forced to leave 500 years ago (as in the case of Sephardic Jews), rightly correcting a historical mistake, but ignores the existence of these very recent children of Portuguese men who fought at the command of the Portuguese State? (p.22)”

Though these children carry their identity inescapably recorded on their bodies, this identity is also hidden from them. In some cases, they change their name to their father’s nickname, or at least to



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what they believe it might be. When they can, they run and re-run on-line searches, constructing a plotline from fragments. These people inhabit a paradox: their identity as children is all too visible, as it is inscribed in their body. Yet their ignorance of their fathers' names, physical characteristics, and their lack of any filial relationship makes this belonging abstract and incomplete. These are lives that have remained beyond the pale.

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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