Black from White and White on Black: Contradictions of Language in the Angolan Novel

Russell G. Hamilton
University of Minnesota

African literature and the question of language

Angola became independent on November 11, 1975, and citizens of that new African country immediately began to obliterate the most visible signs of nearly five hundred years of colonial rule. Statues of Portuguese heroes toppled as Angolans experienced the euphoria of nationhood. The city of Nova Lisboa became Huambo, but even as European place names gave way to African ones it was obvious that for the foreseeable future Portuguese would continue to be the official language in a nation of ethnocultural diversity.

The reasons for the retention of colonial languages by independent African countries will be assessed in the next section of this essay; for the time being, we might note that language is a people’s most fundamental vehicle of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual beliefs. Thus, when speaking of imaginative writing, which is an intimate manifestation of cultural expression and of a people’s world view, we must remember that the language of poetry and prose fiction carries as much practical importance as, and more emotive significance than, the language of government, technology, and commerce.

Most critical works on African writing do take into account the perennial question: can there be an authentic African literature written in a European language? A perusal of any representative bibliography of critical works on African literature reveals that a significant number of books and articles focuses on the problem of language. The majority of these critics, especially Africans themselves, recognize the contradictions inherent in the question of language. Nevertheless, they accept, in principle, the validity of an African literature of European expression.

The novelist and playwright Chinua Achebe, speaking of his own
country, says, "if you take Nigeria as an example, the national literature, as I see it, is the literature written in English..." 2 So much attention has been given to the matter that some African critics have displayed no little annoyance with those who insist on pursuing the question of African literatures written in the languages of other cultures. The above-quoted Chinua Achebe, on another occasion, when invited to participate in a conference in Canada on the African writer and the English language, "fired back a flat No!", presumably because he was put off by the constant rehashing of the issue, particularly by, or under the sponsorship of, non-Africans. Understandable annoyance -- yet language continues to be of fundamental importance: and the sensitivity of some African writers and critics toward this issue is no less compelling in its cultural, ideological, and aesthetic implications.

Naturally, in commenting on a literary work, be it African or otherwise, a critic can hardly avoid referring to words, syntax, and grammatical structures. When Africans refuse to participate in further debates on the language question they are most often saying, and with good reason, that a viable African literature of European expression already exists. At the same time, the undercurrent of annoyance flows from an ambivalence that goes from pride to resentment. There is pride in belonging to a privileged group and a nagging resentment at being literate and educated in a colonial language. Sometimes resentment surfaces as defensiveness, particularly toward the intrusive non-African critic.

The South African writer J. P. Clark derisively characterized the British critic Gerald M. Moore as "Old John Bull...alias Mr. I-know-my-Africa." 3 Moore, of course, has a deservedly good reputation as an Africanist. Still, Clark’s judgement, despite its sardonic harshness, has some validity if we consider that Moore, for all his understanding of Africa, harbors a discernible, imperial pride in “English writing in the tropical world.” And the foregoing words serve as the subtitle of Moore’s The Chosen Tongue, a book which, in the author’s words, is “concerned with writers who...are themselves of non-English stock, for many of whom this language is not the obvious or the imperative choice.” 4 Echoing Chinua Achebe, Moore states that the language was given to these people of non-European stock, and he devotes his book to an attitude that can perhaps be expressed, with his somewhat paternalistic pride, as “and look how beautifully they use it.” Moore stops short of the notion that non-Europeans chose English, just as he mitigates the bitter idea that the language was imposed on them. English was given to the African writer, and as a language that is used so widely “to define cultures not English, or no longer English,” it is indeed the chosen tongue in a Biblical sense that smacks of awesome responsibility, if not burden, for the English themselves. That Moore has this sense of responsibility and greater nationalistic pride can be seen in these words from the conclusion of his book: “the present shows us a continent [Africa] which can bend and

shape this chosen tongue so that it becomes once more the vehicle through which a young nation can explore the limits of its strength, heal its wounds and grope painfully for the real bases of its unity;” and further, “...the best of the work explored here shows that English, whether in Africa or the Caribbean, has not yet lost its capacity to enshrine the hopes as well as the fears of men;” and finally, “for those of us who also use that tongue, nothing protects us from the responsibility of knowing what these men are saying to us, and to each other.” What Moore says does not bother me as much as how he says it: the tone of his statement has all the earmarks of cultural neocolonialism.

Writers, like Achebe, seem to be saying that although European languages were imposed on the continent, Africans themselves were born to these languages and they have no recourse but to use that which was given. There is a subtle, but important, distinction between this notion and that stated by Moore when he affirms the chosen tongue’s capacity to express other cultures not English. In essence, Moore is saying that English continues to demonstrate its flexibility and adaptability as it comes to the aid of young nations in search of a vehicle of cultural expression. Again, I do not argue with Moore’s basic point, for it is an incontrovertible fact that English, as well as other European languages, does serve as an important cultural vehicle in Africa and the Caribbean. Unfortunately, the ideological slant of Moore’s statements glosses over the real sociocultural contradictions that Africans and West Indians must face in accepting that European languages are something other than borrowed.

For the sake of comparison, let us consider how Achebe approaches the issue. In “English and the African Writer” he gives, as an example of his use of English in creative writing, a short passage from his own novel Arrow of God: he then offers, by way of contrast, the same passage written in a style more consistent with that of British prose fiction. The Chief Priest speaks the following words in the original version: “The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place.” 5 The same content, presented in standard colloquial English, reads thusly: “One has to move with the times or else one is left behind.” In the original version Achebe exhibits no exoticisms or orthographic deformation to capture the flavor of the Priest’s speech; and what he says about his approach is quite significant in that he attributes his shaping and binding of English to judgment and instinct. Judgment and instinct are abstract terms that point up, in this context, a distinctly African ideological stance. Along the same lines, Achebe wrote in another article that “no man can understand another whose language he does not speak (language here does not mean simply words but a man’s world-view).” 6 Chinua Achebe is not one to strike out with black rage or Negritudinous affirmations of the African’s supposed “emotive sensitivity,” to use Senghor’s term. Thus, Achebe’s statements have to be taken as defensive rebuffs of those who presume to know what Africans are saying to each
other. Once we understand the sensitivities and defensiveness of African writers and critics we can proceed to read and analyze their writings, not with deference or proprietorial attitudes, but with an awareness of the psychological, philosophical, and political complexities that make for contradictions which serve to enhance the sociocultural significance and the aesthetic value of the literary work.

The question of for whom does the African write is no less an intriguing topic than the issue of language, and in a sense the two problems are one. The fact that the African writer may feel bothered by his reliance on a European language reflects, to a greater or lesser degree, alienation from roots which, along with other factors--the illiteracy of the masses being one--shuts the novelist or poet off from a potential audience. The question of language really constitutes a dilemma of varied dimensions, not the least of which is moral.

An American critic, Lloyd W. Brown, wrote an article entitled "The Moral Significance of European Languages in African Literature." The moral dilemma stems from having to use languages that represent the cornerstone of a civilization that has denied and helped to suppress African humanity. Brown calls on the well-known Caliban-Prosperto myth in which the slave learns his master's language, distorts it, and hur's it back in his tormentor's teeth. To quote Brown: "European languages represent a moral, and perceptual, ambiguity in African literature: Prospero's language is still the emblem of the old relationship, but it is also the tool with which 'new' Calibans define cultural identities that contradict the old European myths." This goes beyond the position that English, for example, by virtue of its flexibility, can adapt to other cultures. No doubt, English does demonstrate amazing flexibility, not exclusively because it is inherently or originally so but also because it has been made flexible by those who have accommodated it to their world view. As an international language English constantly feeds on and enriches itself with non-standard forms and foreign borrowings; and this, perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, also applies to French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Nationality, nation-building, and language

Thus far we have approached our subject from the point of view of literary language. In order to bring this problem into sharper focus, and as a means of establishing a theoretical base for our considerations of certain Angolan novels, it behooves us to review some pertinent factors relating to nationality, nationalism, and sociolinguistics.

The question of Western languages in Africa, as well as in other developing areas of the world, has much to do with such concerns as multilingualism, literacy, and national language policy. On the purely practical level, when we speak of a developing nation we are referring to technological and socioeconomic change based on more or less supranational tenets. As countries like Angola embark on the task of nation-building they necessarily have in sight some economic and technological systems that have little or nothing to do with traditional African societies. Angola's fledging, socialist government must seek the means of developing its resources through the investment of capital and with Western technical expertise.

For the time being, Angola's language policy, whether just de facto or also officially, is based on Portuguese. As stated at the beginning of this essay, Portuguese is, in effect, the national language of Angola, a country that encompasses some eleven language groups which can be further broken down into approximately ninety smaller units. Many of the languages within a main linguistic group are dialects, and thus mutually intelligible to members of the diverse, smaller units. Nearly seventy percent of the approximately 5,000,000 African peoples in Angola speak one of four main languages. Umbundu is spoken by the Ovimbundu (1,500,000) who inhabit central Angola. The Bakongo people (500,000) of extreme northern Angola speak Kikongo, and Chokwe-Lunda, or or Kiko-Lunda (200,000), refers both to the languages and the people of the northeastern region. Kimbundu is the language of four major, closely related groups, the Mbundu, Mbaka, Ndongo, and Mbondo totaling about 1,100,000 who occupy the area from the coast around the capital Luanda and the Kwanza River Valley. All of these groups have played an important role in Angola's history, and the Bakongo, Ovimbundu, and Kimbundu have been key in the liberation struggle that began in the early 1960s.

Portuguese has long served as a lingua franca in Angola, and, in fact, it has tended to develop into variants of the standard language in some urban and semi-rural areas. Creolized variations spoken by semiassimilated Africans have come to be known as pequeno portugues, or, more pejoratively, as pretogues. More importantly, in all the Lusophone territories of Africa, except for the Cape Verde Islands, there existed an official colonial policy of assimilacao similar to French African assimilation; acquisition of the language of the metropole, both in its spoken and written form, was the principal requisite for acceptance into the broad socioeconomic order. About this policy we shall have more to say presently. At the same time, and on an ever-increasing level since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the three main indigenous languages, Umbundu, Kimbundu, and Kikongo, have played an important part in Angolan nationalism and nationalism. By regionalism I mean here a sense of pan-Angolan identity molded by notions of Portuguese multiracialism, and only peripherally, or inconsistently, in line with such purely African ideologies as Negritude, Pan-Africanism, and African personality.

Before pursuing some of the particulars of nationalism, nation-building, and language in Angola, we need consider some general implications regarding these terms. Joshua A. Fishman, in his article
Nationality-Nationalism, and Nation-Nationism," offers some definitions and differentiations of terms worth considering here. He redefines nation as a "politicogeographic entity (otherwise referred to as a country, polity, state) such as might qualify for membership in the United Nations." This definition differs from the traditional meaning of nation as a people of common origins and values, usually speaking one language, under a single government. Fishman reconsiders nationality as a "sociocultural entity that may have no corresponding politicogeographic realization." Obviously, this definition comes close to the traditional meaning of nation in that it encompasses, as Fishman puts it, "solidarity of group behaviors and group values." Having established this distinction between the politicogeographic entity (nation) and the sociocultural entity (nationality) Fishman then elaborates on "why social solidarity is not a precondition for the existence of a national political community...how a national political community can attain such solidarity in successive steps." Nationalism can quite simply be called the emotional-ideological component of the sociocultural entity; and, as Fishman observes, the term presents some definitional confusion in that in the West nationalism has referred to the "driving or organizing dynamic" present as nationality becomes the foundation of a nation. This process of nationality leading to nationalism and then to nation has validity in the case of countries that began as, or continued to be based on, a single nationality. Nationalism has also applied to politicogeographical territories that contain diverse nationalities. Fishman notes further that the "processes by which nationalities themselves were formed, out of prior (indeed primordial) tradition-bound ethnic groups, has also been referred to as nationalism." Nationalism, then, can refer to that period during which a single nationality is going through the formative period of a becoming a politicogeographic entity and also to the period after geopolitical boundaries are secured and a country is going through the action-building process. In the latter situation, which applies precisely to most newly independent, multiethnic linguistically diverse countries, it is about formulating, through nationalism, a sense of sociocultural unity. They transcend what is popular and, I might add, Eurocentrically called "tribalism."

Finally, Fishman prefers nationism, rather than nationalism, "whenever politicogeographic momentum and consolidation are in advance of sociocultural momentum." Nationism is the process of political integration.

We can relate Fishman's assessments of nation, nationality, and nationism to the problem of a Western language superposed, and superimposed, on a developing African society, one in which nationism per force outstrips nationality. About this relationship between language and nationhood Fishman talks in terms of efficiency, or the governmental, technological, and pedagogical practicality of a Western language for a multilingual, African country. Fishman is sensitive to the sociocultural and emotional-ideological links between an indigenous language, as a symbol of national unity, and a people's need to build identity. On the other hand, his discussion of the predominance of nationalism over nationality, and an efficient language over one of self and group identity, tends to tone down the very real issue of superimposed language and moral dilemma. For better or for worse, the ideologizing symbols are there even when a new country has its national priorities of efficiency and economic development in order as it goes about the arduous task of political and territorial unification.

In the case of many developing African countries diglossia means a European language—English, French, or Portuguese—used on official and formal occasions, coexisting with one or more indigenous tongues used in informal encounter. Fishman, along with others, sees diglossia as a viable alternative to the dominance of a single, indigenous language or to the official acceptance of several "native" tongues. In Nigeria, for example, English is the official, widely used language, but such tongues as Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo are very much alive. There are even "ethnic" literatures written in these languages. For a case of bilingual diglossia we might mention the case of French and Flemish in Belgium or we might turn to the New World where in Paraguay most citizens know Spanish and Guarani; or we might consider Haiti where a creole permeates all socioeconomic levels of that Francophone country.

Fishman entertains the possibility that as large, indigenous populations, hitherto not involved in the broader socioeconomic order of the nation, begin to enter into the competitive sphere dominated by an "elite" that has mastered and sought to maintain the superposed language, linguistic conflicts might occur. For several reasons Fishman doubts that the total displacement of diglossia will result even in the face of such linguistic confrontations. These reasons are summed up in the following words from Fishman's essay: "Technology is basically nonethnic and uniformizing throughout the world. It leads linguistically to but one, two, or three world 'technology' languages and to essentially similar life-styles regardless of language. This is in sharp contrast to the basically heterogeneous and diversifying role of the languages of belles-lettres prior to World War I. The purpose and the function of these languages was to render their speakers maximally different in terms of cultural values and world views." To suggest that group identity and world view through language have become less apparent in the face of a no-nonsense, technological world seems to me to ignore the far-reaching implications of cultural and political ideologies. Furthermore, we perhaps should not diminish the importance of literature and literary movements by regulating all to "belles-lettres", as if imaginative writing somehow exist in an effete, purely aesthetic domain detached from sociohistorical context.
Belleslettres may well have assured the prestige of French as a world language of culture and diplomacy, but in the so-called Third World, literary groups and their artistic and critical production have often been central to national revolutionary movements and not to a cosmopolitan sense of art for art’s sake.

Fishman ends his essay with the forthright statement that “neither Pan-Africanism nor Negritude nor communism nor Islam nor democracy nor Christianity is likely soon to replace the nation as the unit of efficient, rational management of administrative affairs, or the nationality as the unit of authenticity toward which nations and subnations will be attracted. The language problem of each stage and kind of national integration (i.e., of nationalism) will be a reflection of the unfinished business of each.” Although Fishman recognizes a language problem as an unavoidable byproduct of the painful process of nation-building in the Third World, he implicitly exhorts these new countries to get down to the business of geopolitical integration in order that they be equipped to compete in a world order that has little patience with irrational symbols and emotional-ideological self-indulgence. This may be sound advice, but the fact still remains that sociocultural integration is not just an obstacle to progress, it is also a real and not easily dismissed emotional reality for those emerging nations that must contend on all levels with the legacy of colonialism.

For those members of the relatively small elites that presently guide the destinies of Lusophone Africa, sociocultural unity as it relates to language and language policy, will remain an important issue. There are, in effect, various phases of national integration at work, and as Fishman notes, these stages are not always in step with each other. On the other hand, these stages, although not in pace with each other, do exist in a reciprocal relationship with one another, which means that there are stresses and tensions that often seem blatantly contradictory. Mozambique, for example, in the interest of nationalism, can negotiate with the Pretoria government on matters of mutual economic benefit while, at the same time, the avowedly Marxist regime of that black nation can use its territory and resources to train guerrillas whose ultimate goal is to end white minority rule in all of southern Africa.

In both Mozambique and Angola, not to mention Guinea-Bissau, the Cape Verde archipelago, and the islands of São Tomé-Principe, language maintenance and literacy programs involve the propagation of Portuguese. However, just as in the geopolitical and economic spheres, all manner of contradictions and maladjustments attend this transitional period in terms of language of efficiency and language of cultural and literary expression.

Language, culture, and Angolan literature

Supported by several theoretical notions we now turn to some historical considerations of the question of language and its relationship to creative writing in Angola. At the beginning of the foregoing section I identify three main language groups in Angola. With Kikongo we encounter the classic case of the result of the arbitrary partitioning of Africa by European nations. The Bakongo, as an ethnic group, overlap the border dividing northern Angola and southern Congo Brazzaville and Zaire. The links with Zaire and the conflicts between the Kikongo-speaking Bakongo who make up the Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and the Movimento Popular para a Libertação de Angola (MPLA), composed mainly of Kimbundu speakers, particularly Mbulu, during the 1975-76 “civil war” in Angola have some relevance to the problems between ethnolinguistic groups; and we should mention that the third nationalist group, União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA), also pitted against the MPLA, is dominated by the Umbundu-speaking Ovimbundu.

What role, then, have indigenous languages played in the period leading to Angolan independence? To answer this question, and without going into all the historical particulars, we must take into account the extent to which the African peoples had early and more or less continuous contact with the Portuguese. The Ovimbundu are of great importance in this respect, but we have to concentrate on the Kimbundu, the second most populous ethnolinguistic group, who inhabit the western area of Angola in and around the capital of Luanda and east to the city of Malange, and whose members have comprised the majority of a Western-oriented intelligentsia since the mid-nineteenth century. From this intelligentsia, made up of assimilados and mulattoes, has come much of the leadership of the MPLA, and it should be noted that this independence movement has its roots in cultural-literary groups dating back to the 1920s with antecedents in the nineteenth century. Needless to say, members of the intelligentsia are Westernized, some educated in Europe, which means, of course, that for many, especially the mixed bloods, Portuguese is their first or only language. Precisely because of their exposure to ideas from Portugal and the world at large, they could gain a perspective on their own situation as Angolans and as Africans.

The usual process in nation-building is from ethnic group to nationality. Under Portuguese colonialism, nationality was attenuated by the idea of Angola as a unique region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Several significant factors contributed to the rise of an intelligentsia composed of blacks, whites, and mulattoes, imbued with a consciousness of Angolan identity, during the first decades of this century. First of all, Portuguese colonial policy and the myths that supported a peculiar brand of Lusitanian greater nationality made for a special kind of intellectual and emotional ambiance in which the multiracial elite functioned. The Portuguese prided themselves on their five centuries in Africa, on their civilizing efforts, and on their lack of racism. They went so far, under Salazar’s New State policies, as to refer officially to their colonies as overseas provinces. The ideological concept of the “Por-
tuguese space" encompassed widely scattered territories and a number of myths aimed at a single, acculturated, multiracial family. 25

Despite high-sounding pronouncements of the national unity of a broad geopolitical space, Portugal never had the human and economic resources to maintain her far flung empire. Thus, the goal of civilizing and acculturating untutored "natives" followed three general paths. In parts of Mozambique and Angola there were sporadic periods of Africanization of white settlers and adventurers who, in relatively small numbers, went to Africa to seek their fortunes. There are documented cases of traders and other whites living in the "bush" who wore African robes, ate local foods, spoke indigenous languages, and cohabitated with "native" women. 25

More far-reaching than the Africanization of Europeans were the processes of creolization whereby in certain regions, particularly around Malange, but even in Luanda, which maintained constant contact with Portugal, the beginnings of true acculturation took place, to the extent of incipient diglossia: Portuguese, the official language, and Kimbundu as the every-day tongue. The Angolan writer Mário António Fernandes de Oliveira, in his book Luanda, "Ilha Crioula, documents aspects of creolization in the capital city during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth. Blacks, whites, and mulattoes lived side by side and participated in a strongly African-flavored life style. The third, and by far the most dramatic, result of Portuguese policies in Angola was the partial or complete destruction of traditional African societies by means of acculturation (which really meant deculturation) and through the work ethic. Only slavery itself has been more destructive of African societies and African psyches than the nineteenth century policies of forced and contract labor predicated on the attitude of civilization through work. 26 Historically, then, the majority of Africans under Portuguese dominion have been "pacified" by force of arms, ignored, or "civilized" through labor.

The already mentioned policy of assimilation, instituted in the nineteenth-century and brought dramatically to an end in 1961 by the outbreak of warfare, has a direct and, in some ways, curious bearing on Angola as a region of the Portuguese space, nationalism, and the language of literary expression. This policy essentially divided Angola's population into the categories of indigenous ("uncivilized" African) and non-indigenous (whites and assimilated blacks and mulattoes). James Duffy rightly observes that the assimilated Africans constituted, in truth, a third category, without all of the opportunities of the whites, which gives the lie to the Portuguese's much touted color blindness.

We can see, then, that the numerically tiny African elites emerged from a paradoxical set of historical circumstances. On the one hand these groups existed on the periphery of an inept native policy, while on the other hand they, as assimilados, enjoyed certain privileges conferred on them by their official status as Portuguese citizens. These members of a black and mulatto bourgeoisie embraced or otherwise absorbed certain aspects of Portugal's cultural mythology. Even black intellectuals fell under the influence of whatever truths lay beyond the myths.

Of great significance is the presence of whites in these groups of intellectuals (while Portuguese policy has been essentially racist there has never been an officially sanctioned separation of the races). This in itself makes for a uniqueness that separates the Afro-Portuguese experience from that of French- and English-speaking Africa. Although in the nineteenth century whites, like the Kimbunduist and Swiss Protestant missionary Heli Chatulain, acted more as mentors than equals to the African, in the 1940s and 1950s, with the increased immigration from Portugal and the rise of nationalist sentiments elsewhere in the world, some native-born Angolan whites entered into a more balanced coalition with black and mulatto compatriots. 27 White Angolans, because of cultural background and economics, or just because they were identified by color with those in power, could, and often did, take the initiative in these multiracial coalitions. The early founding of black and mulatto cultural-literary organizations and an incipiently nationalist, bilingual (Portuguese-Kimbundu) press did give the African a base for ethnic pride and continuity on which to meet with whites in an atmosphere of equality. Significantly, they met on the common ground of Angola as a unique Afro-Portuguese region (the myths of Lusotropocie had their positive aspects) which had as its primary aim an identity predicated on the resuscitation of creolized African customs and a reversal of the processes of deculturation. Multiracialism and Lusotropocie may have mitigated black rage, but protest against social injustices that had been perpetrated on the masses of people, planted the seed which blossomed into nationalism and gave flower in the independence movement.

The initial context for protest in the 1950s and 1960s was the search for cultural identity, often from an ethnohistorical and folkloric standpoint. Literature, however, became the primary vehicle of the emotional-ideological search for authenticity. Poetry, because of its emotive capacity, dominated the literary scene in the 1950s and 1960s. Such themes as evocation of childhood and a creole past, lyrical exhortation, doeful laments of alienation from roots, solidarity, and ancestralism, frequently expressed in rhythms that approached those of Negritude, accommodated black, white, and mulatto poets, alike. Agostinho Neto, who presently leads his country's government, emerged in the 1950s as one of Angola's major poets. Other poets, destined to become principals in the independence movement, were the mulatto Viritio da Cruz and the white Antonio Jacinto. Most of these poets struggled with the problem of language, and some attempted to lend an Angolan authenticity to their art through the use of African words and phrases, or they cultivated a creolized Portuguese. However, our best insights into the contradictions
of language come in the relatively few novels produced by Angolans during the crucial, pre-independence period.

Angolan prose fiction and the contradictions of language

Poetry’s emotive force may, in some ways, be a distraction in a consideration of literary language within a sociohistorical context. This does not mean to say that poetry is not of utmost importance to the thrust of protest and combative literature, but the short story and particularly the novel are by their very nature inclined to conceptualized views of reality and a discursiveness that permits the reader to observe language in its ideologizing process. Fiction writers most often wear several faces in a given work, and in changing masks the novelist usually modifies his language posture thus allowing the reader to see the mechanisms at work. In most poetry words are their own end, whereas the language of prose fiction allows for the abstracting of ideas and values. The novel as a genre is, like English, French, and Portuguese, a European import. Moreover, the novel is a modern bourgeois form, cultivated, in Africa, by a new intelligentsia of basically middle and upper class origins.

The short story in Angola has varied from the stylized re-working of traditional African tales to chronicle-like, neo-realistic portrayals of urban life. In line with the writer’s propensity to get outside of language, the short story and the novel, especially the novel, tend to “explain” as much as to “express.” At times the narrator appears to be telling who he is in order to explain his subject. In this regard, the American critic James Olney, author of Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature, says of his book that “it considers autobiography from Africa less as an individual phenomenon than as a social one.” He continues by stating that “the life that provides the subject for African autobiography is much less individually determined, much more socially oriented, than life recounted in Western (European and American) autobiography; and, second, whether or not people from various cultural backgrounds differ basically as individual human beings, societies certainly differ.” Olney uses autobiography as a modus operandi in establishing his approach to the African novel. He makes a good point in adopting an autobiographical approach with an insistence on the more communal than individual aspects, for in the two contemporary novels we discuss shortly, the third person narrator of one and the first person narrator of the other tell about themselves, either implicitly or explicitly, as members of a social and cultural community. Furthermore, the idea of autobiography helps underline the apparent self-consciousness of the Angolan novelist.

In line with the autobiographical we observe in the short history of the Angolan novel, and the novel in Angola, that both white and black writers manifest an inexorable desire to reveal and/or explain a perceived African reality from a communal viewpoint. Colonial novels, authored mainly by non-Angolan whites, abound in exotic revelations of the “dark continent” and its “savage” inhabitants as if to give credence to a collective European perception of Africa. Many of these colonial writers were military expeditionaries or Portuguese administrators who drew on their own experience in the Angolan backlands, and, in effect, produced in their generally artistically inept, and always culturally biased novels, amateur ethnological documentaries overlying philosophical-psychological portraits of self. We encounter such works as Luis Figueira’s Princesa Negra (1932), which bears the subtitle O Preço da Civilização em África, and whose prologue praises the pioneers and fearless settlers who most contributed to the pacification of savage peoples. Two currents in the Angolan novel sometimes converge and frequently reflect ideological contradictions, particularly during the period of regionalism and growing nationalism. Colonial writing is peripheral to an authentic Angolan literature even though metropolitan Portuguese continued to produce these novels up to the recent past, often under the guise of patriotic proclamations of Lusitanian unity. After the outbreak of guerrilla fighting in 1961 war stories began to appear as the natural heirs to the colonial novel.

What about early novels written by black and mulatto Angolans? To the extent that assimilated Africans comprised a woefully small group is the extent to which there are few novels authored by blacks and mulattos. Although we might reasonably expect those few writers to see the land and its people from a different perspective than that of the white revealer, blacks and mulattos, influenced by their own Westernization, were at best ambivalent, and often blatantly contradictory, about their place in a society that equated civilization with whites and barbarism with blacks or mulattos during the nineteenth century; and only one of these novels, Pedro Machado’s Scenas d’Af’rca (1892), has come down to us.

A valid starting point for the Angolan novel that seeks to explain from a black perspective, ambivalent though it may be, is Assis Júnior’s O Segredo da Morte. Although published in 1934, the story deals with events occurring in the 1890s, during a period of incipient creolization in the area around the towns of Sengue, Malange, and Dondo. Assis Júnior, who was born in 1887 and died in 1960, calls his book a Romance de Costumes Angolenses, a subtitle that stands in marked contrast to Figueira’s Princesa Negra: O Preço de Civilização em África, published two years earlier. Figueira’s flagrantly exotic title contrasts with Assis Júnior’s mildly mysterious title which makes no allusion to race or Africa. The Portuguese writer exoticizes the African and aggrandizes the white pioneer. Assis Júnior’s subtitle suggests that he desires, within the Western disciplines of ethnology and folklore studies, to explain and, indeed, to defend. The novel’s banal plot is no more than a pretext for the author’s discursive and apologetic descriptions of creolisms in a region of Angola at the turn of the century.
In keeping with the novel as an imported genre, Assis Junior acknowledges the influence on his style by Victor Hugo and Anatole France. Certainly the romantic intrigues of O Segredo da Morte reflect the author’s debt to the two French writers: and we might note in passing that the balletristic hegemony of French imprints itself, by extension, on the lesser prestige of the Portuguese language as a vehicle of Western culture. Significantly, the bombast of Assis Junior’s language seems a parody of the high-flown style of Hugo and other nineteenth-century European writers.

With respect to the acquisition and use of languages and literary styles, Ali A. Mazrui has commented on how Africans often indulged in flamboyant copying of European customs. This can be explained by the fact that in a multilingual situation, within a dependent society, a common, albeit borrowed, language served as an important indication of solidarity among black intellectuals and semi-assimilated Africans desirous of distinguishing themselves from the “uncivilized” masses. To be able to speak the white man’s language as well as the European himself did, not only meant prestige and acceptance for the members of a small, black minority, it also served as the source of a pride predicated on the diminution of the dominant group’s foreignness. Furthermore, acquisition of the white man’s language demonstrated the African’s intellectual capacity in that he could manipulate that which conveyed the concepts of a supposedly superior race. Mazrui notes how in an earlier period some educated Africans reveled unabashedly in their Westernization. Writers and orators went out of their way to use the most uncommon, polysyllabic words and to quote long passages from Shakespeare and other European authors. It seems to me, however, that while this flamboyantly imitative phase may have reflected a pattern of self-hate, the black orator and writer was also giving proof, even if unconsciously, of a traditional African reliance on the power of the word.

Mazrui observes that there is a distinction between “taking pride in a language and taking pride in one’s own command of a language.” According to Mazrui, the African who masters a Western tongue can be compared to the European administrator or missionary who feels an inner satisfaction at having learned the obscure dialect of his African wards. I suspect, however, that there are some psychological and ideological differences to be made between the learning of a local language by the colonizer and the acquisition of the imperial language by the colonized. In a large measure their pride in, and perhaps even their love for, French, led the Negritude poets to dare shape and sometimes to distort the language; after all, it was as much theirs as it was Breton’s or Sartre’s. The Caliban-Prospero metaphor no doubt accompanies very real nationalist and Pan-Africanist sentiments. But hurling the colonizer’s language back at him is not necessarily to deny that language; it is, instead, to serve notice that the African and the West Indian have made that language their own. This, of course, brings the Negritude poets and their Anglophone detractors, Chinua Achebe and the South African writer Ezechiel Mphahlele, for example, closer together than perhaps the latter would care to admit.

Assis Junior was a long way from a Negritude ideology; although he was, as founder of the Liga Nacional Africana, an important predecessor of Angolan nationalists. He also seemed to take pride in his command of Portuguese—it was, in truth, an imperfect command—and he attempted to apply the language to an Angolan reality as he perceived it. His shaping and bending of the European language was not so much intended, in the conscious manner of the Negritude writers, as it was a reflection of the intrusion of Kimbundu, which he probably knew better than Portuguese. He cultivated an anachronistic literary style as exaggerated tribute to what he took to be a Western mode of writing. On the other hand, he contradicted the Western language’s cultural and aesthetic hegemony by his discernible dependency on some traditional African, story-telling techniques and through his use of Kimbundu words and phrases. Often, throughout the novel, the narrator interrupts the story with Kimbundu proverbs and passages of local color. Some of these asides are sententious chiding to criticize those Angolans who deny African customs. Assis Junior directs his ideological message to a dual society. He describes, for example, a social gathering during which blacks and whites dance to both African and European music. Duality also extends to the characters’ life style: for example, Elmira, a white Angolan, also goes by the African name of Kapaxi, and she prays to her Christian God while enjoying the protection of the African god of the Kwanza River. Elsewhere I wrote of this fictional occurrence as religious syncretism; I would now prefer to call it a duality that contains only a wishful desire for the twain to meet and to merge into a viable, creole structure. The duality of literary language in O Segredo da Morte likewise does not mean a merging on the dialectical level that the implied author seems to want. The Kimbundu proverbs and descriptions of local customs stand out like museum pieces in the context of the author’s contrived and flamboyant Portuguese. As an example of Angolan regionalism within the mythic Portuguese space, O Segredo represents an attempt to ward off a creeping deculturation that would destroy what Assis Junior saw as the beginnings of a propitious creolization, and deculturation would escalate with an influx of white settlers—this time, whole families—in ensuing decades.

Inherent in the contradictions of language is the clash of cultures, a subject which has received the attention of one of Angola’s best known writers. Fernando Monteiro de Castro Soromenho, most commonly referred to by his last two names, is the writer in question. And he himself is something of a contradiction. As a white Angolan (he was born in Mozambique but taken to Angola at the age of one) who began his writing career in the 1930s, Soromenho shares in some of the Eurocentric and racist distortions of Africa displayed by more obvious colonial novelists. Because of his literary talents and his fundamental sympathy for the black
man, I prefer to call Soromenho an “enlightened” colonial writer. Indeed, contradictions have dogged him in his career as an observer of Africa. Like most of his fellow colonial writers he did intend to reveal an Africa that he at least believed he understood. As an agent who recruited Africans for work in Angola’s diamond mines, and later as a district chief in the eastern zones of the colony, Soromenho took advantage of his access to local populations to learn to speak Kikoko and to gather samples of oral tradition.

In the first phase of his writing career Soromenho converted African legends and myths into sympathetic stories based on the African’s humanity vitiated by his own “prelogical” state. In Soromenho’s view African societies were victimized by their own static tribalism. His depiction of the superstition-bound, poverty-stricken “natives” gives evidence of his European prejudices toward Africa. Yet, his sense of the universal bonds of humankind and his attempts to capture cultural authenticity earned Soromenho the reputation, which spread beyond the borders of the Portuguese-speaking world, of a white man who understood the black man’s soul. For all his understanding of and sympathy for the black subjects of his stories Soromenho did cultivate the picturesque and the exotic, especially in his descriptions of traditional African customs. Thus, African dances were “barbaric” and “delirious”: naked black men and sensuous black women whirled about in a “frenzy.”

Soromenho tried to exteriorize the African psyche, and he did bring to black societies the prejudiced cultural force of his European language. In other words, he, unlike those African writers of whom Gerald Moore wrote, did not bend and shape his language to an African world view. We might say that he descended on an African reality with all of the cultural baggage of his language intact.36 When, however, in the early 1960’s Soromenho entered decisively into his second literary phase, he himself admitted that it was necessary to purge his language of certain terms, like selvagem and simiesco, used to describe the African. Since 1942, when he published Homens sem Caminho, Soromenho had turned to the clash of cultures as his preferred theme. Even before modifying his language he had gained a new level of authenticity by treating his subject from within. In obvious reference to the rise of a new black consciousness, he told an interviewer that because of the contradictions of different realities he saw the necessity of adopting a new technique and style.37

Homens sem Caminho. Terra Morta (1949), Viragem (1957), and A Chaga (written in 1964 and published posthumously in 1970) all deal with the contradictions of Lisbon’s colonial policy. Lourenço, an old settler in A Chaga, sums up the failure of the encounter of African and Portuguese in the following terms: “Negamos ao negro o homem que ele é, sem sequer pensarmos que ao negá-lo també nous negavamos como homens.”38 The voice of the implied author—meaning the novel’s ideological norms—comes through frequently in A Chaga in pronouncements of protest that contrast with the pious, condescending language of Soromenho’s first phase. By 1965 Soromenho had settled in Brazil where he died in 1968. Since 1950 he had lived between Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, with a brief stay in the United States in 1961. An exile, more sad than bitter, Soromenho openly opposed the Salazar regime which had once hailed him as one of its distinguished colonial writers. If there is one principal message that Soromenho left for those who lived under this government, it was that Portugal’s glorious adventure in Africa was largely a sham.

In Paris Soromenho wrote for such journals as Présence Africaine, and he aligned himself philosophically, if not actively, with the cause of African independence. His novelistic language only implicitly reached the level of Angolan nationalism, for his role was to dramatize that historical moment when exploitation had begun to reveal the emptiness of the adventure about which he had once written so grandiloquently: “Sobre a barrabá dos servões africanos, umas escassas dezenas de aventureiros erguem a bandeira de seu país como símbolo de ocupação. São conhecidos por pombeiros a funantes, esses sertanejos de África. A sua história está por escrever. Aqui se encontram alguns dos seus aspectos e poucos nomes.”39 A decade after he wrote those words, a character in A Chaga would say: “E río-me comigo próprio com as histórias dêes sertanejos manhosos, que procuram justificar tudo o que fizeram, e muitas vezes o que não fizeram, com atos de heroísmo na descoberta destas terras, fazendo sempre do negro um salvagem e da Africa um misterio.” (italics mine).40 The disintegration of the myths of manifest destiny and civilizing mission toned down Soromenho’s language and put his narrators into a frame of reference designed to jog a collective, Western conscience.

Even in Soromenho’s attempts to simulate the non-standard Portuguese of the settlers’ mulatto offspring there is no trace of exoticism. His intent is to capture the essence of the conflict of cultures through the social problem acquisition by those who are caught between two worlds. The colono Paulino chides his mulatto son Domingos in this exchange between the two:

Paulino: Nunca mais aprendes a falar. Falas português de prêto.


Paulino: A escola não é pra aprender a falar, seu burro. Escola é pra contas e escrita, percebes?

Domingos: Na casa a gente fala quioco com mãe, com pai, com os irmão. Pai fala português bocadinho só na veranda. Com os brancos é que fala. 41

With patriotic pride and homesickness the settlers hang on to their peasant speech, and they hold the vague hope that their offspring will absorb it somehow, along with an entire culture, even though these “Portuguese” usually receive no formal schooling and the language of the land is the Kikoko spoken by the “uncivilized” African women who keep house for the whites and bear them children. In a way, Domingos’ “sub-standard”
Portuguese represents the cultural stagnation that exists in that area where black and white meet in unequal attempts at familial continuity.

Castro Soromenho presents a dilemma of compelling sociolinguistic dimensions, and it is these dimensions that demand our attention in the works of two contemporary Angolan novelists.

Black from white and white on black: Santos Lima and Luandino Vieira

Manuel dos Santos Lima, virtually Angola's only pre-independence, black novelist, began his career as a writer of prose fiction (he has also written poetry) with As Sementes da Liberdade (1965). Under this rather provocative title Santos Lima tells a rambling story that revolves around Ricardo, a black man, born on the Guinea Gulf island of São Tomé, who returns to Angola, the land of his forebears. There, as an educated, lower-level administrator in an isolated outpost near the Congo border, Ricardo goes through a process of re-Africanization. He marries an assimilated woman, significantly named Ginga, after the powerful, seventeenth-century queen of the Mbandus who resisted Portuguese domination. Progressively, Ricardo returns to the land in both the literal and figurative sense. Curiously, Ricardo, who ostensibly denies Western values by living off the land as a farmer, sends his son and Ginga's son, Almi, to study in Portugal. The apparent explanation for this act, which controverts Ricardo's own earlier decision not to follow this customary route of the aspiring black bourgeoisie, is that while formal education means advancement for the African, he must first be in touch with his roots. The combination of Western education and a sense of knowing who you are fits a pattern of the black Angolan's growing consciousness of people-building (nationality) and nation-building (nationalism). The son's success is a matter of efficiency, which, coupled with his nationalistic commitment, will help to plant the seeds of freedom. This appears to be the author's ideological message.

As Sementes da Liberdade has sociolinguistic significance in terms of both the author's and his black characters' use of Portuguese. But Santos Lima's most recent novel, As Lagrimas e o Vento (1975), offers greater possibilities for commentary in that realm. Ricardo's son, Almi Boaventura, who, in an epilogue to As Sementes, reveals himself to be the narrator of that story, appears as the protagonist of As Lagrimas e o Vento.

For this novel the author obviously drew on his own experiences as an officer who deserted from the Portuguese army while serving in Angola to join the nationalist guerrillas. Basically, the story recounts those first months of the war in which Africans and Portuguese floundered in a sea of often senseless violence and uncertain goals. Almi emerges amidst ideological confusion as the voice of national self-determination and humane cause. The tone of the narrative voice resembles that which in an earlier period inspired Africans to master the European language in order to affirm their intellectual equality with whites. In the case of Santos Lima's narrator there is an interesting parallel between the European who "knows his Africa" and the African who brings about a measure of leveling vis-à-vis his colonial masters by demonstrating an awareness of his own acculturation and by displaying his knowledge of language. Assis Júnior flaunted his Portuguese to the point of flamboyancy; with Santos Lima it is more a case of a controlled and even casual display of Western cultural-linguistic knowledge. At times it seems a case of "over-knowing" the language that results, not in bombast, but in something akin to parody and caricature. Certain European characters in the novel are such repositories of the author's knowledge of Portuguese culture and traditions that they are "over-delineated."

The novel's opening paragraph sets the tone for a narrative carried along, at times, by overly precise language:

"O vento empurra-o para trás, mas, obstinado, ele tentava prosseguir o seu caminho, surdo aos gritos do vento. Não podendo suporta-lo de frente, voltou-lhe as costas e quis continuar, as cegas, carregando com aquele velho padrão. Era uma reclusão de família e por isso queria guardá-lo a todo o custo. Não sabia, porém, onde pousá-lo. Cada vez que o assentava no chão, via-o enterrar-se e apressadamente, voltava a carregá-lo às costas."

The subject of this grammatically precise, and slightly over-written, passage is General José Cabarrão de Boavida y Caloço, who, it turns out, is having a nightmare. The general's absurdly aristocratic name (Cabarrão suggests cabrão, which, colloquially identifies a cuckold or, at best, a fool) right down to the Spanish conjunction y, aids the narrator in his apparent design to prick the balloon of pomposity in a passage of sociological suggestibility--the family relic represents jealousy guarded, outmoded tradition in danger of being buried in Angolan soil. The narrator then reduces the general to his most visceral self, in his underwear, tormented by his thoughts and a persistent flea whose actions are described with humorous preciosity: "A pulga eclipsara-se deixando-lhe nas cuecas os vestígios da sua passagem."

The language of Lima's narrative carries authority by virtue of its correctness, cultural scope, and assuredness. The tone is one that suggests "I know wherof I speak." The fact that the narrator expresses himself with facility lends credence to his pronouncements on Portuguese society and Western mentality. With perhaps more sophistication than colonial writers who characterized Africans, the author delineates stereotyped Europeans who, however, display their humanity through a revelation of their most fundamental fears and aspirations. If Soromenho can be said to know the black man's soul, Santos Lima can be credited with understanding the white man's mentality. Almi Boaventura, the black second lieutenant, educated as a lawyer in Portugal, is thus familiar with European values. Almi's advantage over his white counterparts parallels the author's advantage as a novelist using an imported language and genre and writing
about blacks and whites in Africa. Both the author and his protagonist presumably know who they are as Africans, and they know the Portuguese on a linguistic, cultural, and philosophical level. Most of the Portuguese characters in the novel have little understanding of the black man outside of a Western context; and within that context they seem unsure of what they see and hear even when they deal with the "educated" African. Thus, most of Almi's fellow officers treat him both as a comrade who shares their values and as something of an enigma. At the beginning of the novel Almi's regiment has been recently mobilized and shipped to Angola, and the confusion as to why they are there makes for some dialogue that has significant socio-linguistic implications. Use of dialogue demonstrates the author's familiarity with colloquial Portuguese and with how informal banter reveals ideological curiosities. The typical mode of expression of young metropolitanos can be glimpsed in this exchange between Almi and a certain Gonçalves, who asks his black comrade-in-arms:

--Tu não conheces por aí umas gajas boas para apresentares à malta?
--Mas tu aqui safas-te mais do que nós.
--E' um privilégio, estou na minha terra.
--O pâ, não te chatees, olha que eu disse isso a brincar. 14

On one level Gonçalves treats Almi with easy camaraderie and the intimacy of post-adolescent males; but on the other level, captured in the slangy language of "safas-te mais do que nós," he establishes the distance that separates black from white, and he puts Almi into the role of "native" procurer of carnal pleasure for the occupying army. On both levels Gonçalves depends on Almi's knowledge of certain Western cultural-linguistic formulas.

Santos Lima introduces an array of characters who are stock in many Euro-American war stories: One character, nicknamed Gaja-boa, is a ladykiller, another is the group wisecracker and practical joker. Among the recruits we meet Serafim, a simple peasant boy who wanted to bring his pet goat with him and who, unable to bear the homesickness, hangs himself in the barrack. The conventional war story generally makes use of stock characters—the innocent hometown kid, the hardened sergeant with the big heart--to play on patriotic sentiment. More serious novelists, like Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead or earlier Erich Maria von Remarque in All Quiet on the Western Front, created three-dimensional characters who stand as poignant testimony to the horrors of war. Santos Lima obviously has the latter in mind with his depiction of Verissimo, a Portuguese officer who makes sensitive but doctrinaire entries condemning the war in a diary he keeps for his wife. As Lagrimas e o Vento is no hackneyed war story in that it struggles with conflicting notions of nationality, nation, and greater nationalism. The European characters, functioning within their own context superimposed on one into which they have suddenly been thrust, afford the author the opportunity to exercise his cultural-linguistic virtuosity. And the parallel of implied author and semi-autobiographical protagonist brings the social contradictions of language into focus.

Early in the novel we read Almi's thoughts expressed frequently in high-rhetorical, sometimes angry language. Past and present injustices against the Angolan people, the memory of the slave ships, realistic accounts of recent atrocities all figure in this language. The sense of a people wronged leads to such posterity as this rapid image of the black shanty towns that ring the essentially white city of Luanda: "casas cobertas de fendas e roldas de ódio." 45

Although the first part of the novel has more to do with Almi's relationship with his Portuguese companions, we do see him in occasional contact with certain black residents of Luanda. When we encounter Africans, we see them on various planes of reaction to a social and economic situation made precarious by the war. Some of Luanda's black residents collaborate with the occupying army and the secret police (PIDE), some form cells of saboteurs or slip away to join the guerrillas in the bush, most are merely unpoliticalized, hapless victims.

The language of the whites varies from the official rhetoric of Angola é nossa and somos todos portugueses (including, of course, black Angolans) to the unofficial os pretos são ignorantes, ingênuos e salvagens to an "in-group" banter that reveals false bravado, anger mixed with compassion, confusion, and cultural alienation. We have, in fact, language as a mirror of nationalist ideologies. Nationalism based on greater nationality becomes confused, in the minds of some Portuguese soldiers, with nationism. An excellent example of this confusion occurs during a conversation between Almi and a first lieutenant named Negreiros. The latter asks Almi's opinion of this war that has been imposed on them. Almi calmly replies: "Penso que só a História poderá responder a sua pergunta, meu tenente, sobretudo tendo em conta que estamos em presença de uma guerra civil." 46 Shocked, Negreiros retorts with a conventional dodge: "Oh mes'! Então o nosso alferes chama guerra civil a uma guerra subversiva em que os comunistas puxam os cordelinhos." 47 By now the author's purposes are fairly transparent. The black second lieutenant, by simply repeating platitudes based on greater nationality (the myth of the Portuguese space), throws his colleague into ideological confusion and verbal contradictions. Almi explains "se pela Constituição portuguesa, os Angolanos são considerados portugueses e se Angola é igual ao Minho ou ao Algarve [provinces of continental Portugal], esta insurreição, de um ponto de vista jurídico, só pode ser, logicamente, uma guerra civil." 48 Almi, of course, coolly interjects the concept of geo-political unity into the argument in order to separate ideology from external social reality. 49
We could easily apply the notions of cultural behavior and ethnic group identity to the casual conversation of the junior officers as a means of shedding further light on ideological confusions and rhetorical contradictions. Turning, however, to the language of the novel's black characters, we note certain parallels between the rhetoric of Portuguese greater nationality and black Angolan nationalism. The difference has to do with the embryonic stage of the latter and difficulties in establishing a concept of nationality as a necessary step to nation-building.

With respect to the question of multilingualism among urbanized, black Angolans, we see very few references to the problem of a national language or languages. Portuguese is the língua franca, and Santos Lima makes only very subtle modifications in his black characters' speech as a means of ethnocultural delineation. In the musseque, home of a relative, the latter asks Almi “é doutor de doenças ou dotor de leis?” Almi corrects with his reply: “Sou Licenciado em Direito.” “We cannot necessarily attribute this usage on the part of Almi’s cousin to an African linguistic substratum, but it does serve to suggest the degree of Westernization that separates the two relatives. We might note, however, that primo, as a form of address, does not necessarily mean that the two individuals are cousins; in some African languages the word translates as a general term for kin.

It would be wrong to say that Santos Lima does not have an ear for an African linguistic substratum. He uses this knowledge judiciously, however, on widely scattered occasions. One such occasion the narrator describes a black man as opening his vowels too much. Another fleeting reference to an African phonetic substratum comes in a semi-assimilated African’s pronunciation of his borrowed Portuguese name: Goncalves, with an / sound, becomes Goncares, with an r. In the section of the novel entitled “Os Pretogueses,” the author endeavors to capture phonetic distortions in order to ridicule and pity those semi-assimilated blacks who imitate with a fawning desire to ingratiate themselves to their white masters. One hapless man automatically mouths patriotic pledges of filial devotion to “sí o Salazar;” and when ordered to greet a visiting Portuguese woman, he obediently proffers a “hom bom, mi siora.” Orthographic distortions of standard Portuguese, like mid siora for minha senhora, stand out all the more ludicrously in the novel because Santos Lima generally avoids exoticisms in his characterization of blacks. When he does introduce a note of the exotic he does so for other than picturesque effect. For example, Almi finds himself among villagers at a traditional celebration, described in the following terms: “E o povo cantando e batucando, as marimbás contentes, o ritmo delirante, os corpos frementes, no frenesi das pernas e dos braços na cadência das cabeças.” Santos Lima approximates the externalization of African customs frequently seen in the writings of non-Africans. O ritmo delirante, os corpos frementes, e no frenesi das pernas would serve well the descriptions of colonial writers. Santos Lima has other purposes in mind, however, for Almi becomes politically and sociologically reflective as he continues to watch the spectacle: “O terreiro parcia um feira, um estúdio de cinema ou uma gigantesca mudança com grupos de mascarados que parodiavam os brancos, os contadores de histórias e adivinhas, e sobretudo, os sítios herdeiros de bugingangas e ninharas.” The comparison with a fair and a movie set, the references to a mammoth substitution, the masquerade and parody, and finally the allusion to a people who have become, under colonialism, the heirs to glass beads and worthless trinkets, constitute, in the mind of the politicized Almi, an ambivalent condemnation of revisionist, cultural nationalism. Yet, Almi, in all his melancholy of a Westernized African, feels a sense of cultural deprivation, his own and that of a people deprived of the authenticity that comes through continuity and tradition. When urged to join in the dancing, Almi refuses: “Não sei danzer assim, sentir-me ia ridiculo. F’ certamente uma inibição, sou um mutilado cultural.”

The idea of “cultural disability” brings us again to the issue of contradiction. Both Almi and the implied author stand in somewhat similar positions: the author because of the genre and its language of composition, the protagonist because of his Westernization as an aid to, but in conflict with, his sense of Angolan nationality and nationalism. In reality, the contradictions of the implied author merge with those of the protagonist to the degree that the narrative voice cannot be separated from Almi’s thoughts. With regard to language, we see a process of broad conceptualization in Almi’s speech, both in dialogue and the indirect free style, contrasted with the common-sensical, but ideologically limited, limitations of his uneducated compatriots. Their language, as a manifestation of their conceptualizations, does not meet the exigencies of a new nationalist immediacy. In effect, Almi’s return to Angola is not to a static, fragmented multiethnity but to a land whose future depends on a leveling that will lead to a unified resolve en-route to one nationality and one nation. This is not inconsistent with the course followed by Ricardo, Almi’s father, in As Sementes da Liberdade.

As we have noted, with reference to the first part of the novel set in Luanda, Santos Lima makes economical use of orthographic distortions to identify the speech of his black characters. He does not depend solely on context to characterize African characters, however. Often they speak in an elliptical, slightly lyrical, but never stilted, manner. Furthermore, the villagers’ speech contrasts with the colloquialisms of the Portuguese soldiers and the discursiveness of Almi’s intellectualizations.

The author intersperses Almi’s ruminations on the need for unity with an occasional reference to the problems of multilingualism and a national, indigenous language. One such reference occurs when Edmundo, a light-skinned mulatto, who had led a playload’s life before being drafted into the Portuguese army, appears in the guerrilla camp on his way to the Congo. Like Almi, he is a deserter, and when the two old acquaintances meet,
Edmundo declares: “Quando Angola se tornar uma república democrática e socialista, havemos de adoptar o quimbundo como lingua nacional e os panos como traje da nossa terra.”26 When Almi appears doubtful, Edmundo exclaims: “Por que não? Não se pode traduzir ‘república democrática e socialista,’ em quimbundo, mas os panos o povo conhece...”27 Almi scoffs at the idea of nationalist symbols; for him, Kimbundu in the mouths of Westernized blacks and mulattoes is as much a matter of posturing as the use of traditional African robes is a form of masquerading.28 Besides, Kimbundu is only one of several indigenous languages.

The protagonist plays a duel role of didactic voice and model of tactical activism. Almi’s insistence on efficiency reflects his idea of national development based on breaking the patterns of the past: “Antes a vida fora monotonia, repetição, circulo fechado.”29 “Breaking the closed circle means, among other social programs, the elimination of illiteracy: “Aquelas crianças que o cercavam iam aprender a ler como os brancos.”30 Like the whites, the black children will learn to read and write Portuguese, which, on the heels of the war, will suppress multiethnicity: “Isso nunca aconteceria se a guerra não tivesse trazido esses angolanos de outras terras, Bemba, Ngola, Lunda, até o mecanico Benigno, um mulato da Baia dos Tigres, e todos se desgavan por ‘angolanos’. “31 The word terra has interesting politico-geographic connotations. When Almi tells his fellow officer at the beginning of the novel that he is in his terra, he of course means he is in his homeland of Angola. But in the above quote “esses angolanos de outras terras” refers to diverse ethnolinguistic groups from different regions of Angola whose members are in the process of grasping the concept of nation. The author illustrates this problem of geographical space and nationhood when the old chief Massemba sits in amazement before a map of Angola on which his terra represents a tiny area.

As a concluding comment on Santus Lima’s work, I should say that the sociological and ideological significance of novelistic language illustrates what I metaphorically refer to as “black from white.” Santos Lima both flaunts and defies his Europeanization through the cultivation of language as a means of expressing a communal sense of African identity, his and that of a hoped for new Angolan, who is conscious of nation-building and a tempered nationalism.

For a cogent example of what I call “white on black.” I turn to a novel by José Luandino Vieira, easily Angola’s best-known living writer of prose fiction. Luandino Vieira is a white Angolan, born in Portugal, but taken as a small child to Luanda. His nom de plume, and guerre, Luandino, suggests to what measure he identifies with that contradictory city. I say contradictory city because Luanda was the seat of the Portuguese colonial government in Angola at the same time that it was the intellectual and cultural center of Angolan nationalism; now, of course, it is the capital of that newly independent African nation.

Luandino became a controversial figure when in 1965 the Portuguese Writers Society conferred its first prize for prose fiction on his collection of long short stories, Luannda (1964). At the time of the award the author was serving the first years of a protracted sentence for his political activities as a member of the MPLA. The Lisbon authorities moved to have Luandino stripped of his prize by means of subterfuge. On the advice of a panel of critics and writers they alleged that his work was of dubious literary value. One major allegation was that he delineated his African characters in an offensive way; after all, some critics claimed, whites only think they know how black people talk. This is a reference to Luandino’s attempts to capture the flavor of black Portuguese. I do not propose to go into that issue as it pertains to Luanda, but I will say that the charge has very little to do with the reality of Luandino’s literary language. Luandino, in these stories, uses Kimbundu words and phrases as well as syntactical modifications, but so subtly that he neither caricatures nor distracts with exotic distortions.

By Angolan standards Luandino is a prolific writer with some seven books, including two novels, to his credit. He participated actively in the founding of Angola’s contemporary literary movement, and he has to be considered one of the movement’s principal innovators, particularly with regard to language. Because Luandino, like the Brazilian modernists of the 1920s and 1930s, sees language as a prime factor in a declaration of cultural and artistic autochthony, his writing is often experimental and iconoclastic. The Brazilians incorporated “primitive” and atavistic elements into their works by cultivating an Amerindian and African substratum. Luandino’s use of Kimbundu has even greater sociolinguistic significance because of the immediacy of problems surrounding Angolan nationalism.

Luandino’s novel Nós, os do Makulu (1974) makes very pointed statements on the sociology of language within the contradictory context of the rise of black self-determination juxtaposed with the fears and aspirations of white settlers in Angola. Briefly, the novel’s first person narrator tells of events revolving around his soldier brother Maninho who dies of a guerrilla’s bullet several months into the third year of the war of independence. In a way the novel parallels As Lagrimas e o Vento, except that Nós, os do Makulu is more introspective, almost to the point of being esoteric. In line with this hermeticism is the fact that Angola is seen through the eyes of Mais-Velho, a first generation, white Angolan caught in the middle of a conflict between various modalities of a colonial mentality and the prospect of a unified, multiracial Angola under black majority rule.

We might recall that Santos Lima’s novel begins with a display of the author’s knowledge of Portuguese and Western narrative techniques. Luandino prefaces his novel with a Kimbundu phrase from a traditional legend and he begins the story itself with imagistically expressive language:
“Simples, simples como assim um tiro: era alferes, levou um balção, andava na guerra a deitou a vida no chão, o sangue bebeu.” We do not need to tax our imaginations to see a relationship between the above-quoted sentence and the representational style of traditional African story-telling technique, particularly in the poetically phrased imagery expressed in “he laid his life on the ground, it drank his blood,” to give an English rendition of the last part of the quote. Throughout the novel we can observe a shaping and bending of language that approaches, on its technical-narrative surface, a tension between the indigenous tongue, black Portuguese, and the standard language. Having made note of the surface tension, which also encompasses iconoclastic stylizations (“e a suave tão carapinha de Kibiaka,” p. 32), including neologisms, that combine Kimbundu with Portuguese (“aquimbungamento p. 59) or two Portuguese words (resplandecentes p. 89), we can proceed to a consideration of sociolinguistic contradictions. What we see in terms of conflicts involves racial, generational, cultural, and ideological clashes, all with a superabundance of paradoxes. The narrator, nicknamed Mais-Velho, oldest child of Portuguese peasants settled in Angola, recounts the nature of these clashes in a more often than not fragmented, semisurrealist, memorialist manner. On occasion, however, his voice hits a rhetorical pitch charged with rage and frustration. In the midst of a series of the narrator’s flashbacks to his childhood, his mother clucks her disbelief at the violence and atrocities of the war. Mais-Velho replies with the vehemence of the son who understands the historical role played by his settler parents in the Angolan dilemma: “Mãe: tu és uma colona, ouviste? Uma colona, e assim que tu és. Colonialista, colono. Como e te vou poder fazer aceitar a verdade e a mentira que não podem se separar assim a toa enquanto a gente não soubermos tudo, como te vou explicar que a verdade e mentira aqui, hoje, nossa terra de Luanda, 1961,... que sim, matar-te-e-o, matar-me-ão e vão dizer com justiça: era uma boa branca, era um bom branco.” “Settler (colono) can be equated with colonialis who even when perceived as one of the “good whites,” will not be spared in the conflagration because, as Mais-Velho continues: “O bem que tu fazes, mãe, as sopas que das, as esmoelas que dás, os serviços que dás, os mataichtigos que das, e o mal, e o pior mal: fazer bem sem olhar quem, tu vives de frases feitas no teu bom senso de camponesa que és ainda e esse bom senso é muito perigoso.” 4 Patterns of paternalism and cultural racism transform peasants into riders of black mount who treat their inferiors with the condescending kindness of ingrained charity: “Fazer o bem sem olhar a quem é diminuir, é insultar-primeiro é preciso que reconheças esse a quem como alguém que não quer o teu bem, quer outro bem então, sim!: fazer o bem e não olhes a quem, ama o próximo como a ti mesmo, assim como fizeres assim acharás não o saiba a esquerda o que a direita faz, então sim, isso será bom e justo, minha triste e desiludida mãe que me olhas e ouves o hino final da emmisor estrangeira e estas pensando,...” 5 The son adopts the oratorical style of a parish priest but his convoluted reasoning eludes the common-sensical mother who wholeheartedly accepts, as somehow divinely ordained, the racial hierarchy that governs her life in Angola.

Beyond that which can be laid to generational differences in the same family, we see ideological distinctions predicated on a “new” colonialis mentality. The father, who represents the old, like the settlers in Soromenho’s A Chaga, has slept with “native” women and has fathered a mulatto child, PaiZhino, whom he recognizes as his godson. He despises blacks as a group and emphatically insists they are inferior to whites. Maninho, the youngest son, who represents the new, marries Rute, a mulata, but he willingly takes up arms to fight the “terrorists,” and he attacks his brother’s altruistic and Marxist ideas:

“E então, Mais-Velho? Les Marx e comes bacalhau assado, mão é? Não te deitas com negras nem mulatas—a tua cunhada é mulata, ficou descansando... —por respeito lhe recusas a humanidade dessa coisa simples, onde só o humano se revela, onde só se pode a comunicar, saber, aprender... Rio, sabes, mas me dô muito no coração, fica pesado de amargura. Espalha os teus panfletos, que eu vou matar negros. Mais-Velho! E sei que eles te dirão do mesmo: ‘espalha os teus panfletos, vou matar os brancos!’” 6

Maninho follows the path of continued white domination even though he, paradoxically, has undergone his measure of creolization—he relishes certain African foods—and integration—he sleeps with black women and he takes a mulata as his wife. Yet, Maninho goes off to kill blacks in order to end a war that he did not want but whose political ends divide along lines that he has no difficulty in identifying. Mais-Velho does not sleep with black or mulatto women as a political act, as a rejection of the Lusitanian myth of miscegenation, and he chooses on such traditional dishes as funje and moamba because, as his brother says, recalling a childhood incident, “já fazia política naquela idade, vomitava o funje todo, não o aceitava, ‘respeitava-o,’ não o consumia, como mais tarde, com as meninas.” 66 Through Mais-Velho Luandino Vieira contoverses time-honored, national traditions in a pattern of artistically and sociologically conceived contradictions. Mais-Velho, who recognizes the basic humanity of black Africans, maintains, in effect, a physical and cultural distance from them. Maninho, on the other hand, meets the black woman on a basic level of humanity while denying the African’s fundamental political rights. Maninho and his father easily adjust their palates to exotic food and their tastes to black and mulatto women, but without a sensitivity toward the ethnic and cultural infrastructure of Angola.

The “we” of Nós, os do Makulu includes, in the narrator’s flashbacks, himself, his brother Maninho, his mulatto half-brother PaiZhino, and a black playmate, Kibiaka. Makulu is a lower middle-class neighborhood where black, white, and mestico meet, not always on equal terms, but in an atmosphere of a certain cultural leveling. Here language takes on
its most contradictory, sociological cast as Kimbundu erodes and enriches
the speech patterns of all. Language, that cornerstone of a people’s world
view, sums up all of the ideological confusion of a provincial city in a
transitional territory. A type of Luanda Portuguese, pretoques for some, a
more potent and symbolic force than African foods or inter-racial sexual
encounter, distinguishes Maninho and his older brother from their in-
transigent parents who, with their hearts back in Portugal, exercise their
old-fashioned colonial prerogatives. Luandino’s novelistic language forms
a tension with Kimbundu, as if to say that the African language is a
symbolic expression of an omnipresent black reality that will not be denied
in Angola. With refrain-like regularity the author intersperses his narrative
with Kimbundu phrases and proverbs acquired naturally by children and
later reflected upon by the adult narrator. Four separate paragraphs in the
novel begin in similar fashion: “Bilingues que a gente éramos...” 68;
“Bilingues começavamos a querer ser...” 69; “Bilingues quase que
somos...” 70; “Bilingues que somos, quase...” 71. The adverb quase
strengthens the tension of reverse acculturation always repressed by the
force of cultural racism. Maninho tells his brother, in an ideological
discussion, that “enquanto não podemos nos entender porque só um lado
de nós cresceu, temos de nos matar aos outros” e a razão de nossa
vida, a única forma que me posso dar, fraternamente, de assumir a sua
dignidade, a razão de viver—matar ou ser morto, de pê.” 72 Language, the
Kimbundu they almost knew, did not grow equally as whites and blacks
entered into adulthood, eventually to confront and perhaps kill each other.

The hermetic, pre-adolescent world of Makulusu is their corner of
Luanda: “Luanda, nossa senhora de amor, uma morte.” 73 In what can be
considered a love-death poem to Angola, Luandino metaphorically ex-
presses the reality of the province-colony-nation’s destiny in the death of
Maninho: “capitão-mor [a play on capitão-mor] das mortes nas matas
da nossa terra de Angola.” 74

The reader of this novel might well ask, for whom does Luandino
Vieira write? We might look for an answer in the last line of the novel:
“Nos, os do Makulusu.” The novel ends with its title, and the idea of a
closed circle suggests a narrative that excludes those not part of Nos.
However, we might also consider under what conditions, when, and where
Luandino wrote the novel: clandestinely: April 16th to 23rd, 1967;
Tarrafal, the infamous prisoner camp at the northern tip of the Cape Verde
Island of Santiago. At the time Luandino had no choice but to write for the
desk drawer, as it were, or, on a more abstract level, for those companions
who would perhaps never read his words. We might further speculate that
he wrote out of a sense of evocative nostalgia, which is altogether con-
sistent with the thrust of Angolan cultural regionalism and with other of
Luandino’s works, especially A Cidade e a Infância (1959), Velhas
Estórias (1964), and No Antigamente, na Vida (1969). On the other hand,
with the award-winning Luanda, he began to gain recognition in literary
circles in Portugal and beyond. His style, characterized by linguistic
virtuosity and experimentation, reflects his place in the broader spectrum
of lusophone letters. The contemporary Brazilian writer Guimarães Rosa
had an obvious influence on Luandino’s later works. Thus, when Nos, os
do Makulusu appeared in print in Portugal, after the coup of April 1974,
the novel attracted the attention of those who fall well outside of that
closed circle for whom the Angolan author presumably wrote.

Nos, os do Makulusu is unique among Luandino’s works in that it is a
first-person narrative, and the narrator tells his memoirist story from the
point of view of a second generation, white Angolan. He may direct
himself to all Angolans, and despite the closed nature of the novel it
is certainly has universal appeal as a work of art, but the message it contains
is for the colonos and their heirs who, as Angolans, have to decide on their
future in a territory with a past of racial and socioeconomic inequality and
a future of political change. That future has already arrived, and as we
know most colonos chose to leave Angola.

In no other contemporary Angolan work do we get a more immediate
sense of the contradictions of language. With reference again to the use of
Kimbundu, Luandino himself offers no translation of the novel’s epigram;
the editors do, however, supply the following Portuguese rendition of the
quotation: “...porque de onde vimos já nada há a ver. O que procuramos
está para onde vamos.” The quotation has a prophetic ring to it with ob-
vious implications for settler and black Angolan alike. Still, there is
something cryptic about Luandino’s use of Kimbundu, for along with
language there are many allusions to places, things, and events that will
elude those who are not in some degree familiar with Luanda and certain
historical data.

In reality, the novel directs itself to several audiences at the same
time. We read, for example, pointed statements to be understood by all
those who inhabit the “Portuguese space.” The language of the following
fragment parodies a report filed by a foreign cultural attaché: “um belo
relatório de etnossociologia do espaço Lusoassalazarista.” 75 At intervals
in the novel the narrator plays sarcastically on platitudes of Lusitanian
nationalism. More importantly, Luandino uses language to defy on an
aesthetic and ideological level as well as to communicate with those of
his inner circle. He hurls his Kimbunduzied Portuguese and his quazi-
 bilingualism into the teeth of settlers and metropolitans, and then he
retrieves into a kind of code to talk with those Angolans who share his
perceptions. We cannot assume that Luandino supports diglossia for
Angola, and clearly he intends no statement on national language policy.
We can be sure, however, that he does seek a mode of artistic expres-
sion that reflects an important aspect of Angola’s sociocultural reality.

Finally, during one of the several exchanges between Maninho and
Mais-Velho, another character. Dino, makes the observation that “esta
realidade complexa enriquecerá a literatura, temas, vivências.” Indeed,
the complexities of Angola's realities, expressed by means of linguistic tensions and contradictions have enriched a young literature.

Summary and Conclusions

The problem of African literature in European languages, with the attendant question of moral dilemma, arises from the stigma of a colonial legacy. Nation-building and nationality underlie the issues of language practicality vs. sociocultural symbolism, and in creative writing this juxtaposition often makes for tensions that lend themselves to artistic effect.

Much of what can be said about Anglophone and Francophone African writing also applies to African literature of Portuguese expression. What makes Angolan literature unique is the peculiar form of Lusitanian ideologies as well as the anachronistic longevity of the Portuguese colonial empire. The birth of Angolan nationalism and the war that helped overthrow the regime in Portugal and bring about an independent Angola are unprecedented events in present day Africa. These events, set against Lusotropism, the multiracial composition of the cultural-literary-nationalist groups, and the period in which all of this occurred, likewise have had a bearing on the unique nature of Angolan literature.

By applying a method based on sociolinguistic notions I have attempted to show how novelistic language offers an insight into Angola's transitional period of nation-building and sociocultural identity seeking. The novel, as a genre, is as much a European import-and a relatively recent one at that-as the Portuguese language in Angola. Thus from two principal approaches I have dealt with contradictions on a sociocultural and politico-geographic level within a framework of literary considerations.

Assis Júnior exemplifies the assimilated African's propensity to flaunt his knowledge of the acquired language and his desire to imitate Western literary techniques even while seeking to maintain his Angolan identity. The "enlightened" colonial writer Castro Soromenho applied his considerable talent to an externalization of black society and the African mentality. In his second phase, however, he succeeded in internalizing his perceptions of the confrontation of African and European by depicting the dehumanizing results of the clash of cultures. In more contemporary times Manuel dos Santos Lima manipulates Western literary techniques and molds Portuguese so that the psychological and sociological contradictions of the educated African appear interwoven with literary language. Paralleling Santos Lima's derivation of "black from white," José Luandino Vieira, the most ambitious of contemporary Angolan novelists, imposes "white on black" and thus literally epitomizes the contradictions of language in the Angolan novel.

NOTES

5 Ibid., p. 212.
7 Ibid., p. 19.
13 Ibid., p. 39.
14 Ibid., p. 39.
15 Ibid., p. 39.
16 Ibid., p. 40.
17 Ibid., p. 42.
18 Ibid., p. 46.
19 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
20 Ibid., p. 47.
21 Holden Roberto, the leader of the Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola (FNLA), is a Bakongo and the son-in-law of Mobutu, who is the president of Zaire and himself a Bakongo.
22 The history of the rise of Angolan nationalism and independence groups is much too lengthy and involved to be dealt with here. Briefly stated, however, the post-coup conflict that saw the MPLA opposed to FNLA and UNITA can be explained by two main factors. First of all, both the FNLA, which developed from the Uniao das Populacoes de Angola (UPA), and UNITA are basically cultural-nationalist or ethno-nationalist in philosophy as opposed to the pan-Angolan MPLA. Armed confrontations between the FNLA and MPLA.
had occurred long before 1974 when the Caetano-Salazar regime was overthrown in Portugal. After that year, however, the stakes (i.e. who was to rule Angola after independence) increased in magnitude and the ideological differences that separated the three groups became more apparent. The intervention of Western and Communist nations (The United States, The Soviet Union, People’s Republic of China, Cuba, and South Africa) tended to obscure the picture and give the impression in the world at large that FNLA, UNITA, and MPLA were creations or puppets of foreign geopolitical and ideological interests, and there is some evidence to support this contention in the case of FNLA.

Paradoxically, the least cultural-nationalist, most cosmopolitan group, the MPLA, is associated with the indigenous language, Kimbundu, that has had the greatest symbolic impact on Angolan nationalism. Kimbundu, and not tribalism, did indeed become one of the important symbolic rallying points in the cultural-literary movement that formed the emotional-ideological component of the MPLA.

The Ovimbundu also had long and continuous contact with Europeans, but the Kimbundu, because of their presence in urban areas, particularly in and around Luanda, have been most exposed to Westernization. See my book Voices From an Empire: A History of Afro-Portuguese Literature (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 26-29, for an account of nineteenth-century, black intellectuals in Luanda.

See Voices From an Empire, pp. 10-17, for a discussion of Lusotropicalism and its influences on Afro-Portuguese literature.

James Duffy, in Portugal in Africa (London: Penguin Books, 1962) states that “survival resulted more from the ability of the white inhabitants to maintain an uncertain modus vivendi with the Africans than it did from any of Lisbon’s efforts to transplant European cultural values.” And, “the history of the interior in both territories [Angola and Mozambique] is as much the assimilation of the Portuguese by the Africans as it is the reverse.” p. 161

See Duffy, Portugal in Africa, pp. 128-139 and pp. 184-190, for accounts of forced and contract labor.

See Voices From an Empire, pp. 61-68, for a discussion of literary-cultural groups in Angola.


Olney uses this language in his definitions of autobiographical literature, pp. viii-viii.

Olney’s approach differs markedly from the traditional biographical method that sends the critic to the work of art to learn something about the author’s life. Although we do not adopt Olney’s approach we share in his desire to interpret the author’s norms as shaped by other members of his extended community.


See, for example, Artur Maciel, Angola Heroica: 120 Dias com os Nossos Soldados (Lisbon: Livaria Bertrand, 1904).


Mazrui, p. 185.

See Voices From an Empire, p. 30.
CLUES AND SOURCES

Imperial Spain and the Secularization of the Picaresque Novel

Nicholas Spadaccini
University of Minnesota

Despite all that has been said and written recently on the picaresque, the last authentic novel of that genre in Spain’s Golden Age continues to be read in an historical vacuum. With the exception of some of the debatable assessments of A. A. Parker or the impressionistic, yet equally useful, comments of Juan Goytisolo, there has been a general unwillingness to study its place in the history of picaresque narratives or to discover an anonymous author’s handling of the problems of reality and history. That is a pity, for La vida y hechos de Estebanillo González, hombre de buen humor (Antwerp, 1646), not only sums up the poetics of an entire genre (1554-1646), but offers as well a pointed correlation between a picaresque own story and the history of the times. The debacle of Spain and the Hapsburg Empire during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) is experienced, witnessed, and recounted by a soldier of fortune who hides his mercenary identity behind the mask of a lowly laughter-maker—a common jesters who, through the use of his buen humor, is made to question the dominant ideologies of the time. Similarly, no less a matter than the trajectory of the picaresque genre in Spain (a topic that has occupied some of the best Hispanists) is reviewed with a critical eye while many of its features and positions are challenged, on aesthetic and social grounds.

It is not my intention to review here all the issues—social as well as literary—raised by picaresque narratives during some one hundred years, nor to tackle all the problems raised by Estebanillo González. My main concern in this note is to offer clues that might serve a dual purpose: to reevaluate the last representative picaresque narrative in seventeenth-century Spain and to help us reconsider the history of the genre. Briefly, then, as I see it, one of those important clues (which has been passed over by all but a select few) is revealed by the anonymous author at a key moment of the narrative, precisely when the protagonist is forced to abandon the unattached life of a picaresque to become a paid buffoon.

Having deserted his comrades at Nordlingen and having subsequently been taken prisoner at Maastricht (Holland) by the French Duke of Buillon, Estebanillo finds himself totally destitute upon his release from captivity. His only asset is his buen humor, i.e., a disposition and ability to make people laugh, which he seeks to peddle for food and drink. Thus, when he is presented with the opportunity of joining General Ottavio Piccolomini’s household as clown he accepts that lowly position despite his protest about being subdued to a master. While he was fully conscious that a servant’s costume [librea] was nothing but a symbol of bondage, a garment of slavery ("...que aunque su nombre [librea] empieza en libertad es vestido de esclavitud"), he believed then, and continues to hold now, at the moment of narration, that he had no alternative but to accept the uniform; “me fue fuera el engañarme, por no remediar mi desnudar” (p. 295). The picaresque social situation is thus expressed unequivocally: any type of employment was preferable to idleness, which often meant starvation or, at best, being forced to join an army. Playing the role of a clown, however humiliating or degrading, was a way of surviving the hardships of war, especially those inflicted on the common soldier who was often tricked or bullied into joining infantry regiments.