

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTO VECCHI: COLONIAL NOSTALGIA IN THE COUNTRY OF SAUDADE – LONGINGS FOR THE PAST IN PORTUGAL

**INTERVIEWER:
MIRIAM THALER**

Universidade Católica Portuguesa
ORCID ID 0000-0002-5905-4180
miriam_thaler@yahoo.de

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

Roberto Vecchi is Professor at the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Bologna, where he holds the chair in Portuguese and Brazilian Literature, and where, together with Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, he is responsible for the Eduardo Lourenço Chair (University of Bologna/Instituto Camões). Further, he also occupies the position of Vice Rector for Teaching at the University of Bologna. He is a fellow researcher at CES (Centro de Estudos Sociais), University of Coimbra, studying trauma, colonial war and violence. Additionally, in Brazil, he is a CNPq researcher in the research group on violence and literature. He has published widely on the literature of the Portuguese colonial war, such as *Portugal, Excepção atlântica. Pensar a literatura da guerra colonial* (Porto, 2010). Together with Margarida Calafate Ribeiro and Monica V. Silva, he has organized *Papéis da prisão* de José Luandino Vieira (2015) and has co-published an Anthology of essays by Eduardo Lourenço, *Do colonialismo como nosso impensado* (Lisboa, 2014), which has been relaunched recently (2024). In a forthcoming book, he analyzes nostalgic imaginations of Africa in Portuguese cultural texts.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Memory; Literary representations of Portuguese Colonial wars; Literary representations of Retornados; Nostalgia; Saudade; Melancholia

DOI: 10.34632/diffractions.2024.16684

Diffractions // Graduate Journal for the Study of Culture // N°8 - 2nd Series // June 2024

In the current issue of *Diffractions*, we are interested in the multifarious forms of expression and functions of ‘Nostalgia’. Being located ourselves in Lisbon, where expressions of a longing for the imperial past or at least a fond reminiscing seems tangible at many corners of the city, we are particularly interested to explore more deeply the nostalgic longings for the colonial past in Portugal. Additionally, zooming in onto this topic in Portugal might be particularly interesting, since an affect closely overlapping with nostalgia, the affect of longing – *saudade* – is often said to be intrinsically connected to Portuguese Culture. You have published an article (*A nostalgia colonial no País da saudade: fantasmagorias e pós-memória*, 2020) where you reflect on *saudade* in interconnection with and in distinction to nostalgia. How do you work with and through these two concepts?

Roberto Vecchi:

Saudade is a “country concept”. It's not simply a concept or a feeling. You have a stereotypization of this word that is part of all the touristic guidebooks on Portugal. It carries with it the idea that it is a specific Portuguese feeling that is impossible to translate and adapt. As such, it's something that has become a sort of an idiomatic sign for the Portuguese community, for Portugal. And this is a critical problem, because when you transform a concept into a symbol of your identity, you have to conduct an ideological operation.

In my own elaborations, I am focusing on colonial nostalgia in Portuguese culture, considering colonial nostalgia – which is a current European issue – as something tangential to Portuguese *saudade*. I don't enter deeply into the discrimination between the two sides, but what I try to do is to take advantage of the tangentiality of these two concepts. They are inside the same constellation. I talk about a complex of nostalgia wherein *saudade* is inscribed. I think it's important to take advantage of the combination of the two concepts. I am approaching *saudade* through this constellation and not as a single concept. So sometimes, in my reflections, I shift from *saudade* to nostalgia and vice versa, because they have parts that overlap with one another. I am interested in the whole potential of the constellation of colonial nostalgia.

But if you want to highlight a difference between nostalgia and *saudade*, I follow a definition proposed by Vladimir Jankélévitch in *L'Irreversible et la*

Nostalgie (1974). He recounts the experience of Ulysses who arrives back in Ithaca and doesn't feel that it is the same place he left. Through this example, Jankélévitch connects nostalgia with the inherent impossibility of return.

In contrast, *saudade* is something that in a certain way tries to feed, tries to reinforce the expectation of a possible return - something which is captured in an iconic definition, stemming from *Ode Marítima* by Fernando Pessoa. He writes, "todo o cais é uma saudade de pedra". The whole pier is *saudade* set in stone. In a certain way it gives a materialization to something that is so in the air and very difficult to catch. The pier is something representing a complex of temporalities. It is something that you lost, that is in the past, but something that you reach again when you go back.

There is also a very strong and interesting definition of *saudade* by Eduardo Lourenço in *Portugal como destino - seguido de mitologia da saudade*, which I also use for my reflections of this complex of nostalgia. He develops a very interesting, combined reading of three elements: nostalgia, melancholia and *saudade*. He succeeds in a genius way in defining the relation among these three very important concepts and he arrives at a definition of *saudade* as happy melancholia. It contains this idea of a relationship with the past that can be suffering, can be a sort of pain, but also has a happy element. I think it's a very precise definition, because it doesn't create a national specificity. He doesn't talk about a Portuguese melancholia. He emphasizes instead the aspect of happiness, of the idealization of a future return.

To sum up, nostalgia is projected towards the past. It looks behind and not forward. *Saudade* is something that is Augustinian in this sense. It merges all the temporalities, past, present and future. As Saint Augustine said, the flowing present is the only time we can experience because we lost the past and we do not yet have the future. The present is in touch with before and after.

You mentioned Fernando Pessoa's (Álvaro Campos's) "Ode Marítima". I find this poem a very interesting approach to *saudade*. It is almost like a fever dream. You have layers of imagination and reality, past, present and future merging. Álvaro Campos, the narrator of the poem, is fantasizing about great adventures on sea, reminiscent of the Portuguese romantic idea of the so called 'Age of Discoveries', about being captured by pirates, but also longing for his

irretrievable childhood. Would you say, overall, Pessoa represents or reshapes Portuguese saudade in the poem?

Roberto Vecchi:

He goes beyond the conventional meaning of saudade. In the “Ode Marítima” you have something that is more complex than a simple typology of nostalgia or saudade, because you have this feeling, as you said, inscribed into an experimental temporality, mixing together all the temporalities available. In this way, it is a strong reconfiguration of the feeling of saudade. We should not forget that the beginnings of Pessoa's literary life lie inside the movement of *Saudosismo*. He, in a certain way, reshaped the idea of saudade, deriving a different signification for a word that is very important as an icon of Portuguese identity, but at the same time very dangerous for all the ideological intents and implications it carries. Pessoa is always a reformulator of meaning. Saudade in “Ode Marítima”, suffers this treatment of re-articulation. It is something that, in a certain way, is very radical. It's not a conservative gesture or deed. If you grasp Pessoa in different fields, you always feel that he's not trying to reproduce a tradition, but he systematically reinvents new traditions, exploiting something that exists, but reformulating and putting it inside another frame.

Leaving Pessoa behind, someone who tried to actually capture a Portuguese sense of self is Eduardo Lourenço. You did mention his “happy melancholia” as an apt description of Portuguese saudade. This capturing of saudade as a bittersweet feeling is very much overlapping with how nostalgia has been described. However, Lourenço’s characterization of saudade as melancholia might entail also the psychoanalytic, Freudian idea of longing for a loss that is not well defined, resulting in an impossibility to work through the grief it provokes. Nostalgia, on the other hand, in general, seems to be directed at a more specifically defined object. Is this another way of distinguishing saudade from nostalgia?

Roberto Vecchi:

All the three categories, nostalgia, melancholia, and saudade are reactions to the past, are ways of dealing with loss. But a person living with melancholia feels

sadness without being able to fully understand its causes. Melancholia through this psychoanalytic lens is something that shows that the work of mourning was not completed. Melancholia is a state when you do not yet identify the object of your loss and therefore cannot complete the work of mourning. The melancholic talks incessantly about this loss he can't quite understand. In this sense what is at stake is the possibility to define this loss.

Melancholia is something that refers to the image of the specter. You have a specter when you don't have the work of mourning carried out completely. So, the specter evokes melancholia. You are haunted by this undefined specter. The task that needs to be undertaken now is to identify and ontologize the remnants – a crucial basis to enable the work of mourning. If you don't have a clearly identified ontology of remnants, you can't conclude the work of mourning. What needs to be done now is to identify what is left from the past. In this context, I would like to use again another image by Fernando Pessoa. He wrote a famous poem. It's one of his sonnets in *Passos da Cruz*. There you have the leader of the Moorish army, who was captured by the Spanish, launching one last glance at the city of Granada. At a certain moment it will be possible to launch this last glance at the past.

The distinction you invoked between a longing for something in the past that accepts the impossibility of return and a longing for something in the past that is entangled with fantasies of a possible return connects well with Svetlana Boym's seminal distinction between a restorative and a reflective nostalgia....

Roberto Vecchi:

Yes, there you also find this duplicity. All the most important reflections on nostalgia – and Boym's book is one of these – show this impossibility to reduce the concept to one fixed meaning. This is why in my view, combining nostalgia and saudade is feasible. They are two parts of a unique constellation. What is important for me, is that a single definition is not enough to configure the idea of nostalgia, you need multiple definitions that you need to mix.

Also, keeping saudade and nostalgia in the same constellation is important to avoid the idea of Portuguese exceptionalism. Colonial nostalgia ultimately is a broader European topic. Therefore, I pay special attention to the international dimension of colonial nostalgia. I am particularly interested, in this regard, in a

European nostalgia in relation with colonialism in Africa and my aim is to highlight a particular nostalgia – in its Portuguese declension – inside a larger European discussion. The European ERC project, *Memoirs*, led by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro as Principal Investigator, where I collaborated, revealed new depths in a subterranean European layer of the colonial experience. To talk about it as *saudade colonial* would limit its discussion, provincialize it. I want to inscribe Portugal inside a European historical development. Portugal is a country that elaborates in a peculiar way something that is common to all of us. This is the reason why I generally try to highlight nostalgia over *saudade*. Of course, I keep the difference in some moments, because it's important to realize that some uses of the past are kept consciously open with the expectation of a possible return.

Speaking about embedding Portuguese colonial nostalgia into a larger European framework, there seem to be parallels with Paul Gilroy's analysis of British society as afflicted by postcolonial melancholia. In his analysis Gilroy identifies World War II as a screen memory – as Britain's finest hour – that is celebrated instead of acknowledging and grieving the loss of the British empire. I was wondering if, in a similar way, what Eduardo Lourenço calls "hyperidentidade" (hyperidentity), this ubiquitously present idea of seafaring and 'Discoveries' acts as a screen memory in the same way. Ironically, empire is everywhere and remembered very centrally through the romanticized and depoliticized view of the so-called 'Discoveries', while its final loss at the moment of the colonial wars and its immediate aftermath is not truly dealt with. I would add that it is – at least in parts – exactly this depoliticized view of the colonial past that doesn't make space for dealing with colonialist exploitation and oppression. Do you agree?

Roberto Vecchi:

The term hyperidentity is quite ironic. And this is an aspect that is not completely understood in Portugal, where it tends to be understood in a literal instead of a figurative sense. It is considered as an effect of great despotism. Eduardo Lourenço is observing the persistence of the tropes of seafaring, discoveries and Empire despite the loss of the colonies and is reflecting on how this is possible. It is possible only for Empire as a dominant mental image that is not anchored in historical

reality, and which is very expansive. Therefore, it's not possible to see the loss of something that is limited in time; Portuguese decolonizations happened very quickly. It is very ironic and contradictory, since on the one hand you have this dependence on a past and on the other you have this insensitivity. Ultimately, what he is discussing, in my view, is the idea that a wrong use of the past may have very negative political consequences.

I keep being fascinated with this idea of “hyperidentidade”, the memory of an imaginary empire, which doesn’t seem to be able to encapsulate the experience of, for example, the *Retornados* (Returnees), those Portuguese that were forced to leave their homes in the former Portuguese colonies after the end of the colonial wars and who in large parts arrived to settle in Portugal. They have a very much lived-in memory of what the empire was. They have a nostalgia for something very real they have lost, namely their homes. How does this fit in or not at all with this idea of “hyperidentidade”?

Roberto Vecchi:

Lourenço wrote another seminal essay in 1976, just after decolonization, it’s called *Apelo ao(s) retornado(s)*. It’s a sharp analysis of Portuguese colonialism. He there defines Portugal as a country of colonization without being colonial, which shows the complexity of the object. His analysis also shows an understanding of the grief felt by the *Retornados* for all their material loss. This is very important, because in a certain way, the idea of an innocent colonialism is associated with the figure of the *Retornado*. On the one hand they lost their belongings, on the other hand they of course were an active part of the colonial project: they are implicated subjects.

Retornados as a social group do feed an imagination of the possible return. There are a lot of books that you can find in Portugal, which were self-published by people that were compelled to leave Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and after some years tried to organize their return or their way back to the country, they left during the colonial time. It's very interesting, because you see that these people are trying to reactivate the past that doesn't exist anymore. In their writing, which from a literary point of view is mostly very simple, very naive, without an aesthetic commitment, they try to find the past in the present.

There is a very effective definition of nostalgia as “the past without guilt”. Nostalgia is something directly connected with the use of the past. Through nostalgia you have a second chance to reconstruct your life without any guilt, saving all the best moments of the past, without considering that probably your best moments were produced by very bad moments for others. In this sense, nostalgia is creating a sort of auto-justice in history. You are the owner of your idea of possible justice.

In your research you are particularly interested in nostalgic imaginations of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa in Portuguese society. What are the specific imaginations you have uncovered?

Roberto Vecchi:

Well, in my research I analyze uses of the past in literature. I use literature as a particular archive, based not on documents but on fragments of past, feelings, memories, images. Literature and arts, specifically, are in my view a political ontology connecting power and forms of life. In a certain way, they summarize political and historical relations better than any other kind of reflection. Arts and literature in particular are interesting as an object of study, because they interlace different temporalities, conjugate opposition and produce clashes of things that ordinarily seem to be quiet. In the field of art, you can absorb historical tensions better than in critical discourse or speeches. So, in this sense, Literature – in capital letters – for me, integrates all art, movie or theater etc...

I analyze nostalgia as expressed in two frameworks. On one side, you have a feeding of colonial nostalgia as a commodity. Colonial nostalgia of Africa, in Portugal, is something that makes a product sell much better. You have a whole industry exploiting colonial nostalgia. For instance, one of the works that I discuss is *Os Retornados - Um Amor Nunca Se Esquece* by Julio Magalhães. It was a bestseller, and it has characteristics which neutralize any opposition. Other publications are largely collections of old pictures of life in the African colonies or collections of music from the colonial time. There are books idealizing the Angolan past, saying that in Angola in the 60's everything was possible. ‘We had the best cars in the world’. ‘We had the best parties’. ‘We had the best discos’. ‘We had the best women’. ‘We had the best men’. It’s an Edenic picture, a re-edenization of the

past. Nostalgia as a commodity has the aim to confirm the impressions of those people who act as consumers in this market; It's useless to expect a critical position from these productions. They are images coming from the past, very close to the ones deformed by the nostalgic entanglement, fulfilling a personal expectation.

On the other hand, there is another track. It is connected with a critical review of the past where the past is shown as something much more complex. You have some specific topics inevitably showing this complexity. One, for instance, is the colonial war. There you simply cannot accept or assume an uncritical past because it shows the great contradictions of colonialism. You also have some books showing the limits of the colonial relations in some colonies, books representing violence and the difficulties of relations with the locals.

You have these two ways to handle the same past. And I think it's important to put these perspectives next to each other. You can't say you have good representations of the past and bad representations. All the representations contribute in a multidirectional way to a collective memory of what Africa was for the Portuguese. At the moment, there is a battlefield of memories. And you have these two parts fighting in order to define what the African past was. I think now is the moment in which we have to talk about how nostalgia works, how colonial nostalgia works. I try to go beyond the ideological break between nostalgic neocolonialism and the critique of what Portuguese colonialism was. I want to reflect on the uses of the past, specifically, on how the nostalgic constellation works.

You also have to consider that in the case of Portuguese culture, there are some cultural elements showing a tendency to reuse partially and from an ideological point of view, concepts or feelings such as nostalgia. For instance, *Lusotropicalism*. Something that is based on a nostalgic imagination, devoid of any guilt, of what the colonial past was. It's what I call in my research, the nostalgic entanglement. It's an entanglement connecting the different representations of the past whose ideology was created by the proper regime that is *Lusotropicalism* – the idea of a different, a benevolent colonization. This idea of a different colonization is something that affects the definition of a relation with the past. It's something that is seminal to a certain configuration of the use of the past, of colonial nostalgia.

Would you say that in Portugal the Lusotropicalist imagination infuses the nostalgia, that for example, the *Retornados* feel for the past they have lived?

Roberto Vecchi:

Yes. And it often is infused as well with an idealizing of the time under Salazar. What is important in my view, is that you have to construct an awareness of the use of the past through nostalgia. You have to prevent hidden, concealed uses of the past that contain ideological elements that can be complex or even dangerous. For instance, *neolusotropicalism*, because it is something that covers up the presence of racism in Portugal. If you understand the use of nostalgia, you can transform the battlefield of memory into a place where very different points of view are included, not only a hegemonic one.

Yes, but I see a challenge in what you're saying, because you seem to suggest a unification in fragmentation. By suggesting that all memory narratives have to be included, even if they directly contradict each other, I am wondering how one would make sure that all these memory narratives co-exist on a common ground?

Roberto Vecchi:

It's not possible to avoid fragmentation. It's not possible to control the process or the attempt of recomposing the fragments. I don't want to interfere in it. I only try to add knowledge, showing how things work. I think it's very important to redefine the idea of the archive, in order to have an archive that is able to integrate all kinds of memories. Not only the ones that I like, or you like, or Eduardo Lourenço likes. All kinds of memories. Then, a political selection and a collective horizon can be the result of a common debate which represents a premise for the writing of a history of a very complicated past.

But don't you think there is a need to find a common language, some kind of common ground?

Roberto Vecchi:

In this moment I don't think this is already possible. If you put all the fragments on the table, and you reflect on the possible combinations that you have from a theoretical, from a conceptual point of view, what comes out of this exercise is unpredictable. But it is a basis upon which it might be possible to define a historical collective contract on remembering the past.

I do think, however, that there might be a recent example of an art performance that suggests a common ground, while maintaining different narratives. I am talking about Grada Kilomba's performance 'O Barco' ('The Boat') wherein she reconsacrates one of the central Portuguese identity symbols, the ship, which normally stands for the Portuguese expansion and seafaring. In her performance enacted by Black dancers in close vicinity to the Padrão dos Descobrimentos (the so-called Monument of Discoveries), she evoked another symbolism, a ship carrying enslaved Africans, invoking the Portuguese involvement into this transatlantic trade, which is historically entangled with the celebrated 'Age of Discoveries'. Interestingly, however, this doesn't provoke a complete fragmentation of narratives, because the boat, while standing for suffering, pain and lives lost, remains connected to positive affect as well. It stands for resilience and endurance, an affect that can be shared in also by those embracing the mainstream narrative of those connecting the symbol of the boat with the tropes of seafaring and 'Discoveries'.

Roberto Vecchi:

I agree. I am limiting myself to reflecting about the uses of the past, but Grada Kilomba can go beyond these limits through her art. Another remarkable example, among many, in this context is Joana Craveiro, a playwright, director, and actress. She offers one of the strongest reflections in Portugal on collective memory connected with the empire and at the same time, she has the capacity to perform this reflection on a wider and public scene through her artistic work. Both these

artists have something in common, in the way they connect thought and art. They do absolutely necessary work, because all I can do, is to offer a reflection, I do not go beyond. I am not an artist, or a creator. My desire is that some people will be able to understand some functioning in something so common as to feel something, as you said, bitter or sweet about the past.

Creative Commons Attribution License | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.