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A Tiny Spark

History and Memory of the Angolan Anticolonial Struggle in José Luandino Vieira's *Papéis da prisão*

Elisa Scaraggi
Luso-Brazilian Review, January 2022, 58 (2) 54-80; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3368/lbr.58.2.54>

<https://lbr.uwpress.org/content/58/2/54>

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Abstract

From 1961 to 1972, the Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira was incarcerated by Portuguese colonial authorities because of his participation in the anticolonial struggle of Angola. In prison, he wrote most of his literary works, alongside a series of notebooks in which he reported his thoughts, feelings, literary and political considerations, etc. In 2015, after more than forty years after Vieira's release from prison, the notebooks were published in a volume titled *Papéis da prisão. Apontamentos, diário, correspondência (1962–1971)*. In this article, I focus on how the book contributes to the debate on Angola's past by influencing how the years of the struggle for independence are perceived today and how they will be remembered in the future. I argue that *Papéis* is not simply a collection of the writer's intimate and personal memories as it bears witness to the experience of a larger community, a community that Vieira identifies with the Angolan nation. Briefly considering the political uses of memory, I show how *Papéis* stands apart from a crystallized official narrative of the anticolonial struggle, contributing to renewed discussions around Angola's past. These discussions aim to restore complexity, depth, and diversity to a narrative that is oversimplified and partisan. However, restoring complexity also implies showing the contradictions, conflicts, and tensions that emerged during the struggle. In this sense, the book is not a nostalgic tribute to the past, but rather a call to reflect on what the past still has to say to the present.

Resumo

Abstract

From 1961 to 1972, the Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira was incarcerated by Portuguese colonial authorities because of his participation in the anticolonial struggle of Angola. In prison, he wrote most of his literary works, alongside a series of notebooks in which he reported his thoughts, feelings, literary and political considerations, etc. In 2015, after more than forty years after Vieira's release from prison, the notebooks were published in a volume titled *Papéis da prisão. Apontamentos, diário, correspondência (1962–1971)*. In this article, I focus on how the book contributes to the debate on Angola's past by influencing how the years of the struggle for independence are perceived today and how they will be remembered in the future. I argue that *Papéis* is not simply a collection of the writer's intimate and personal memories as it bears witness to the experience of a larger community, a community that Vieira identifies with the Angolan nation. Briefly considering the political uses of memory, I show how *Papéis* stands apart from a crystallized official narrative of the anticolonial struggle, contributing to renewed discussions around Angola's past. These discussions aim to restore complexity, depth, and diversity to a narrative that is oversimplified and partisan. However, restoring complexity also implies showing the contradictions, conflicts, and tensions that emerged during the struggle. In this sense, the book is not a nostalgic tribute to the past, but rather a call to reflect on what the past still has to say to the present.

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

vol. 58 no. 2 54-80

<https://doi.org/10.3368/lbr.58.2.54>

[University of Wisconsin Press](#)

[0024-7413](#)

[1548-9957](#)

DOI

Published By

Print ISSN

Online ISSN

History

- Published online March 28, 2022.

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