ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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The Society of Reluctant Dreamers: José Eduardo Agualusa and National Allegory

The setting for José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* (*A sociedade dos sonhadores involuntários*, 2017) stretches across Southern Africa, from Angola to South Africa and Mozambique, with forays into Namibia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as across the Atlantic to Cuba and northeastern Brazil. In part, the resonances and routes that connect these diverse locales are the legacy of Portuguese colonialism, at whose heart was the triangular trade of slaves, raw material, and commodities between Africa, South America, and Europe. But they also result from decades of Cold War proxy conflicts in which formerly anti-colonial guerrillas, backed by South African soldiers and US cash, battled the Angolan postcolonial state, which in turn had financial support from the Soviet Union and direct military assistance from Castro's Cuba (and even Ceaușescu's Romania). The fighting, in fact, long outlived the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc, Namibia's transition from client state to full independence, and the transformation of South Africa from apartheid regime to multicultural democracy. After a failed attempt to win the Angolan presidency through electoral means in 1992, eternal rebel Jonas Savimbi returned to the fray and the civil war only finally ended with his death, in combat, ten years later. The uneasy peace that follows is the background to Agualusa's novel, in which one character tells another that "The war isn't over, my friend. It's only sleeping" (131). At issue are the dreams that hold sway while the violence slumbers, and whether they foretell a resolution to what seems to be an intractable problem of division and discord. Finally, however, the novel suggests that it is the impulse to impose unity and resolution that is itself the root of the violence.

1. Dream Time

The book's protagonist, Daniel Benchimol, is an Angolan journalist who, at the novel's outset, has just gone through a divorce and is headed to a slightly shabby beach resort named the Rainbow Hotel to rest and recuperate. The resort's owner is the novel's other central character (though a multitude more sweep in and out of the narrative, often with their own stories to tell). He is Hossi Apolónio Kaley, a former brigadier, and perhaps torturer, with Savimbi's South African-backed UNITA rebel force. They strike up an unlikely friendship, chatting over beers. Benchimol has an unusual confession to make to Kaley: "You know, I dreamed about you," he says. "Yeah, I know it must seem a bit

Jonas Savimbi, UNITA rebel leader

weird." But Kaley's response is equally odd: "It's been a while since people dreamed about me. [. . .] I used to appear in their dreams wearing a purple coat" (42, 43). And so the narrative that follows is largely determined by or concerned with dreams.

Benchimol has a habit of dreaming about real people, whether he knows them or not. Swimming in the sea by the Rainbow Hotel, he comes across a camera in the water, whose memory card he recovers, to find that it is full of pictures of a woman who has featured in his dreams. She turns out to be a Mozambican artist named Moira, living in Cape Town, who makes art out of recreating her own dreams. Benchimol visits her, and together they run into a Brazilian neuroscientist who is working on a machine to record and reproduce people's dreams. "We should set up a Republic of Dreamers," Moira comments (107). Meanwhile, in excerpts from his journal, Kaley recounts an episode in which, sent to a Havana clinic "specializing in war trauma" (46), he starts appearing in the dreams of the other inmates, which leads to an interrogation from a Cuban intelligence officer looking for a way to put this strange talent to use.

A theme throughout the book, linking its disparate narrative strands, is whether dreams can be put to work. "Unfortunately, people have stopped seeing the value of dreams," says the neuroscientist, Hélio. "We need to restore dreams to their practical function" (109). Yet in common parlance, dreams and practicality are opposed: a "dream" is precisely what is impractical, impossible, fantastic, or utopian. What, then, are dreams for? Pause the video, and consider this question, as it plays out both in Agualusa's novel and more broadly. What are the different ways in which we think about dreams? And what, perhaps, might be the politics of dreaming? Write down some thoughts. While you do that, I'll have a whisky, but I'll be right back.

Hossi tells the story of a South African captain who steps on a landmine: "He asked for whisky, he liked whisky, but we didn't have any whisky so I gave him a bit of Marufo wine, and he died smiling in my arms" (52). In the end, for all the social and psychic investment we place in what we consume and how we consume it, it may not matter much what we drink. The captain goes on to appear in Hossi's dreams to say something similar about the arbitrariness of other social divisions, even those with the most lethal of consequences: "Oh, mate, mate, we're killing with no reason at all, the people now sending us to our deaths are already preparing to switch sides." Yet it is revealing that

this argument can be read equally as hard-boiled cynicism (causes mean nothing) or as dreamlike utopianism (a fundamental brotherhood of man). There is a nihilism shadowing this fantasy. Perhaps we *should* think more about what we are drinking.

The classic account of the significance of dreams is that of Sigmund Freud, for whom they perform two functions. For the dreamer, in Freud's account, a dream is the fulfilment of a wish, usually a wish that cannot be acknowledged in waking life. Precisely because the desire that motivates the dream is unacknowledgeable, often "derived from infancy and in a state of repression" (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 594), it can only make itself known in distorted form, or rather in the distortions (condensation and displacement) that constitute the essential "dream-work," by which ordinary memories and bits and pieces of everyday life (the "day's residues") are transformed and subjected to a new logic. A dream is then the result of a compromise between two opposing systems, as the otherwise censorious preconscious allows a "safety valve" for the expression of forbidden desires, discharging but also binding unconscious excitation to ensure that, if all goes well, it is "powerless to act as a disturbance" to the sleeper (577). For the psychoanalyst, then, the fact that dreams manifest, however indirectly, the influence of unconscious forces gives them a second function of allowing a glimpse into the otherwise unrepresentable desires and traumas that drive us. Hence Freud declares that "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (604). Rather than being merely frivolous and insubstantial, dreams betray something of our true nature.

The Freudian interpretation of dreams, however, is an inversion of the old tradition that ascribes to dreaming the potential for prediction or prophecy. It is with this point that Freud concludes his *magnum opus:* "And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future? There is of course no question of that. It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense." The dream, after all, is an indication that, at some level, we are never able to give up on our desires, however much we fight against them. "Nevertheless," Freud continues, "the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past" (615). Dreams, for Freud, are fundamentally

conservative and ahistorical: they are part of a compulsion to repeat that blocks true novelty.

It is this assertion that Agualusa's novel contests. In it, Benchimol repeatedly dreams of people he has yet to meet, events that have yet to take place. He suggests that dreams may allow us "to remember future events, if they're very important or very traumatic" (171). It is this notion—this fantasy, if you like, perhaps all too easily dismissible as classic wish fulfilment—that justifies the book's cathartic and triumphant conclusion, by which Benchimol's friend Kaley, severely injured by a government assassin, infiltrates the dreams of the entire Angolan population, giving them the courage to rise up against an authoritarian one-party state. Here the dream is not so much the product of (psychic) repression as it is the means by which to defeat its political equivalent. In this collective dream ("It's ours! It's our dream!" as one character puts it [252]), the president of the day is quite literally diminished, cut down to size, allowing the people to realize their strength, and the novel ends with the image of a multitudinous crowd outside the national palace "as it surge[s] forward, in an inexorable movement of rejoicing, to meet the vast helplessness of the soldiers" (262). This is the utopian utility of dreams for Agualusa. At last, a country wracked by decades of warfare taps into a common dream to show that there is something more powerful than a gun!

2. Doubles, Deceit, and Democracy

The conclusion to *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* is a little too neat, though it is complicated by an epilogue in which an ambivalent Benchimol reveals that he has subsequently withdrawn from all forms of politics, setting up house in Mozambique where "here, too, there are people who believe in utopias" but "Not me. I just watch. I'm an indolent and dispassionate observer: a Bantu flaneur" (263). This epilogue derails one of the major logics of the preceding narrative, over the course of which Benchimol has been forcefully reproached for the extent to which he is out of touch with ordinary Angolans: "The problem," he is told, "is that you, and a lot of people like you, may be here in Luanda, but you don't live here, with us. You don't suffer with us. [. . .] In the old days, you used to immerse yourself in the real Angola, from time to time, at least to interview some poor wretch or another. You don't even do that now" (189). The climactic vision of popular unity, in which at a mass rally the journalist animates the protest movement and is then one of the first to enter the palace and confront the President,

would seem to show the writer making good on his duty to be committed to the national struggle. Moreover, the notion that dreams can effectively bring about a desired future is an obvious allegory for the idea that literature can fulfil a similar social function. As Agualusa puts it in an interview, quoting the opening to the Gospel of John: "'In the beginning was the word.' I used to believe that literature could outline the future. But not now, now I'm starting to think that literature creates the future" (Pittella). Yet in the novel's epilogue, that Messianic role for the writer is at best tempered by resignation, if not entirely discarded through exhaustion. It is as though Agualusa himself recognized, belatedly at the end of a book that sometimes seems to say quite the opposite, that the dream of the "committed" intellectual is no more than that: a dream.

More generally, the vision of a nation as one, united in a common dream, is at odds with a countervailing tendency in the novel towards multiplicity and excess. This can be seen not only in the ways in which characters endlessly traverse national borders, whether tracing the regional and global pathways of the Angolan so-called "civil war" or simply following up on chance connections and unanticipated lines of flight, but also in the proliferation of doubles and copies throughout the book. Kaley, for instance, has a twin brother who he tells everyone is dead but who stands in for him in the final political confrontation. The logic of the many dreams scattered through the text is that of return and repetition, which leads also to multiplication, extrapolation, and exaggeration. Even death, in principle the ultimate singularity, comes more than once to the same individual: Kaley tells us that he has already died two times before, on one occasion to be revived when lightning (against the adage that it never strikes the same place twice) hits him again just moments after an earlier bolt had stopped his heart. The twofold blow marks his body with an impressive network of ramifying scars: "from his neck to his belly, unfolding and blossoming into a thousand delicate, precise bolts of light" (38). *Doubling kickstarts a mechanism that generates uncountable multitudes, whose diverse multiplicity contrasts starkly with the image of one nation, one people.*

Moreover, as he navigates the plethora of doubles, twins, echoes, reproductions, and impersonations that litter the plot—and shape the form of its presentation, in so far as we often read the same episode twice, narrated from different perspectives—Benchimol seldom shows much preference for the so-called original over its so-called copy, or rather he questions which is which. On meeting Moira for the first time, for instance, he says:

"She seemed fake, all of a sudden, a rather crude copy of the woman of my dreams" (94). And it is, after all, the "fake" Kaley (his estranged brother, taking on his role) who ultimately rouses the people and spearheads the challenge to the dictatorship. A well-crafted lie trumps the tragic truth that Kaley is dead at this point. Indeed, Agualusa challenges the usual association of dictatorship with falsehood and democracy with truth. On the contrary, Moira tells us: "I've always thought the truth very overrated. In democracy there isn't one truth, there are versions. In a dictatorship, well, yes, then there's only one truth: the official version" (170). Democracy requires uncertainty and doubt, and a tolerance for obfuscation or deceit.

So it is only appropriate that *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers* should be a divided, somewhat incoherent book, not least in what it has to say about discord and division itself. It wants both to offer us the fantasy of resolution, of an end to the fractures and fractiousness that have violently scarred Southern Africa's (post)colonial history, and also to suggest that the violence comes from repeated attempts to impose coherence and unity. After all, the acronym for Savimbi's movement, UNITA, is a hair's breadth from the word for united (*a nação unida*, the nation united). But in the end the attempt to force closure and resolution, to close every hair's breadth gap, leads to catastrophe. Reluctantly perhaps, we have to give up on that dream.

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Image:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Johnas_Savimbi,_leader_of_Unita,_the_Angolan_Rebels.jpg

Song: "Africa, One of a Kind" (Angelique Kidjo, feat. Mr Eazi, Salif Keita)