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# *Mensagem, Présence Africaine, Black Orpheus: African epistemes, international networks, and the renovation of the literary environment (1960s)*

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### Abstract

This article dwells on reviews such as *Mensagem* (Lisbon), *Présence Africaine* (Dakar and Paris) and *Black Orpheus* (Ibadan) and on the transcontinental connections and international networks they established. While literature often tends to be considered, by the European tradition, as an individual practice, this contribution will focus on the collective editorial works that generations of young African intellectuals, strongly committed to the anticolonial movements and/or to Pan-African ideals, built through transnational connections in the 1960's. The circulation of texts, authors, and translations between those reviews was deeply connected to a conception of art committed to the dislocation of the idea of center. Those projects addressed oral tradition, visual arts and claimed the dignity of these forms of knowledge. Despite often using the "Metropolises" as intellectual hubs, African epistemes, and their diffusion in and outside Africa, were central to the reflections of the above-mentioned editorial projects.

### Keywords

Mensagem. Présence Africaine. Black Orpheus.



## Anticolonial literatures in the 1960s: Counteracting colonial radical exclusions

When dwelling on the anticolonial literary environment of the 1960s, one is confronted with the existence of a compelling linguistic demarcation, directly associated with the former areas of influence of the European colonial powers that ruled African territories, either back then or in the preceding decades. The habit of approaching those productions in “slots”, such as African English-speaking, Francophones or Lusophone literatures, is controversial. Despite being undeniable that one of the consequences of colonial domination was the establishment of cultural connections through a common language, such a choice has the limit of not enlightening properly the transnational cultural, political, and literary ties that took place beyond the colonial spaces. Significant connections that gathered around ideas such as *négritude*, black literature or literature of African and black diaspora, as well as around the Pan-Africanist movement, are relevant to the comprehension of the contexts of the reviews themselves.

This article, therefore, aims to be a preliminary study of the connections that were built, strengthened, and signified both around international conferences and around influential literary reviews, such as *Mensagem*, edited by *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* in Lisbon, *Présence Africaine* (Dakar and Paris) and *Black Orpheus* (Ibadan). Those literary reviews, by addressing oral tradition and visual arts, aimed to dignify other forms of knowledge than the European and to spread African epistememes in and outside Africa. The effort of validation, through the reviews, of black culture from Africa and its diasporas was associated with anticolonial claims, often coming from places that were – or had been – “Metropolises” of the colonial empires, functioning as intellectual hubs. In this sense, despite being often and geographically located in the “center”, those collective projects aimed to deconstruct and decolonize the empire(s) from their core, valorizing and enhancing subordinated cultures. Those three literary projects counteracted the logics of radical exclusion of the colonies, organized on “abyssal lines of thought” aimed to impose an arbitrary distinction and organization of the humankind in groups of humans and sub-humans (SOUSA SANTOS *apud* SOUSA SANTOS; MENEZES, 2014, p. 35-37).

In October 1946, hundreds of activists from the whole African continent joined the Bamako Congress (in Mali, at the time part of French Sudan), in which the *Rassemblement démocratique africain* (African Democratic Rally, RDA) was born. Houphouët-Boigny was a member of the first direction, and this was a crucial moment in post-war African politics (LUBABU, 2007). The 1950s saw the intensification of the project of African Unity, especially advocated by Kwame Nkrumah. The future president of Ghana conceived the Pan-African unity as the only solution to escape the neocolonial trap. After an appeal to “Positive Action” in the Gold Coast region (today part of



Ghana, but back then under British administration), Nkrumah was arrested in London in 1959. As a protest, George Padmore called for a demonstration in Trafalgar Square. Dockers, construction workers, students, Pan-Africanist militants, and activists joined. In the following years, Nkrumah's initiative turned Ghana (especially Accra), into one of the main Pan-Africanist bases in the African continent. Structures to support members of the anticolonial and nationalist movements were also created (BOUKARI-YABARA, 2014). The institution of the Alliance of Bakongo (ABAKO), the *Afro-Asian Conference* of Bandung (April 1955), the *Premier Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs* (Paris, 1956, followed by Rome in 1959), the *First Afro-Asian Writers' Conference* (1958), the *Afro-Asian Women's Conference* (Cairo, 1961), and the *Conference of the Women of Africa and African Descent* (Accra, 1960) were, in this sense, landmarks in the political and cultural panorama of that decade. It is evident that those dynamics were reproducing the Cold War logic, namely for what concerned the consolidation of internationalist currents or the strengthening of the influence of the Soviet Block: in this background, however, cultural initiatives were flourishing. Not only works such as Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme*, and Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (The wretched of the earth), or the project of an *Encyclopaedia Africana* to be organized by Du Bois and Alphaeus Hunton in Accra (BOUKARI-YABARA, 2019, p. 164) were by inspiring activists and intellectuals, but the urgency of creating cultural and epistemological alternatives was resulting in the creation of editorial projects and artistic works.

In the next pages, we will try to set the basis for a mapping of the intellectual networks that were established since the early 1950s and consolidated through political, cultural, and editorial projects, with focus on the three we have just mentioned. This is an uneasy task, complicated by the fact that literary history still tends to consider, in its analysis, the spheres of influence of the colonial languages. We will underline how, despite being deeply influenced by political repression, neo-colonial or colonial situations that impacted the circulation of texts, people and ideas, those networks revolutionized the understanding of literature, politics, and representations of Africa and Europe.

### Three editorial projects and their convergence: The role of the 1956's *Premier Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs* in Paris

The *Premier Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs*, held in Sorbonne (Paris), in September 1956, under the organization of the review *Présence Africaine* and its director and founder Alioune Diop, is considered a turning point in the literary environment of the post-war period. The congress consolidated connections between African intellectuals in diaspora that were already established at the beginning of the decade. While it enhanced tensions, differences and, obviously, an extensive black awareness, in the opinion of some of its participants, it made visible a certain astonishment



in recognizing that the colonial borders led to a feeling of strangeness between distinct spheres of linguistic and cultural colonial influence (SWAIM, 2006).

The heterogeneity and plurality of the cultural life and artistic production in a wide continent cannot, obviously, be explained according to colonial borders or domination. In the context of the *Congrés*, though, especially attentive to the colonial issue, the idea that imposed colonial borders – and languages – would hinder cultural exchange between black cultural production within the continent gained some followers.

Discussing the event is not the purpose of our reflection; regardless, we cannot avoid mentioning it was an initiative that, reuniting writers and artists of Africa and the black diaspora and taking place in the core of Europe, was a strong and symbolic statement. Challenging ideas of assimilation that, with different nuances, were the leitmotif used by colonial propagandas to once justify slavery and, in more recent times, brutal repression and unhuman treatment to colonized people, those intellectuals, starting from the assumption that the latter was “moralement, spirituellement indéfendable” (CÉSAIRE, 1950, p. 8), were leading the tasks of dislocating the idea of center, provincializing Europe (CHAKRABARTY, 2000). The emergence and consolidation of Pan-Africanist and negritudinists ideals that had taken place since the end of the XIX Century, from W.E.B. Du Bois to Léopold Sédar Senghor, now founded a point of conversion, in which contrasts were enhanced thanks to the interference of state intelligences, as the fact that Du Bois himself was prevented from joining the *Congrès* demonstrates. After the event, even Diop started being looked after by the *Préfecture de Police de Paris* for his participation in literary events, such as the *Conference of Afro-Asian writers* of Cairo, in 1962 (ANPP- 77 W - 4047/ 413099), and for the creation, together with Jean Price-Mars, Aimé Césaire and Cheikh Anta Diop (among others), of the *Société Africaine de Culture* (African Cultural Society), in December, 1956 (ANPP- 77 W - 4047/ 413099, 13 and following).

The congress was also a spark that led to the creation of the youngest between the editorial projects we will consider: the literary review *Black Orpheus*, founded in 1957 by the German Nigerian-based Ulli Beier, was directly inspired by Sartre’s “Orphée Noir”, preface to the 1948’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, edited by Senghor. Beier’s initial aim was to publish translations to English of African literary works originally written in other languages (BENSON, 1986; OKEKE-AGULU, 2014). The first issue, printed in Lagos by the *Times* press, underlined the role of the linguistic obstacles:

one difficulty, of course, has been the one of language; because a great deal of the best African writing is in French or Portuguese or Spanish. Black Orpheus tries to



break down some of these language barriers by introducing writers from all territories in translation (BEIER, *Black Orpheus* n° 1, p. 4 *apud* BENSON, 2020, p. 24).

It had become evident that divisions imposed by colonial domination were keeping on fragmenting possibilities of dialogue, hindering a deepest reinforcement of a Pan-African awareness. *Black Orpheus* was, in this sense, a review born about a decade after *Présence Africaine* (1947) and *Mensagem* (1948): those editorial projects were deeply connected and opened to the publications of black poetry from Africa and its diasporas, with a special attention on the productions coming from Latin America and the US.

### International connections and the peculiarities of the Parisian environment

The presence of Angolan writers and students in Paris concerned the French police, especially because of the political networks they could establish with the Algerian liberation movement, their connections with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (URSS), and, finally, because of their position in the direction of People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), fighting against Portuguese law. We shall also consider that, according to the police reports, the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP) (the Portuguese Communist Party, that was clandestine and had direct connections with the liberation movements) was banned and declared illegal in France on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December of 1957. Marcelino Dos Santos, Mozambican poet, and founder of the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO), was considered the main leader of the party in France (ANPP- 77 W - 4959/640898). Pan-Africanism, and Diop's role as one of its vectors in France and worldwide, also happened to be a great concern to the police. One can notice, through the police reports, how deeply the Cold War's logics of the two blocks were rooted in countries like Portugal and France, both facing either armed conflicts or increasing claims for decolonization. In this sense, the concern with the politization of literature, international networks and the influence of Marxist, communist ideals, and contacts with the URSS, was a leitmotif in the reports. Amílcar Cabral's international connections and meetings were underlined being, for example, his contacts in China, but also his stays in Abidjan and Conakry, mentioned.

Mario Pinto de Andrade's presence in Paris was, in this sense, tracked since 1954, both because of his collaboration with Diop's publishing house *Présence Africaine* between 1955 and 1958, and because of his relationship with the young anticolonial filmmaker Ducados, known as



Sarah Maldoror.<sup>1</sup> The filmmaker, who then became the De Andrade's wife, was strongly committed to the anticolonial cause and directed anticolonial movies such as *Sambizanga* (1972). De Andrade's cultural agency in Parisians' environment was not limited to *Présence*: as the police indicated, he was a reader of literary works in Portuguese for *Éditions du Seuil* and *Éditions Robert Laffont*, also leading a collaboration with Maspero's publishing house (ANPP- 77 W - 5482/660159).

De Andrade's texts on Luso-tropicalism were published since the fourth issue of *Présence*, under the pseudonym of Buanga Fele, as well as interviews with the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, reviews on Basil Davidson's work, etc.<sup>2</sup> The Angolan intellectual played a significant role in the circulation of texts from Lisbon to Paris and backwards: the *Antologia da poesia negra de expressão portuguesa*, published in 1958 by Jean Pierre Oswald, represented a landmark in the literary debates on black and anticolonial literature at the time. Poems of Alda do Espírito Santo, Agostinho Neto, António Jacinto, Francisco José Tenreiro, Noémia de Sousa, and Viriato da Cruz were published in the volume, opened by the poem "Son número 6", by Guillén. It is worth mentioning that poetry from Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau was excluded from a 1953 anthology organized by the same authors, as the country and their cultural products were considered the expression of a creole and not of negritudist values an African culture (TENREIRO; ANDRADE, 1953).

*Mensagem*, the bulletin of the association *Casa dos Estudantes do Império*, was the main vehicle in the Metropole of the Portuguese empire for the cultural debate around blackness and the ideas of a black literatures and consciousness. Inspired in the homonymous Angolan literary review whose short life (1950 – 1953) was interrupted by the repressive action of the Salazarist regime, its continuity between the two and another relevant literary review, *Cultura*, was assured thanks to the circulation of the work of a group of writers committed to the anticolonial cause in the effort for the decolonization. At that time – and differently from most of other European capitals – Lisbon, despite having "evolved from a parochial small town into a more cosmopolitan city in the early 1950s", [...] "still felt stifling due to censorship and the omnipresence of state security" (BURTON, 2019, p. 25). What was truly revolutionary in *Mensagem* was that this home-made student-led bulletin was born thanks the initiative of the Portuguese regime and became one of the main vehicles for anticolonial, independentist, and negritudist ideas.

<sup>1</sup>The movie was filmed with militant and non-professional actors and based on Luandino Vieira's novel *A vida verdadeira de Domingos Xavier*, denouncing the repression of the political police in the *musseques* of Luanda.

<sup>2</sup> Those text are searchable through the review *Présence Africaine* and Mario Pinto de Andrade's personal archive, available in the online archive of Mário Soares Foundation: [http://casacomum.org/cc/arquivos?set=e\\_3991](http://casacomum.org/cc/arquivos?set=e_3991)



The *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* (CEI) was an academic association of the *Mocidade Portuguesa*, founded in Lisbon in 1944 and initially aiming at reuniting students coming from all the different corners of the Portuguese “empire”, reinforcing their feeling of belonging to the Portuguese Nation. Since the 1950s, and thanks to the renewed international context, most of the renowned anticolonial activists and intellectuals joined the *Casa* (CASTELO, 1994; MARTINS, 2017): Agostinho Neto, Amílcar Cabral, Alda Espírito Santo, Noémia de Sousa, and Mário Pinto de Andrade, amongst others. The political police of the regime (PIDE), was soon concerned with the circulations of opponents, activists, and intellectuals between CEI and the *Clube Marítimo Africano* (CMA), the latter mainly frequented by workers. The apprehension of handwritten material by the police is historical evidence of the international circulation, both in the original language and in translation, of the texts written by black poets, such as the Cuban Regino Pedroso or Guillén himself (ANTT/PT/PIDE/ D-A/003/266854-1). The activities of CEI, increasingly understood by the regime as a concrete threat to the survival of the “national unity”, were abruptly interrupted in 1965, after a scandal related to the attribution of the *Grande Prémio Novelística* of the Portuguese Society of Writers to Luanda, a collection of short stories written by MPLA activist and writer Luandino Vieira, at the time imprisoned in the concentration camp of Chão Bom (Tarfal, Cape Verde).

The Parisian context and that of the review *Présence Africaine* were very distinct from that of Lisbon and *Mensagem*: while French black writers based there were often feeling they were, at least partially, belonging to that place (MOURALIS *apud* MUDIMBE, 1992, p. 5), the condition of the students and writers collaborating with the latter was far more complex. Since the 1950s, PIDE’s persecutions forced writers, activists, and intellectuals, such as Cabral, Neto, Espírito Santo, Da Cruz, Sousa, Pinto de Andrade, Rodrigues, etc., to exile. Their activity in the Angolan and Mozambican press, especially in daily or periodical newspapers such as *ABC*, *Diário de Angola*, *Notícias*, and *O Brado Africano* were mapped and monitored by the police, as well as their political actions. The transit outside their territories, especially after the outbreak of the war (Angola, 1961 and Mozambique 1963) and increased persecutions of members of the Liberation Movements, was, therefore, often perceived as temporary and functional to a return home.

Young students, activists and intellectuals passing from Lisbon, suffered both because the colonial rule and a fascist dictatorship, with the political repression and persecutions it entailed. The colonial propaganda, presenting Portugal as a pluricontinental and multiracial country, assumed the inferiority of African cultures, as well as on the idea of a civilizing mission and of assimilation. As the liberation movements were getting stronger, the political and cultural repression was intensified: for this reason, exile – to Paris, Algiers, Dar-El-Salaam, etc. – was often the solution. Publishing in a review such as *Présence Africaine*, whose main goal was to enhance the comprehension of Africa





and of the condition of Africans in Europe, represented an opportunity for the internationalization of the fight for freedom and dignification of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé e Príncipe.

What gave a strong symbolic meaning to the literary pieces were the aesthetic innovations, as well as their collectiveness: a whole generation was challenging the colonial rule, the subalternation of black people and, moreover, a series of representations and cultural assumption about which cultural and aesthetic manifestation were worth being considered as such.

## From Lisbon and Paris to Ibadan. Dislocating the center through African epistemes

The harmonization between cultural and political activities marked the generations of African writers we are approaching (BARBOSA, 2020). We must acknowledge, anyhow, that the editorial projects we are referring to embraced different time span, as well as distinct political and cultural contexts. The circulation of texts and authors between them underlines the consolidation of networks that, if might diverge in their conceptions of political fight, decolonization methods, and solidarities, often shared aesthetic models or practices. As we have mentioned above, most of those writers acted at the intersection – or influenced by – the internationalism, Pan-Africanism, and the general context of negritudinist movements (TAVARES, 1999), but the contexts they were experiencing differed. So did the reception of theories and approaches towards politics and the future of African countries. Senghorian's socialism was, for example, endorsed with suspiciousness in some radical circuits, being it purged from class struggle and atheism (SOUDIECK DIONE, 2017).

*Mensagem*, *Présence Africaine* and *Black Orpheus* faced editorial changes in the period we are considering, and they witnessed divergent realities and contexts. As we mentioned, *Mensagem* was created, and marked, in the whole period of its existence, during a fascist dictatorship whose main effort was, after the Second World War, towards maintaining a colonial apparatus. The editorial and printing process was collaborative and volunteer, and PIDE's persecutions marked the life of the bulletin deeply. Between 1952 and 1957, while CEI was under the control of a governmental Administrative Commission, *Mensagem* was not published. In that period, the number of associates also dropped (*Mensagem*, 1958), probably because of the fear of political retaliations. The space of literary and artistic production in the bulletin was consolidated since January 1959, under the direction of Tomás Medeiros and, later, Carlos Ervedosa. Collaborations, circulations, and ties with *Présence* granted, as we will explore further in this article, some aesthetic convergences. *Présence* was published in Paris and Dakar, but its irradiating centre was Paris.



The concept behind *Black Orpheus*, as well as its context, was distinct from the one of *Mensagem* and *Présence*. Ulli Beier edited the review from 1957 to 1965, ran the Mbari Art Workshops, and used the publication as an effective tool to consecrate young artists in the Nigerian panorama. With his curatorial choices, Beier demonstrated a commitment to the promotion of indigenous art and religions of Africa as well as a preference for the modernist non-Eurocentric avant-garde techniques (OKEKE-AGULU, 2015), such as the work of the Goan artist Francis Newton Souza. *Black Orpheus* also published Wole Soyinka's work extensively. The review gave space, in its pages, to the publication of visual arts: this eclectic tendency was in line with the editors' aversion to literary academicism. Furthermore, it was a conscious choice that, as underlined in Abiola Irele's article on the review, avoid incurring in the risk to address an "insignificant minority, but also of being outside the range of immediate concerns" (IRELE, 1965, p. 151).

After Nigeria's transition to independence, and under a renewed political and cultural context, the German editor understood the need to change the editorial policy. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo and Abiola Irele, editors of the review since 1966, had to manage, a few years later, the publication during a Civil War (1967-70), with all the difficulties this implied. In this second phase, the review became much more a showcase of the cultural production of the Nigerian elite than it was in the previous years.

It is undoubtable, however, that literary publications as such gave their contribution to reconceptualize and reorganize the global order (WILDER 2015), together with other international actors. A landmark was, in this sense, the Fifth Pan-African Congress, held in Manchester, in October 1945, organized by George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah (BOUKARI-YABARA, 2014). While freedom from European domination was called for, Western aesthetic standards were questioned. This was a form of enhancing endogenous culture and refusing implicit notions of intellectual superiority of European cultural elaborations.

As the "resolutions on literature" of the 1959's *Second Congress* organized by *Présence* in Rome underlined, to defend African literatures meant to dignify oral and vernacular literatures, while reiterating the negative impacts colonial dynamics had on African cultures, having often led to a cultural silencing. The need of an epistemological change from the individual to the collective was also mentioned (*Présence Africaine*, p. 387-392). Despite geographical, cultural, and editorial differences, that is, those projects aimed to spread and dignify the African epistemologies, the valorization of oral, and the vernacular tradition, and to reaffirm the collective literary – artistic, in a wider sense – projects focused on the collective, not guided by Western-inspired individualistic approaches, and, finally, to use African languages in literary production.

Language was one of the privileged literary vehicles for enhancing oral African traditions: the introduction of *kimbundu* or *ronga* words and expressions in the literary language was one



relevant mark of the poetry published in *Mensagem*. The realities represented, furthermore, were often related to social contexts of peripheral urban spaces, such as the Angolan *musseques* or the Mozambican *caniços*. Jose Craveirinha's *Grito Negro* (Black Shout) went beyond the denunciation of colonial oppression, representing the reality of *contratados*, workers without any formal ties with the employers, who often deprived them of basic rights. By saying loudly "I am coal! / And I have to glow, yes / And burn everything with the strength of my combustion"<sup>3</sup> (CRAVEIRINHA 1964, p. 66, my translation), the author enhanced blackness in some of the most powerful verses of Mozambican poetry. The pride of being black is equally evident in the poem *Samba*, in which Noémia De Sousa invoked a shared fraternity of the South, focusing on the rhythms of *batuques* and on the African heritage in Brazil, especially in Bahia (DE SOUSA, 1959, p. 21-22). The dignification of African people, with focus on Maputo's suburban reality, was central to the poetical reflection of De Sousa's poetry. Mozambican imagery, as well as the one of the African diasporas, was central to her literary representation of the urban collectiveness of Lourenço Marques (now Maputo). Peasant workers, with a strong focus on women's workers, felt on their bodies both oppression and hope, while childhood memories of *cocuanas* (grandmothers) in circle telling stories, always starting with *Karingana wa karingana* (Once upon a time), showed the pride of being African, "tortured and magnificent/ proud and mystic"<sup>4</sup> (DE SOUSA 2021, p. 49, my translation). Mário Pinto de Andrade published his poem *Muimbo ua Sabalu* (Sabalu's song) in *kimbundu*, followed by a Portuguese translation (DE ANDRADE, 1959, p. 17-18). Those kinds of productions were challenging colonial constructions about a supposed "legitimate" literary language, but also Luso-tropical representations of a peaceful coexistence in colonial societies.

It is relevant, I consider, to underline that the colonial space themselves were challenged by those projects: not just *Black Orpheus* would, since 1957, translate African poetry from one language to the other, mediating between different cultures and cross-cutting imperial spaces. After Paris' *Premier Congrès* and the *Afro-Asian Writers' Conference of Tashkent* (October 1956), the international and transcontinental networks consolidated, despite political and cultural disencounters and disagreements.

*Présence's* number 57 (1966) was dedicated to a "New sum of poetry from the negro world", English translation for the French expression "*monde noir*". The anthology was organized by negritudinist poet León-Gontran Damas, who was married to Marietta Campos: this also granted

<sup>3</sup> The original excerpt runs as follows: "Eu sou carvão! / E tenho que arder, sim / E queimar tudo com a força da minha combustão."

<sup>4</sup> The original excerpt runs as follows: "Torturada e magnífica, / ativa e mística, /África da cabeça aos pés, /—ah, essa sou eu!"



him a discreet knowledge and contacts of the environment of the Brazilian black activism,<sup>5</sup> fact that influenced the choice, for the Southern America section of literature written in Portuguese and Spanish, of including just Brazilian writers, namely members of the *Associação Cultural do Negro*. Those were Nataniel Dantas, Eduardo de Oliveira, Carlos de Assumpção, Luiz Paiva de Castro, Oswaldo de Camargo, and Marta Botelho. The *Associação Cultural do Negro* hasn't been accurately studied, despite its relevance and the influence and contacts that members of the association had with both sociologists like Florestan Fernandes and cultural movements such as the *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, led by Abdias do Nascimento (MEDEIROS, 2012).

Similarly, to the Mozambican and Angolan poets of *Mensagem*, Oswaldo de Camargo addressed the proud of being "black, black, black/ wonderfully black!" ("negro, negro, negro, maravilhosamente negro!" (CAMARGO, 1966, p. 515). Christopher Okigbo, as De Sousa, recalled "THE DRUMS/ Once more, and like masked dancers, On the orange - / Yellow myth of the sands of exile" (OKIGBO, 1966, p. 276). In the *Liminaire* (Introduction) of the *Nouvelle Somme*, Aimé Césaire emphasized the role that poetry had as an emancipatory act: its essentialist forms and language were intended as a tool of liberation from colonial constraints.

While Mozambican poet Virgílio de Lemos was in charge for the introduction to the poetry written in Portuguese, Abiola Irele – who would, in the same year, go back from Paris to Nigeria and become co-editor of *Black Orpheus* together with J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, opening a new phase for the review (BENSON, 2020, p. 69)<sup>6</sup> – wrote his considerations about the heterogeneity and diversity of the poetical production coming from English-speaking Africa (*Présence Africaine* n° 57, 1965, p. 263-265). In 1963, the Antillean historian and writer Léonard Sainville organized, always under *Présence*, two volumes of an anthology of "Romanciers et conteurs négro-africains" (SAINVILLE, 1963), in which, once again, the presence of texts authored by Brazilian writers such as Carolina Maria de Jesus, Machado de Assis, and Jorge Amado was quite visible.<sup>7</sup> The relative absence of texts written by African writers in Portuguese (we must mention the publication of two texts, by the Angolan writers Óscar Ribas and Castro Soromenho) is even more interesting if we consider that, always in 1963, João Alves das Neves organized the volume *Poetas e contistas Africanos de expressão portuguesa*, edited by Brasiliense. Finally, If *Black Orpheus* was the youngest of the

<sup>5</sup> I thank Mário Medeiros for making light for me on this issue. References to Damas' agency in the elaboration of number 57 of *Présence Africaine*, as well as on the fact that the poets were all members of the ACN, can be found in MEDEIROS, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> In 1966, Beier was, always according to Benson, planning to interrupt the review, considering it was no longer needed to "defend" African literature – and black literature in the diaspora – because of the general attention it had caught. Irele and Clark-Bekederemo considered to transform *Black Orpheus* into a poetry section of a new review, with the potential name of *Mbari review*.

<sup>7</sup> This might have been due to the lack of available translations from Portuguese to French, but the issue should be studied further.



three editorial projects, it had the specificity of being printed in Africa exclusively, it was sold, but also stolen<sup>8</sup>, and read in South Africa and other African countries. The study of its circulation and editorial history, in the connections with other African literatures, is worth being studied further. The editorial projects we described so far shifted the cultural focus from an Eurocentric point of view, conception of art and geography to African and indigenous epistemologies. Artists and editors often coming from a background of intertwined cultural heritages, marked by violent encounters brought by colonialism, were engaged, in this period, in collective cultural projects aiming at finding radical solutions for post-war societies.

## Conclusions

When mentioning the transits of editors and outlining agencies that granted the connections between those three projects, the main danger is, we consider, the one of overexposing individual roles in those processes. In this sense, and considering interrogations about the concrete possibility of a decolonial conceptual history of literature (HELGESSION, 2022), our purpose was to demonstrate how individual agencies were linked to a common project, and a common effort for an epistemological shift towards the decolonization of knowledge. This did not imply the absence, in those contexts, of mechanisms of power reproducing disparities or marked by colonial unbalances: the complexity of the social, cultural, and symbolic systems was reproduced in cultural representations. In the 1960s we can see, however, and in the context of African literatures, an explicit commitment to a collective cause: if this was clearly marked to the political contexts and social revendications, this phenomena in the intellectual and editorial scene must be analyzed in their historical complexity, with a special attention to the processes that involved the circulation of ideas and their transformation and adaptation to different contexts.

The practice of consolidating networks, carrying printed matters often clandestinely, as well as the relevance of women's active participation (in writing, drawing covers, granting connections, organizing the editions, etc.), were, moreover, challenging the individualistic patterns and frames of a strictly western conception of literature. The main challenge in mapping women's agency in those processes lies on the fact that archival sources, police reports, and the history of the movements tend to suppress or minimize women's action. When we address the question, then, most of the sources lead us back to relevant male historical actors, whose path has been reconstructed. Alda

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<sup>8</sup> According to Benson (2020, p. 23): "Beier never quite knew with any confidence where *Black Orpheus* was available. Years later, on a trip to South Africa, Beier would ask a black staff member of the Johannesburg magazine *Drum* how much *Black Orpheus* was selling from there. His would-be informant replied: "I don't know. I always buy a stolen copy".



Espirito Santo's role in antifascism and anticolonialism, and in *Mensagem's* environment, is known but not yet deeply studied, such as, for example, the one of Christiane Yandé Diop in the direction of *Présence Africaine*, or of Susanne Wenger and Georgina Betts in the elaboration of the graphic look of *Black Orpheus*. African women actually had an active role, and gave, mainly through translation and correspondence, significant contribution (OYĚWÙMÍ, 2003) to the transnational – and transcontinental – circulation of printed material outside the colonial space, so that a decolonial history of the intellectual backgrounds of the period we are dwelling on cannot dispense with the reconstruction of such experiences.

The role of *Présence Africaine* in this process of epistemological shift, towards what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would later define as decolonization of the mind (THIONG' O, 1986), has widely been studied: *The Surreptitious Speech. Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947- 1987*, organized by Mudimbe (1992), explored the connections, contradictions, and power unbalances caused by the cultural consequences of colonization and by the inequalities in the circulation of knowledge. In this sense, the call of the editorial projects *Presence*, *Mensagem* and *Black Orpheus* for an "Africanization" of knowledge, for the pride of being black and the common acknowledgment of the specificity and value of African cultures, was nothing but a first step in the process of radical change in the dismantling of the structures of coloniality. Those projects contributed both to the task of provincializing Europe and in taking Africa to the core of the discussion through to the spread of a Pan-African consciousness.

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