

Yara Monteiro

Stops: Angola, Brazil, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, United Kingdom

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(1979- )



Yara Monteiro, a Portuguese writer of Angolan descent, has stood out in the contemporary Luso-Angolan literary world with her authentic voice, rooted in a diasporic heritage. Memory and post-memory are the driving force behind Yara Monteiro's bold writing. In 1981, at the age of two, she arrived in Portugal from Huambo, the central plateau of Angola, with her grandparents, mother, and aunt. Her background in Human Resources led her to work in Luanda in 2005, motivated by the end of the Civil War in Angola (2002) and the search for the complementary identity of her "motherland Angola" (Monteiro 2023).

It is this journey between two worlds that forms the backdrop of her first novel, *Essa Dama Bate Bué* [*This woman is well cool*] (2018). Much like the author, the main character of her book, Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca, has a trajectory that leads her back to her roots. Vitória is a Black lesbian woman and the daughter of an Angolan mother. She returns to the country of her birth in search of the mother she never knew, and in search of herself. A guerrilla fighter in the trenches of the Angolan armed struggle and a participant in the life of both colonialism and post-colonialism, "Mother Rosa always had a free spirit and a rebellious attitude towards oppression" (11). It was the fight for justice and the rebellion of a youth stolen from so many generations that determined the mother's path as a soldier, initially against and later taking up arms against the abuses of colonialism. In the days leading up to the start of the armed struggle in Angola (1961), Rosa, Vitória's mother, like many others, created pamphlets, participated in protests, and ultimately joined the armed struggle for national independence.

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The daughter of assimilated individuals witnessed the abuses perpetrated both by colonialism and by the structure of traditional Angolan society itself. She decided to confront this, and for years on end, fought alongside men and many other women to build a future free from colonialism and the oppression of humans by other humans. The book offers a clear critique of colonialism while simultaneously presenting and questioning the future of this country in transition, during the post-liberation war, but also in the post-civil war period.

Yara Monteiro has the ability to bring forth a plethora of female portraits that have been barely explored in literature written in or about Angola. From the lesbian woman in search of her mother and her Angolan identity, a metaphor for the quest for national identity, to the guerrilla woman embodied in the figure of Mother Rosa, epitomising generations of women who fought in the struggle for Angolan national independence, either bearing arms or playing various roles as supporters of the same cause. The book depicts former comrades-in-arms of the mother, who, in the post-independence period, did not find their place in the new society that seemed to forget their contribution to the struggle. Relegated to their traditional domestic and maternal roles, these women demonstrate the same determination as always in creating a new life. They are the women who keep things going, trying to normalise the day-to-day chaos of Luanda's stage and are in a constant struggle for the survival of their families. They are all the "women who are well cool," fighting, battling, questioning, answering, seeking, restless, strong, resilient, young, old, the core of the ideals of this nation.

But the supreme woman is the city of Luanda. The capital almost embodies the nation with its aspirations, pains, joys, and ideals. In constant transformation, the city is not welcoming. During the day, the "womb of dust and cement" (2018: 28) swallows, chews, and spits out those who tread on it, demanding much and offering little. However, at night, this "grand woman" is kamba, that is, a friend, sister, companion, embracing everyone in the cradle of a dream for a better life. Yara Monteiro took a step forward and infused the discussion about the city with gender, racial, and power issues, questioning the future of the nation through the past of its women. Perhaps for the first time in literature about Angola, a woman writes a book whose main character is a woman in search of another woman, with a plot mostly

sustained by other female characters. In this way, women gain the privileged place they never had in discussions about the struggle for Angolan national liberation. Therefore, the book has the great merit of problematising the participation of Angolan women in the construction of the struggle and the new nation from various roles, beyond that of a guerrilla fighter.

It almost seems that these stories could only have been told with an outsider's perspective, from the diaspora, because Luanda embodies identities in transit. Like the city itself, diasporic authors are defined and shaped by these "identities in transit," to paraphrase Yara Monteiro (2021); identities (in)formed by the spaces that saw them born and raised, identities always in internal motion managed by various traversing external worlds, multiple nationalities, places of speech, and imagined spaces. The Vitória in the book, much like the real Yara, encounters a very different Angola from the country depicted by her grandparents. The imagined community constructed in the diaspora fades away and is replaced by a harsh reality full of emotional shocks and new acceptances. As Vitória discovers her mother's life story, including the possibility of being the result of rape by a fellow guerrilla fighter, she begins to accept her mother's choices. This intersection between post-memory, as shared by close family members, the memory of those who participated in the armed struggle, and her own experience in present-day Angola, creates the layers that constitute identity, as experienced by each individual in Angola and in the diaspora.

The exploration of femininity, identity and social duality, the feminine connection with the world, with the past, with roots, continues in the author's first poetry book, *Memórias, Aparições, Arritmias* [*Memories, Apparitions, Arrhythmias*] (2021). This poetry book is a beautiful object created with care, attention, with body and soul. Poems written over time, but many also during the pandemic when the author was looking after her sick grandmother, the texts and the accompanying photographs demonstrate a creative maturity blossoming in a variety of artistic explorations. Yara herself took the photographs for the book and conceived its structure, revealing a wish to expand her artistic creativity not only as a writer but also as a visual artist. In addition to her writing, Yara works with photography, video,

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collage, and performance.

The ease with which Yara reveals understanding herself helps explore the feminine condition and maintain authenticity in her artistic endeavours. The connection with her grandmother serves as a reminder of the migratory link, the root that inspires, providing the foundation to amplify the sacred feminine energies of all the women who came before—creators that reside in each of us, as the cradle of our own growth and maturation, and as a universal mother, custodian of natural balances. Identified by critics and self-defined as an eco-feminist book, *Memories, Apparitions, Arrhythmias* quickly attracted interest and was honoured with the Glória de Sant’Anna Award in 2022.

Her concern for the diasporic condition and her multiple stays in countries such as Angola, Portugal and Brazil led her to curate a four-episode podcast on “issues of citizenship and social mobilisation of women in Africa and the diaspora.”

Her presence at international festivals such as Fliaraxá in Brazil or Afrolit Sans Frontières, along with numerous other gatherings and interviews, highlight the interest that her books have sparked and the need for them to exist in a context of greater expansion and openness towards trans-territorial memories and post-memories.

Yara Monteiro’s literary and artistic journey helps us understand how she self-identifies; however, her true contribution lies in the interrogation she manages to carry out regarding her host countries or countries of origin. Yara’s books don’t belong to her alone, nor to Angola, nor to Portugal, but rather to generations of granddaughters, grandsons, and grandparents whose life stories have been woven through the intricacies of (post)-colonialism, (post)-independence, and post-memory.

## Quotations

“Rosa Chitula, my mother, loved Angola more than I, and she fought for it. My name is Vitória

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Queiroz da Fonseca. I am a woman. I am Black.” (*Essa Dama Bate Bué!*: 9)

“Grandfather António considered himself assimilated and, above all, Portuguese. He saw the implosion of nationalism as an insidious turn against colonial serenity. However, he was astounded by Portugal’s attitude: washing its hands. (...) Mother Rosa always had a free spirit and a rebellious attitude towards oppression. Her insurrection against imperialism began to sharpen as the radio and newspapers stopped ignoring the looting, rapes, kidnappings, and the increasing tension between whites and blacks. (...) Under her daughter’s mattress, she found pamphlets. After showing them to the grandmother and blaming her for Rosa’s bad principles, she destroyed them. She thought it best to avoid a dispute and said nothing to her daughter.” (*idem*: 11-12)

“From Luanda, entire families had already begun to move to Lisbon. Even so, Grandfather António believed that good fortune would be on his side and decided to continue with the shops and trucks he had always had in Nova Lisboa. He turned the misfortune of life into an opportunity. He worked with both sides of the political conflict and intended to continue so long as providence kept his secret. The shade of his skin placed him in an intermediate world. For some, he wasn’t black enough, and for others, he needed to lighten his skin. He revered the Portuguese and tolerated the others. Whites and blacks greeted him with servility.” (*idem*: 13)

“My mother was missing for over fifteen years. When she reappeared, it was to hand me over to my grandparents. I was two years old, and after that, I never heard from her again.” (*idem*: 14)

“In one last farewell embrace, arms changed bodies, faces changed eyes, which changed souls. With regret, and despite my grandfather’s well-intentioned promises, the women knew they would not see each other again. When you flee from war, you only carry the weight you can bear. In this case, Miss Bia, Hermínia, and Cândida were an excess load for the Queiroz da Fonseca. The departure of our family carries with it the burden of the death of those who gave us life, but now we decide to leave it behind.” (*idem*: 17)

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“‘War swallows our dignity before it even touches our skin,’ Antonio laments in silence as he looks at the tree.” (*ibidem*)

“Clutching the rosary, the grandmother goes around the tree and repeats the phrase, but without conviction. She refuses to forget her daughter Rosa and Angola.” (*idem*: 21)

“- My mother was a fighter. My family has known nothing about her since the late seventies.  
- Many comrades fought for this country. Heroines.” (*idem*: 99)

“(…) Luanda is like a complicated woman you can’t forget. Isn’t it true? One way or another, you always want to come back.” (*idem*: 113)

“Miss Vitória Queiroz da Fonseca is looking for her mother, Rosa Chitula Queiroz da Fonseca, and her aunt Juliana Tijamba. (...) Let’s unite this family, my people! Peace brings families together. Stay with us on 93.5 FM...” (*idem*: 127)

“In Vitória’s family, they never talked about the war in Angola. It’s taboo.” (*idem*: 154)

“- What should I do?  
- Whatever you think is best for you. It may sound strange, but here, we all love you. Wait, Vitória. Just wait. You come from a people that is still waiting, that waits, always.” (*idem*: 206)

## WEATHER FORECAST

I braid my hair  
they say  
I want to look more black  
I have a blow dry  
they say I want to look more white

In the warm front coming from the southern hemisphere

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the curls dry dishevelled  
they ask  
Where do I want to look from?

“I am from where I stand.”

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2. “As minhas raízes são africanas e as minhas asas são europeias”, entrevista a Yara

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Monteiro por Doris Wieser.

<https://www.buala.org/pt/cara-a-cara/as-minhas-raizes-sao-africanas-e-as-minhas-asas-sao-europeias-entrevista-a-yara-monteiro>

3. Memórias Aparições Arritmias, de Yara Nakahanda Monteiro (Companhia das Letras, 2021) por Doris Wieser.

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4. Todavia ao vivo — Lançamento de ESSA DAMA BATE BUÉ!, de Yara Nakahanda Monteiro.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DGEkIdpE0k>

5. ConSensual #2: Yara Monteiro – Literatura (Audio Podcast);

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6. Radio Mukaji. <https://yaramonteiro.com/#podcast>

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