

FILM REVIEW

Julio Matos and Coraci Ruiz, directors. *Letters to Angola*. (Original title: *Cartas para Angola*.) 2012. 78 min. Portuguese with English subtitles. Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. Aggregator Media. No Price Reported.

Letters to Angola, directed by Julio Matos and Coraci Ruiz, is an engaging documentary film with a novel and unique premise. By exploring the stories of migration and exile of seven pairs of people from Angola to places across the Atlantic in Brazil and Portugal, it distinguishes itself from other Angolan films that have privileged single stories taking place, for the most part, in the capital of the country, Luanda. With one foot rooted in the tradition of African cinema that has explored themes crisscrossing the formation of nation-state identities—such as the struggle for independence and civil war—this documentary also references the long-lasting footprints of colonialism, seen in the intersection between socio-economic inequalities and structural racism. Furthermore, a close inquiry into the feelings and personal relations of fourteen different characters offers a deeper insight into broader past-present connections across various places and memories, ranging from transatlantic slave trade history and legacies to the very present daily lives of the protagonists. The interplay between past and present, history and memory, is set right at the beginning of the piece by a voice-over to a background of neon lights in an urban cityscape:

Walking these streets, the question I ask myself most is: is a city an external place where we live, walk, and dream with our eyes open through the neighborhood of friends around us, or is a city an internal place that haunts us from inside and lives in our hearts like a heavy anchor keeping us fixated on memories and places from another corner?

The plot goes through a series of video recordings from each of the seven characters who were located outside of Angola, while they read aloud the letters that they have written to each of their seven friends who live in Angola. Sizaltina Cutaia, Fernanda Fernandes, Allan da Rosa, Lukeny Bamba Furtado, Carlos Serrano, Jacinto Fortunato, Alessandra Ribeiro, Augusto Van Dunen, Edú de Maria, Wiza, Suzana and Avelino Dias, Julia Pinto André, Ondjaki, and Ana Paula Tavares: all stories are presented by their characters

in the first person and through a preponderant close-up photography that captures them reacting to the letters throughout the documentary. Plenty of establishing shots also show up, contextualizing the continents, landscapes, and cities where they are located. A constant switching between inner warm home and public spaces (kitchens, living rooms, offices, bars, and stages) and busy outdoor settings (streets, parks, public transportation, and the Atlantic shoreline with a sunset in motion) helps to contextualize characters in their personal yet social environments. The letters recall the times when each pair of friends was together on either side of the Atlantic and the memories that they treasure from those times. While giving some hints of context, these people also narrate the different types of economic, political, and cultural reasons that displaced them from Angola, whether physically or mentally.

Sizaltina, an Angolan living in Luanda, and Fernanda, a Brazilian living in Rio de Janeiro, remember the long discussions they used to have during the three years when they were coworkers in Angola. They relate how their friendship developed while sharing preoccupations that they had in common, ranging from gender imbalances to the poisonous echoes of colonial color classifications from the past in the racialization of people in the present. Also, Ondjaki in Rio de Janeiro and Ana Paula in Lisbon found themselves distanced from Angola for long periods of time while following professional, family, and academic choices. They connected with each other through their families and their reciprocal creative appreciation as poets. Ana Paula longs to go back to Angola eventually, yet she is aware that her memories could be more of a mythification of the country's past, for it changes every day.

Although, they explain, they were supporters of the movement for independence in Angola—where they were born and raised—Jacinto, Carlos, Suzana, and Avelino had to leave or stay out of the country after independence (1975) mostly because of their Portuguese family ties. Jacinto remembers how the country during colonial rule experienced something similar to South Africa's apartheid, a type of inherent segregation in which black and white people lived and socialized in separate spaces. This, he says, became a fundamental motivation for the liberation war against Portuguese colonial rule. Suzana recalls how she developed memories about Angola, notwithstanding the fact that she was only two years old when she went to live in Brazil with her family. In contrast to Jacinto's traumatic experience with fractured social spaces, Suzana, Julia, and Sizaltina reconstruct their fond feelings for Angolan cuisine, showing the variety of legacies that a single place of origin can constitute in people's later selves. Along with Ondjaki and Wiza, Julia and Jacinto point out that the mixing of different accents from Angola, Brazil, and Portugal has represented over the years a landmark of their multi-spatial identities and life experiences. They reflect on how a certain accent can denote at the same time both the particularity of their place of origin and the intertwinement of the different parts of the Lusophone Atlantic World.

The past-present connections in these stories go beyond recent times and extend all the way to transatlantic slave trade history from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and the very foundation of the Portuguese colony of

Angola—today the city of Luanda—in 1575. The influence of African stories and rhythms in the arts and culinary traditions in Brazil and Portugal, as well as in Luanda coming from the interior of the country, is manifested in presentations of different types of poetry, dance, music, and recipe secrets in the stories of Allan, Lukeny, Alessandra, Augusto, Edú, Wiza, Ondjaki, Ana Paula, Sizaltina, Suzana, Avelino, and Julia. Long-lasting legacies include not only the traumatic experience of the forced deportation out of Africa of more than twelve million enslaved people—over five million of them from Angola and surrounding areas in West Central Africa alone—over the course of four centuries (www.slavevoyages.org), but also the resilience of societies that had to learn to deal with and resist slavery across the Atlantic. This perhaps represents the most distinctive aspect of *Letters to Angola* in relation to other important films about Angola that have been produced since the end of the civil war (2002), which focus on stories taking place mostly in Luanda's urban space and with references to places located exclusively in the interior of, not outside, the country. These films include *O Heroi* (Gamboa 2004), *Na Cidade Vazia* (Ganga 2004), and the more recently featured *Air Conditioner* (Fradique 2020). In contrast, in *Letters to Angola* the Atlantic Ocean space represents a bridge, not a border, to history.

Not limited by contemporary nation-state boundaries, *Letters to Angola* highlights the global dimension of the life stories of fourteen Angolan people and the plural interconnected histories of their place of origin. The narration of their trajectories recreates an Angola and an Africa of the past that might not be there anymore in certain ways, yet deep down these memories constitute for these people part of a centuries-long transatlantic experience.

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