Cartas para Angola: The Search for a Place Called Home

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Abstract: This article examines the documentary *Cartas para Angola* (2011) directed by Julio Matos and Coraci Ruiz. The documentary has as its leitmotif the correspondence exchanged between a set of people whose lives are traced between Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. Taking as a point of departure the notions of home and belonging and in dialogue with Fernando Arenas's work, I investigate people's relationship to places, expanding earlier conceptions on the ways places work to create a web of meanings in people's lives. I argue that the existence of hybrid locations enables us to interrogate essentializing paradigms around notions of home and nation, exploring some of the tensions that characterize life in a globally interconnected world.

Keywords: Belonging, immigrants, in-between-ness, memory, identity

In these times—when governments are trying to incorporate new territories into their countries, former colonies are seeking independence and self-governance, Indigenous peoples and Quilombola communities are involved in increasingly violent struggles for land demarcation, and millions of people are spread around the world—questions about belonging are crucial to help us understand how we define who we are, who belongs to a place, and where we feel we belong to.[1] The construction of a sense of place and belonging involves a complex and ever-changing set of factors. The way we experience home and belonging is based on the intersection of positionalities such as class, race, ethnicity, and so on. In some

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[1] In 1988 Brazilian Constitution Art. LXVIII, *quilombolas* are defined as "the "remaining members of quilombo communities that have been occupying the same lands," referred to as quilombos.

cases, the articulation of images of a "true/real" national belonging, identity, and culture can lead to spaces of exclusion and invisibility, producing conditions for marginalization. This is especially true of immigrants, whose meaning of home and belonging is part of a continuous process of uprooting and regrounding. For immigrants, material and symbolic notions of home and belonging are shaped by intersecting and variable feelings, social practices, and policies that extend across and connect different spaces.

The understanding of what it means to be Portuguese, Brazilian, or Angolan provides an insight into the process of developing diasporic identities. Despite the strong ties in sociohistorical, economic, and political realms, Portuguese-speaking diasporic individuals must navigate the complexities and ambiguities of everyday life. *Cartas para Angola*, a 78-minute documentary directed by Julio Matos and Coraci Ruiz, contemplates some of these issues. Released in 2011, the documentary has the leitmotif of letters exchanged between fourteen people whose lives are traced between Angola, Brazil, and Portugal. The letters focus on issues of immigration, language, the war of independence, the civil war, race, and identity. Experiences and feelings of belonging play a key role in *Cartas para Angola.* Age, social class, ethnicity, and the historical context have all shaped the narratives presented here.

Using the notions of belonging and home as a point of departure, this essay examines how a transnational sense of belonging and/or nonbelonging is constructed. It analyzes how notions of race, family ties, memory, language, and origin complicate the sense of who we are. I argue that these hybrid locations allow us to understand how people attach meanings to places that extend beyond one's neighborhood, and even beyond a city or a country.[2] The existence of physical and emotional hybrid locations enables us to interrogate essentializing paradigms around notions of home and nation, exploring some of the tensions that characterize life in a globally interconnected world. My goal is to investigate people's relationship with places, expanding earlier conceptions of the ways places work to create a web of meanings in people's lives.

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[2] Hybridity here is not used as a celebration of newly or romanticized emerging identities, but as a positioning that critically considers hybrid positions lived and experienced by immigrants in their everyday life.

Patterns of Migration in the Lusophone World

The presence of immigrants in Portugal from former Portuguese colonies is not new. Most of the time they are referred to as Africans or African descendants—despite being a complex and diversified community divided by race, ethnicity, religion, education, and social class (Batalha 61). There were different flows of immigrants to Portugal. In the mid-1960s, unskilled (illiterate) cheap labor workers from former Portuguese colonies migrated to Portugal. Migration intensified throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As we know, with the end of the dictatorship in Portugal and the adoption of a plan of decolonization, the three major liberation movements in Angola (the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) resumed their fight to expand their power and take control of the country. Despite the commitment by "high-ranking Portuguese politicians and members of the military" to "the security of persons and goods, the maintenance of the public order and the equal treatment to all without regard of skin color," the "deterioration of interracial and interethnic relations in Angola" forced many settlers and Angolans to migrate (Kalter, ch. 1).[3] According to Christoph Kalter, the massive flow of individuals to Portugal can be explained by the intensification of the conflict between opposing liberation movement factions aligned with inflationary prices, the shortage of public education, and infrastructure:

> Between mid-July and the beginning of November of 1975, around 260,000 individuals left Angola in aircraft operated by the state-owned Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP) and by the Portuguese air force, but also in planes provided by Belgium, France, West Germany, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, Netherlands, Great Britain, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), and the United States. (ch. 1)

The process of (re)insertion in Portuguese society was marked by drawbacks. In the 1970s, Portugal was undergoing an economic crisis with rising unemployment rates; thus, discriminatory behavior against former settlers and the Angolan

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[3] For more, see UN Department of Political Affairs, *Decolonization* 17–30.

refugees was used as a tool to reserve "job opportunities for the allegedly 'genuine Portuguese'" (Kalter ch. 1).[4] Non-Portuguese immigrants and nonwhite immigrants were forced to live in barracks and shantytowns when they arrived in Portugal, later being relocated to government social housing projects on the peripheries of Lisbon or in nearby municipalities such as Amadora (Batalha 62). The ethnic clusters that were set up after the end of the war of independence have continued to grow over time. Despite the promises of integration into the Portuguese society, non-Portuguese and nonwhite immigrants were continuously perceived as promiscuous, idle, and drunk individuals (Kalter ch. 2).

Since Portugal's accession to the European Union, an increasing number of Brazilian immigrants have been moving to Portugal. According to a report from the Foreigners and Borders Service of Portugal (SEF), the number of Brazilians living in Portugal increased by 5.6% in 2020. Since 2012, Brazilians have been the largest foreign population in Portugal, constituting approximately 29.3% of the foreign residents (30–31). For many Brazilians, Portugal offers a higher standard of living, a more stable political environment, better public services, and lower crime rates when compared to Brazil. Yet, the changing migration patterns are not restricted to immigrants to Portugal. With the global economic crisis of 2008 and Angola's economic growth, there has been a gradual expansion of the economic trade and cooperation between Angola and Portugal (Ip and Shen 116–17). In five years, the number of Portuguese immigrants in Angola increased by 240%, going from 33,300 in 2007 to 113,000 in 2012, and reaching 200,000 by 2019 (Ip and Shen 124). Many nonelite, Portuguese immigrants, who are often illegal, receive low salaries and have difficulty in securing immigration documents in Angola (Akesson 78). Meanwhile, the Portuguese business elite in Luanda depend on partnerships with powerful Angolans and are usually protected by them, since an "Angolan co-ownership is a legal requirement in branches of key economic and political importance such as oil, diamonds and media, but, de facto, this applies to business more generally" (Akesson 86).

According to a 2011 report of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, Brazil currently hosts around 4,477 refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people (20). In 2021, for instance, 6.7% of asylum seekers were from

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[4] According to António José Saraiva, many Portuguese blamed the ex-settlers for colonialism, "portraying them as an elite of exploiters that had forced the army to defend their privileges in useless colonial wars" (Kalter ch. 1).

Angola. Many of the refugees and asylum seekers went to Brazil after escaping the Angolan civil war (1975–2002). They chose Brazil in their search for better living conditions and professional opportunities; however, most live in favelas or poor neighborhoods and work in the informal sector (Furtado 17–18). Brazil's language and culture are determining factors in their choice to live in that country. Yet, despite the cultural ties between Brazil and Angola, a growing number of immigrants have been victims of xenophobic and racist outbursts. These racist and xenophobic practices are also part of the everyday life of Brazilians who have immigrated to Portugal.

The few examples above illustrate how changes in the direction of migratory waves can promote changes in power dynamics, which raises serious questioning about claims of equity before the law. Migration flows have also reshaped the complex economic and political power relations among diverse groups in the global landscape. However, as Fernando Arenas reminds us, migratory flows from Brazil and Africa toward Portugal have shaped "the country's human landscape, as well as its national identity" ("African, Portuguese" 35). As will be discussed in detail, the reshaping of the country's landscape may translate into feelings of estrangement and displacement, through which the boundaries between the familiar and the strange are constantly being rethought.

The Notion of Home and a Sense of Belonging in Cartas para Angola

Cartas para Angola intertwines the stories of fourteen individuals who share their experiences of migration, war, exile, discrimination, nostalgia, and belonging. The documentary begins from individual memories that try to negotiate alternative senses of belonging as a crucial part of a healing process. The interplay between past and present connects the history of the transatlantic slave to the struggles for independence and civil war, revealing a present time still marked by the legacies of the past. The first shot of the documentary sets up the connections between past and present, here and there. It begins with a black and white image and the sound of rough breaking sea waves on the beach, setting up a clear connection between the protagonists' life stories and the colonial past. Taken from a car in motion, the subsequent sequence of shots captures the walls and streets of the city of Rio de

Janeiro at night.[5] The first letter comes from a voice-over in Rio de Janeiro that questions the meaning of a city:

> Uma cidade é um lugar externo onde moramos, caminhamos e sonhamos com os olhos acordados mediante a vizinhança de amigos que nos cercam? Ou uma cidade é um lugar interno que nos persegue do lado de dentro dos olhos e mora no nosso coração como uma âncora pesada que nos mantem presos a memórias e lugares de outros lugares? (1:12–1:36)

The voice-over plays with the idea of two complementary and interrelated concepts of "city"—the one that is part of our daily lives and the one that lives in our memories. The tension between the two cities is the leitmotif that interconnects the various letters and voices.

The nostalgia present in most of the participants' voices when referring to Angola attests to the ways in which immigrants construct their identities and sense of belonging through place. When describing Angola, they highlight certain characteristics that serve as the grounds on which they can forge a sense of identity and a connection to the past. That is the case of Avelino, an Angolan of Portuguese parents, who was forced to leave Angola after independence in order to save his life. Living in Brazil for more than forty years, he still recalls emotionally charged moments of his childhood in Angola. In his traumatic recollections, he describes his attempts to fit in—removing his shoes to be able to climb the trees with his friends—and his dream of returning to an Angola that is no longer a reality. Suzana, his daughter, who moved to Brazil when she was only two years old, alludes to the vital role of food in reconstructing their sense of community and ties to Angola. When addressing the loneliness in her childhood, she concedes that

> durante muito tempo, filha única de um pai e uma mãe que saíram de Angola e perderam tudo lá . . . tiveram que começar do nada. Falar da infância para mim é falar de uma espécie de exílio. E passado um tempo chegou a Júlia . . . e eu passava a semana inteira

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[5] This same complementary duality can be seen in the constant switch between closed spaces (kitchens, bars, living rooms, and theater stages) and outdoor settings (street, parks, and the beach). In the case of the streets, the motion blurs or the traffic jams capture the rhythms of the city, conveying an impression of movement and displacement.

> esperando o final de semana porque a gente se encontrava em todos os finais de semana. (57:31–58:14)

Weekend gatherings (as *comilanças*) in Julia's house were an important space for socialization as they were a chance for people to share stories that helped them engender feelings of familiarity, security, and support. Food—or the act of preparing food and eating with others—is thus a critical anchor for identity in the context of immigration.

As the examples above indicate, memories and personal accounts are central in providing continuity to the dislocations of individuals and their social identities. Put simply, the stories we share, the various objects, and the cultural and religious practices we individually and collectively incorporate into our everyday lives become who we are as individuals and as members of a community. Drawing from experiences of displacement, Zofia Rosinska argues that "memory plays a triple role: it is identity-forming by maintaining the original identifications; it is therapeutic because it helps bear the hardships of transplantation onto a foreign culture; it is also community-forming, by creating a bond among those recollecting together" (39). In the case of Avelino and Julia, food transcends national and ethnic boundaries and contributes to a sense of familiarity, of shelter, of feeling at home.

Yet, the interplay between past and present, here and there, is not limited to food. In some instances, reclaiming their cultural roots is described as a necessary step for immigrants to define who they are. Culture functions as a mode of empowerment, becoming a political act that aims to discover continuities, locating the narratives of the self within broader narratives of families, cities, cultures, nations, and diasporas. One such case is when the protagonists refer to race. The issue of race first appears in the documentary through the voice of an Angolan woman, Sizaltina Cutaia, when she remembers that the first time her youngest sister saw a white, blue-eyed blonde woman, she "fugiu" (2:21–2:33). However, the tension about skin color categories is also present in relation to Angolans. For example, Sizaltina refers to a conversation in which she was described as a "mestiça" or "misturada," unlike her brother, whose skin is described as "a escuridão de negro" (3:13–3:42). The preoccupation with skin color can be connected to the experience of colonialism since the colonial social order was based on the individuals' color, class, and status. Now, however, the Black category gains a new significance in Angola.

The need to affirm a collective identity and a sense of belonging is not restricted to a plurality of skin colors; it also involves the recovery of cultural references. That is the case of Augusto Van Dunen, who decided to create a folkloric dance company in Angola:

> Isso (as danças, os tambores) desapareceu ou tem vindo a desaparecer porque o país passou 30 anos em guerra . . . há necessidade de resgatar novamente que é para introduzir e voltar . . . resgatar esses valores vão ser mais sessenta anos . . . tamos a convidar crianças para ensinar . . . para ensinar essas crianças tocar já os instrumentos tradicionais de tenra idade. (42:07–43:27)

On the other side of the Atlantic, Alessandra Ribeiro's Angolan grandmother erased any trace of her native language and culture at home to better integrate her children into the society of the receiving country. When she gets a job, Alessandra realizes that "quando você vai no shopping você vê roupas, pessoas e posturas de uma maneira diferente das coisas que eu fazia. As roupas não me cabiam, não tinha ninguém parecida comigo fazendo desfile, participando do manequim ou adquirindo aquelas coisas" (36:00–36:44). As a victim of racism in her everyday life in Brazil, Alessandra decides to embrace her African roots in a move toward centering an Afrocentric (religious) identity as a defining feature of her way of being. Such elements become an anchor of belonging and help create a sense of home for immigrants and their descendants within the imaginary of a racist—though traditionally described as a cordial—Brazilian/Portuguese multicultural society. The conversations and experiences shared in the letters become part of a process of self-narration allowing immigrants to build bridges across the Atlantic Ocean to forge other and more inclusive communities.

The complex intersectionality of accent (or language varieties) and identity manifests itself in different moments. Living in Brazil for forty years, Carlos Serrano reflects on the mixing of accents from Angola, Brazil, and Portugal as a mark of his multispatial identity and life experiences. Born in Angola, Carlos is continuously mistaken for Brazilian when in Portugal and in Angola. His experience allows us to reflect on how certain accents or vocabulary may denote different meanings depending on the location in the Lusophone world. A sense of ambiguity or indeterminacy is also present in the way he talks about himself.

Despite being married to a Brazilian woman and having children and grandchildren born and living in Brazil, Carlos sees himself inhabiting an in-between space as "a minha dimensão afetiva individual ainda tem um lugar lá (Angola), ainda tem lugar lá, e não poderia deixar de dizer que também tem um pouco em Portugal . . . por isso eu fico sempre confundido qual é a minha identidade hoje" (32:05–32:35). According to Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, the lived experiences and spatial imaginaries of immigrants often revolve around complex dialogues about home— "the relationship between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, diverse homemaking practices, and the intersections of home, memory, identity and belonging" (199). Home is thus experienced as a material/lived and immaterial/imagined space of belonging that makes explicit the multiplicity and fluidity of the notion.

When immigrants move across frontiers, they carry with them their values, beliefs, social practices, religions, and languages. Considering the challenges immigrants may face when adjusting to the new culture, individuals will respond differently to the process of assimilation. When talking about his own experience, Ondjaki argues that some immigrants can easily adapt to a new culture, while others may not. This issue, however, gains complexity when we listen to the stories. As Homi Bhabha discusses, individuals occupy hyphenated identity positions due to the endless negotiations between spaces, cultures, and times, turning individuals into inhabitants of the in-between or hybrid spaces. The hyphen here stands as a marker of an oscillation between here and there, as a marker of those living between moving/fluid/multiple borders. As Bhabha puts it, this permanent duality is not resolved with the mere replacement of one reality for the other(s); rather, it allows diasporic individuals to claim a mixture of cultural and linguistic codes as part of their identity, as is the case of Avelino Dias, Carlos Serrano, and Ondjaki In other words, the condition of possibility for these individuals occurs in the in-between, in the neither-nor, transcending the taken-for-granted binaries (savage-civilized, center-margin).

The documentary also points to the importance of community activities and spaces to make the claim that we belong. For example, the poetry by Allan Santos connects São Paulo de Piratininga, with its poor neighborhoods ("as quebradas'), to the slums ("musseques") in São Paulo de Luanda. His poem explores the similarities between the two cities where the natural landscape and vegetation were replaced by asphalt and concrete roads, and the rivers (Tietê and Kwanza) "vão

ficando mais grachosos, menos graciosos" (15:09). His verses set up a parallel between the colonial exploitation and a capitalist regime in which

> nossas cores são investidas no Ministério do Turismo que nunca nos acaricia, né Luanda, mas que joga pro alto, sorridentes, as suas medalhas e pra nós, pro chão, as suas migalhas. E a gente vira cartão postal . . . sempre tem um chefe das antigas farejando o melhor jeito de nos assimilar, de nos amestrar. (16:42–17:22)

On the other side of the Atlantic, sitting by the beach, Lukeny Bamba Fortunato listens to Allan's recorded poem and describes him as "um angolano com sotaque brasileiro" (17:43). There is a cut, and the next scene takes place in a middle-class neighborhood in Tabuão da Serra, São Paulo, where Allan lives. While listening to the sound of an armed police helicopter flying over his community, Allan makes a correlation between the violence of the war in Angola and the everyday life in his neighborhood in São Paulo "com os helicópteros em cima da periferia, helicópteros com suas metralhadoras, os helicópteros com suas câmeras" (18:15–18:28). There is another cut, and the next scene is at a bar in Luanda where a spoken word poetry event is taking place. Lukeny explains how it took time for everybody involved to get used to performing in front of a live audience. Rooted in oral traditions and performance, spoken word poetry functions as a tool to address concerns such as inflation—for example, the price of watermelon in a local market—creating an analogy to the Portuguese colonization process:

> eles nos melam desde que Diogo Cão aportou na foz do Rio Zaire. Desde que nos transformaram em produto, desde que nos transformaram em pessoas que no fundo eram mercadoria e disseram que um madura era equivalente a três moleques. (25:01—25:17)

Once again, a correlation is established between the transatlantic slave trade and a neoliberal economic system marked by exploitation, inequality, and violence. On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, poetry is thus perceived as a powerful tool for individuals to regain autonomy over their own stories, revisit the past, and embrace their roots.

Music—or more specifically samba—is another element that can foster a sense of community and belonging across the ocean. It is not by chance that Edu de Maria mentions to Wiza, an Angolan musician, "reconheço em você os traços dos que caminham aqui ao meu lado dia a dia" (44:40). Pondering the influence of African culture on the Brazilian way of being, Allan concedes that "não é o fado que cantamos ou usamos para expressar nossa voz mais profunda. É em roda, na manifestação coletiva, que nos encontramos, seja no samba, na capoeira que traz a força e a simplicidade da palma de mão, é o tambor sincopado que acende a chama que nos alimenta e nos faz respirar" (45:39–46:02). Not only does learning about the trajectory of samba from the batuques linked to Africa help one gain an understanding of past and present challenges and of how to approach the future; music is also perceived as a vehicle that can reverse the decline or disappearance of local languages and cultures. Born in the interior of Angola, Wiza was brought up speaking Kikongo—one of the Bantu languages still spoken in the interior of Angola but almost completely absent from the capital. When he decided to move to Luanda, he chose to compose and sing his songs in Kikongo. As he mentions in the documentary, it has long been a practice among Angolans "negar a África, [tendendo] a ser muito mais ocidentais" (51:41–51:45); however, nowadays, you can listen to songs in Kikongo, and audiences are starting to sing songs in Kikongo. Wiza's main goal is to encourage Angolans to appreciate and value their own cultures and languages.

Overall, we can say that the acts of cooking, playing samba, writing and reading poetry, and dancing should be interpreted as performances that are essential nodes of connecting past and present, here and there, incorporating embodied memories of past experiences— elements that give the protagonists a sense of heritage as part of the social history of their community. What I am describing here are cultural performances that help create close links to a sense of home, as they are imbued with the protagonists' values and beliefs, thus complicating simplistic notions of place-based identities that are negotiated at the local or global level. Their stories articulate alternative frameworks that try to refashion how individuals see themselves and how they look at and interpret their community. Bhabha describes belonging as the "historically and temporally disjunct positions that minorities occupy ambivalently within the nation's space" (5). Caught up in this space of ambivalence or of in-between-ness, the protagonists

establish emotional relationships with geographically distant places and people—elements that define who they are.

Interestingly, the idealized image of Angola is absent in almost all narratives. Described as a clan sentenced to feel *saudade*, protagonists repeatedly inform us that "a Angola que deixei não é a que encontro quando vou lá" or that "a África que a gente sonha eu sei que não está lá." In their voices, Angola is intimately connected to a notion of feeling at home—an abstract signifier of a wide set of associations and meanings. Home becomes a metaphor of experiences of joy, suffering, comfort, and belonging in place. As Lynne C. Manzo argues, meaningful places are those we consciously return to because of the events they symbolize and the meaning they hold. The construction of identity or the notion of home in spatial terms is a dynamic process that includes meaningful places. Put simply, people choose landscapes that are congruent with their self-concept, changing settings to better represent themselves. It is not by chance that the documentary closes with the image of the Tejo River, reinforcing the importance of the river/sea for where the protagonists feel they belong. The river/sea also functions as a bridge connecting different experiences and lives. As the various cases analyzed here illustrate, our relationship to places is not merely an individual phenomenon; it is influenced by external factors shaped by historical, economic, and sociopolitical contexts in which we find ourselves. In this way, place combines the spatial with the sociopolitical, the historical, and the economic. The accounts examined here explore the ways in which identity is attached to memory and cultural practices, both personal and collective, which manifest themselves in space.

There is, however, another aspect that needs to be considered. In "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez argue that decoloniality should be perceived as "a process of recognizing the colonial wounds that are historically true and still open in the everyday experience of most people on the planet" (17). According to the authors, the healing process only begins when we acknowledge and face our colonial wounds. In "Migrations in the Rise of African Lisbon: Time-Space of Portuguese (Post)coloniality," Arenas examines the history of colonialism—the overlapping racialized, gendered, and sexualized structures of discrimination—and its impact on the configuration of power structures in the present. Arenas's article also alludes to an African and Afro-descendants' cultural production that challenges the legacies of the colonial order, reclaiming a voice for those who were kept silent

for so long. These cultural expressions challenge the homogeneity of the dominant Western narrative, rejecting the terms laid down by the narrative of otherness. Luis Madureira makes a similar point when he refers to "hybrid articulations of cultural difference" that can work as a tool to unveil the diversity and plurality within these various societies—a necessary step to put into question the Lusotropicalist myth of Portugal as a nonviolent, multiracial colonial society (205, 223).

In the case of *Cartas para Angola*, the multiplicity of stories and experiences can be perceived as part of the healing process to which Mignolo and Vazquez refer. The documentary creates a space for those affected by the Portuguese colonial project in different degrees to share their stories. In this case, the recognition of a shared story may help forge a sense of community and connectedness with others who may have had similar life experiences. At the same time, storytelling also functions as a strategy of resistance as the protagonists' individual experiences become part of a collective memory—a crucial step to resist amnesia, demand justice, and refute the negative stories traditionally told about oppressed, marginalized groups. In so doing, the documentary becomes part of a larger debate that tries to articulate memory through new meanings, rearticulating difference and politically intervening in the dominant modes of knowledge production. In proposing new articulations between past and present, the various protagonists move beyond power structures and neat categories, gaining control over their own stories and creating communities across the ocean. In this sense, we can say that the documentary is not simply a repository of memories, but a tool for breaking the silence that has surrounded the protagonists' existence. *Cartas para Angola* emphasizes the process by which immigrants, through their daily activities, create supportive social networks that cross national boundaries—a perspective that highlights the complex relationship between here and there, pointing to the dynamic, changing nature of place and belonging.

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