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

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The Book of Chameleons: José Eduardo Agualusa on Duplicity, Tribute, and Revenge

Caveat lector: Reader, beware! We should not judge a book by its title. José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Book of Chameleons* (*O vendedor de passados*, 2004) only mentions chameleons once, when they are brought up as evidence for an argument that "Lies [. . .] are everywhere. Even nature herself lies. What is camouflage, for instance, but a lie? The chameleon disguises itself as a leaf in order to deceive a poor butterfly" (122). We might then say that the title itself is appropriately chameleonesque, in that it is a little deceptive, has a touch of false description: in many ways this is *not* a book of chameleons, and those who open it expecting it to be so will be disappointed, although it does feature a lizard as one of its central characters (also its first-person narrator). But that lizard is a gecko, not a chameleon. Once we realize this, we may wonder what other deceptions or tricks the book has in store for us, what else in it is not quite what it seems.

The novel's title, moreover, is an artifact of translation—the Portuguese original literally means "The Seller of Pasts." So maybe this, too, is appropriate: that the book's past life in its original language has been gently erased and replaced, in its rebirth for an English-speaking readership. The translator, Daniel Hahn, justifies the revised title (which, he explains, was a joint decision made with the author, Agualusa) on the basis that "At its heart this is a book about a number of characters whose personalities—whose stories—keep shifting from moment to moment; whose true personalities and stories are impossible to pin down" ("Translating Chameleons" 19). Again, perhaps, it is apt that the story shifts yet again as it moves into a new language. After all, in English it *is* now a "book of chameleons," and its new title may lead us to read it slightly differently: new language, new book.

For there are (once again, appropriately) at least two ways of thinking about the "doubleness and duplicity" that, as critics Rita Maria Knop and Virgínia Carvalho de Assis Costa observe, are indelibly "inscribed in the novel" ("From Duplicity to the Double" 97). On the one hand, we could think about them in terms of treacherous mendacity and deception, as with the example of the chameleon that Agualusa provides: "He lies to [the butterfly], saying, *Don't worry, my dear, can't you see I'm just a very green leaf waving in the breeze*, and then he jets out his tongue at six hundred and twenty-five centimeters a second, and eats it" (122). Here, the dissimulation is a trick or a trap,

designed to put us off our guard and make us easy prey for the ruthless hunter. We should therefore always beware that the real thing still lurks behind the mask. On the other hand, however, we might think about the ways in which dissimulation also creates something new that, as with the translated novel, has its own reality, a life of its own. As Agualusa himself notes about the process of rendering his own novels into other languages, "To a great extent every translation is a re-creation. This isn't something that bothers me, rather the contrary" (Agualusa and Hahn, "The Book of Chameleons" 184). In fact, there may be times at which we cannot easily distinguish between the "original" and the "copy," or when the double comes to be more lifelike, more real, than the thing on which it is modelled.

Fittingly perhaps, this novel cannot quite decide between these two conceptions of doubleness. For much of the time, in part in homage to the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, to whom Agualusa tells us the book is a "tribute" (Agualusa and Hahn 181), it suggests that a mask can have as much as if not more reality than what it masks. But its somewhat surprising (and violent) dénouement indicates by contrast that beneath it all, things stay the same: a leopard cannot change its spots; a tiger (gecko) cannot change its stripes. In the end, the book seems to conclude, the truth will catch up with us, as we can never escape our pasts.

1. The Powers of the False

Let us start by listing at least some of the instances of doubleness found in this novel. What examples can you see of duplication, masking, mirroring, reinvention, and the like? How do the themes of duplicity and dissimulation play out in the book? Pause the video and write down as many examples as you can. While you do that, I'll have a glass of papaya juice, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Papaya Juice

Félix Ventura's garden features "at least ten papaya trees. Félix believes in the restorative powers of papaya" (10). He has "a glass of papaya juice" when he comes home in the afternoons, before sharing "the sunset rites" with the gecko (4). For dinner, he routinely has "a thick slice of papaya, dressed with lemon and a dash of port wine" (15), or alternatively a fruit shake made with papaya mixed with "passion fruits, a banana,

raisins, pine nuts, a soup-spoon of muesli (an English brand) and a strand of honey" (87). Papayas are native to Southern Mexico and Central America, but were brought to Europe by the Spanish in the sixteenth century and are now grown throughout the tropics; India is by some distance the world's largest producer, followed by the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia. In short, it is a global (or rather, pantropical) fruit, much as Agualusa's novels trace connections and genealogies that tie Southern Africa both to the Americas (Brazil, Cuba, the USA) and to Europe (here, Portugal and Germany). Its "restorative" promise is enmeshed in a web of vast geographical scope.

The Book of Chameleons has two main characters, who share the same house in Luanda, Angola's capital city. The first, Félix Ventura, has two jobs, one open and legal, and the other clandestine. He is a collector and dealer of second-hand books on the one hand. And he is a "seller of pasts" (as, once again, the original Portuguese title has it) on the other, whereby he puts these old books to use by catering to "a whole class, [. . .] a whole new bourgeoisie [. . .] whose futures are secure. But what these people lack is a good past, a distinguished ancestry; diplomas. [. . .] He sells them a brand new past" (16) by providing them with documents and photographs attesting to a distinguished but invented (second) genealogy. The house's other inhabitant is a gecko, the book's narrator, un-named for most of the narrative, who describes Ventura as "the creature" (3), as though it were the lizard that were the more human of the two. Indeed, Ventura, who is Black ("pure black" [18]) but albino, and so suffers under the tropical sun, points out similarities between himself and the gecko: "You've really got terrible skin, you know that? We must be related. . ." (4). And the gecko, a rare breed, has the singular capacity to make a laughing sound that can be mistaken for human laughter. In fact he, too, is double in that he remembers a past life as a man, and in his dreams he once more takes on human form and interacts with Ventura (who likewise dreams of the gecko-[re]turned-human) and other characters. Sometimes he even wonders if he is a man dreaming that he is a gecko, rather than a gecko dreaming he is a man. After all, his "dreams are almost always more lifelike than reality" (46). It is unclear which is his "second life," and which his first.

The plot gets going with the arrival of a mysterious foreigner, a war photographer, who is seeking Ventura's services. What he wants is a little unusual: not just a new past, but

an entirely invented second identity: "a new name" (17), with documents to match. After some hesitation, but also a hefty cash advance, Ventura is persuaded to take on the commission and comes up with the requisite forged documents in the name of "José Buchmann." As always, he establishes for his client a fictitious genealogy and family story: a Boer father from a place called Chibia, in Angola's rural south, and an American mother, an artist, who abandoned the family when she went to South Africa and never returned. All well and good, but things start to get peculiar when "Buchmann," to Ventura's astonishment, decides to track down his fictitious parents and finds, first, his father's grave, and then evidence of his mother's subsequent life after her flight to Cape Town (a city he tells us is like "a plastic palm tree [. . .] so clean, so tidy. It's a fraud that is suits us to believe in" [135]) and on to New York and back. The *coup de grâce* comes when Buchmann returns from South Africa with a painting signed by his mother, physical proof of the truth of Ventura's false narrative, which seems increasingly to be becoming real. The forger is "alarmed. He held the watercolor carefully between his fingers, as though he were afraid that the unlikelihood of the object could compromise its solidity" (134). Somehow his fiction has gained material weight.

We may be less surprised about all this, however, if we pick up on clues about the gecko's past life, which include the novel's epigraph, taken from the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges: "If I were to be born again, I'd like to be something completely different." And there are hints also in the gecko's dreams (of himself as a man with a fear of women and sexuality, who would like someday to live in Geneva) that he is in fact the reincarnation, as lizard, of Borges. Agualusa confirms this hunch: "in my book Borges is reincarnated in Luanda in the body of a gecko. The gecko's memories correspond to fragments of Borges's real life story. Somehow I wanted to give Borges a second chance" (Agualusa and Hahn 181-2). And there is perhaps no writer more fascinated than was Borges with the themes of doubleness and duplication. He wrote, for instance, a story ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius") about a secret society that, by inserting false entries into encyclopaedias, invents first a country and then an entire world, physical evidence for whose existence strangely starts appearing in the unlikeliest of places.

Knowing this, we may come to see Buchmann's adventures to be a rewriting of Borges (critic Bernard McGuirk notes that "Buchmann has the acquired initials of the blind librarian precursor" ["Intra-Colonialism or *l'Animotion*" 171]), and start to notice other

allusions to the Argentine throughout Agualusa's text. There may even be moments at which, as Borges would put it (and as indeed he did, in a story, "Borges and I," about his own relationship to himself), it is hard to tell which of the two it is that has written a particular page. Just as Ventura is a ghostwriter for a government minister's memoirs ("sew[ing] fiction in with reality dextrously, minutely" [127]), so Borges is the writerly ghost haunting this entire novel, a second writer behind the first, though the first, of course, comes second. The entire game of doubles, in which the priority of copy over original is thrown into doubt, is quite evidently copied from Agualusa's Argentine precursor. Hence his "tribute" is at the same time both theft from and repayment ("an offering or gift rendered as a duty, or as an acknowledgement of affection or esteem" ["tribute"]) to a writer who has long had a hold on Agualusa's imagination.

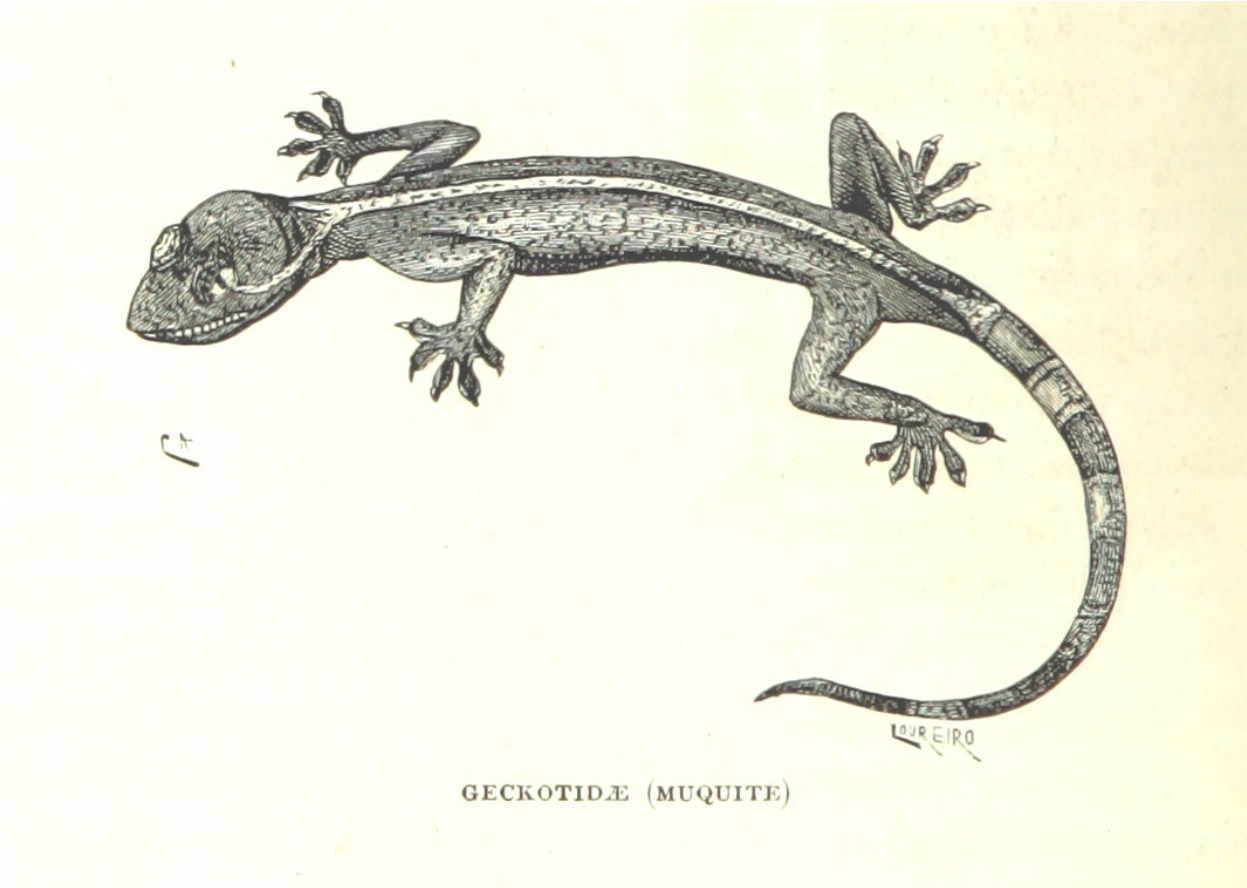

Illustration of an Angolan gecko, from an account of a Portuguese expedition in 1890

2. History's Revenge

As the novel progresses, more characters turn up at the "strange ship" (41) that is Ventura's (and the gecko's) abode. As might be expected, they are also doubles in one way or another. Ângela Lúcia, for instance, her first name just one letter distant from the name of the country in which the novel takes place, is a young woman for whom Ventura has fallen. Like Buchmann, she is a photographer, but whereas he is a photographer of the dark side of human history (from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the Israel/Palestine conflict), she is a photographer of light: "I collect light" (51), she tells us; "everything about her is Light" (117), claims Ventura. She even seems to have an aversion to the dark. When Buchmann describes his career, Lúcia protests: "Enough! I don't want your memories to pollute this house with blood. . ." (75). But as the gecko notes, "where there is light, there are shadows too" (117). And shadow or shade is where a gecko hides, seeking "a deeper crack, a deeper damper crack" (105), to keep out of the sun.

It is from a kind of crack, "a sewer that apparently he'd made his home" (74), that a fourth character emerges: an old man, seemingly a madman, reminiscent of "an ancient, vengeful god, wild haired, with suddenly lit-up eyes," who turns out to be an "ex-agent of the Ministry of State Security" (143) with a life story stranger than fiction. Edmundo Barata dos Reis is a former schoolmate of Ventura's, was later involved in the anti-colonial liberation struggle against the Portuguese (who put him in a concentration camp for "trying to establish a bomb-making network in Luanda" [144]), and kept the faith with Marxism even when the post-revolutionary government embraced free-market capitalism. "A communist!" he calls himself. "Would you believe it? I'm the very last communist south of the equator. . ." (144). But his loyalty to the ideology (he has a shirt from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that he never takes off, leaving "a hammer and sickle tattooed on [his] chest" [146]) means that he has fallen out of favour with Angola's current regime. He lives in hiding in the sewer, as the revolution has betrayed him. Not only is he a double of the post-colonial moment, a reminder of a past that the ruling party, the MPLA (the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola, permanently in power since independence), would rather have us forget. He also has his own conspiratorial theory of political dissimulation, telling Félix and Ângela that "The president has been replaced with a double. [. . .] They've put a double in his place, a scarecrow—I'm not sure how to put it—a fucking replica." This leads Ventura to

comment: "So, we have a fantasy president now? [. . .] Yes, I'd suspected as much. We have a fantasy government. A fantasy justice system. We have—in other words—a fantasy country" (145). The very land they are living in is an illusion, both its present and its history little more than a tall tale, no more real than the fake genealogies that the seller of pasts concocts.

Suddenly, however, everything changes. . . or rather, everything reverts back to the same. In a few, fairly frantic pages it is revealed that what much of what we have read has been the effect of a long-planned, hidden plot instigated by Buchmann, who now unveils himself as no longer the "book man" but in fact one Pedro Gouveia ("A ghost. A demon," exclaims Barata dos Reis [157]), not a foreigner at all but a former member of the MPLA who—in 1977, two years after independence—took part in an attempted *coup d'etat* against the revolution. The coup failed and the rebels were persecuted (in fact, in the wake of the historical event to which Agualusa alludes, at least two thousand, and perhaps tens of thousands of so-called "fractionalists," followers or suspected followers of the former Interior Minister, Nito Alves, were killed). Barata dos Reis, ultra-loyal agent of State Security ("The revolution was under threat. There was a band of nobodies, a gang of irresponsible petits bourgeois who tried to seize power" [158]) was one of those charged with restoring order. He interrogated, and no doubt tortured, Gouveia/Buchmann, delighting in telling him that he had killed his wife, Marta. Marta had been pregnant at the time she was rounded up, and Barata dos Reis also told Gouveia that they had killed the baby, born into custody, but in fact (and if anything, worse) they tortured the infant, leaving scars that would persist long into adulthood . . . scars that we, or the gecko, have seen already, not knowing what they are, as it turns out that it is Ângela who is Gouveia's long-lost daughter. Hearing this story in Ventura's kitchen, with everything now exposed to the light, Ângela herself grabs a revolver and shoots Barata dos Reis in the chest, killing him instantly. His dark past has caught up with him at last.

We have returned to the chameleon's mode of and *raison d'être* for duplicity: as a trap to lull the unwary into false confidence before inflicting a fatal blow. And although such revenge plots are not entirely foreign to Borges (for instance in stories such as "Death and the Compass" and, perhaps especially, "Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth"), to a large extent at this point the Borgesian playfulness and ambiguity fades, in favour of realist explication: albeit in a dream, and only to the gecko, Buchmann/

Gouveia spells everything out, including how he faked his fictional father's gravestone and passed off someone else's artwork as his mother's painting. His rationale does maintain the other way of thinking of doubleness: "I needed Félix himself to believe in my life story. If he believed it, who wouldn't? And today, I honestly believe it myself. I look back now, back into my past, and I see two lives. In one, I was Pedro Gouveia, in another Jose Buchmann. Pedro Gouveia died. Jose Buchmann returned to Chibia" (172). But there is a sense that some of the experimentation and ambition of the novel has here been betrayed. It is no wonder that after this, his final dream, the gecko / Borges promptly dies, killed by his mortal enemy, a scorpion. If not a chameleon, is Gouveia not the scorpion in this piece?

But such may be life—and death. *It may be nice to think we can reinvent ourselves, construct new pasts and precursors, and fiction encourages us in this fantasy. But there are scars that simply will not fade*, such as here the national traumas of Angola's troubled birth pangs and lengthy civil war, which began with independence in 1975 and continued off and on for over a quarter of a century, leaving something like 800,000 dead and four million displaced. Such devastation leaves ghosts that cannot be wished away, whether by the government's embrace of market neoliberalism in the context of an oil boom in which fortunes are to be made, or by ordinary men and women who might hope it had all been a dream. No more illusions: not everything can be dressed up or denied, or not for long, before the real returns with a vengeance.

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Song: "Banda Maravilha" (Banda Maravilha)