

Post-imperial Performativities: Sexual Misencounters and Engenderings of Desire in António Lobo Antunes's *Fado alexandrino*

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Abstract: This study of *Fado alexandrino* examines the representation of gender roles and sexual encounters that call into question the typical male/masculinity and female/femininity associations and challenge the heterosexual hegemonic norm. Our approach falls in line with Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender identity and the work of Luce Irigaray on female sexuality as a means to explore the parodic empowering of masculinized women, the greater visibility of "alternative" sexualities, the denigration of the female sex and the kaleidoscope of overlapping, unfulfilled political and sexual desires that fuel the narrative. In relation to the cultural opening of the mid-1970s, we analyze this renegotiation of gender and sexuality as a site for the display of a newly found freedom of expression that nonetheless privileges a masculinist narrative voice.

In Lobo Antunes's fifth novel, *Fado alexandrino* (1983), there is a short, seemingly minor episode in which one of the protagonists relates an encounter with an androgynous woman doctor: "a creature in a smock appeared, of indefinite age and more or less of the female sex in spite of the deep voice and masculine shoes [...]" (272). Although this gendered representation takes only a few lines in what is one of Lobo Antunes's most voluminous novels, it is emblematic of the author's constant, intricate toying with a no less intricate representation of gender roles and the concept of *performativity* that is central to our study. Through the recollections of four army veterans from the war in

Mozambique, *Fado alexandrino* foregrounds a multiplicity of different roles and identities that represent, as Phyllis Peres pertinently states, “seemingly different actors in supposedly different plays,” but also, and foremost in our present reading, multiple engendered performances that produce an intriguing collage effect as different expressions of sexuality are portrayed (199).

Drawing on Judith Butler’s now well-known theory of the “performativity of gender” and her nuanced discussion of subjects of sex/gender/desire that are at the core of her postmodern account of subjectivity, this study analyzes the complex intertwining of the protagonists of *Fado alexandrino*, with an emphasis on the sexual encounters that permeate the novel and the denaturalization of the associations man/masculinity and woman/femininity.¹ Butler rejects the very possibility of stable gender identities from which acts would proceed, and as such, there is no fixed continuum between sex, desire and gender (Butler, “Subjects” 3-44). Her work argues that the notion of belonging to a sex or gender can be problematized, not only due to distinct historical or cultural interpretations but also because gender is an effect performatively produced through a citational process of non-identical re-enactments.² Perhaps more explicit of this aspect is Butler’s rewording of her theorization in the essay “Performative Acts,” where she explains:

As a public action and performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual [...]. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations [...] so the gendered body *acts* its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and *enacts* interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (“Performative” 410; emphasis added.)

In *Fado alexandrino* bodily acts, interpretations and “inscriptions” provide a fertile site to explore the gendered performances that challenge the expectations of the masculinity/femininity binary. In this text Lobo Antunes satirizes the typical heterosexual matrix—that which Adrienne Rich refers to as “compulsory heterosexuality”—and portrays, with increasing intensity as the novel progresses, gender as an artifice, disengaged from the sexed body and even defying the presumption of the immutable character of sex (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 26).³ Working along the discontinuity of sex and culturally constructed gender, heterosexuality with its “discrete and asymmetrical

oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine' [...] understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" is set against homo- and trans-sexualizations of desire (23). This portrayal of gender identities as open or incomplete on the one hand, and an apparent emergence of non-heterosexual practices on the other, corresponds to a more liberal/liberated political scene present in Portugal from the mid-1970s onwards. As a consequence, complex male/female or same-sex relationships are constantly confronted with a fear of displacement that is intensified by the post-imperial setting of the novel and a tenuous and fundamentally ambivalent struggle for identity as the protagonists are torn between the life-changing experience of the colonial war and the necessity to become reintegrated into the civilian way of life in Lisbon. Through a pervasively masculinist discourse, that in parts echoes a bourgeois (Catholic) ideology, the alternating male protagonists impart their view and expectations of a phallogocentric economy of sexuality and their earnest effort to re-establish the hegemonic "center" of heterosexual satisfaction and male dominance.

1. Women on Top

The narrative of *Fado alexandrino* is divided into three chronological sections (before, during and after the Revolution) that are recounted through the reminiscing and pseudo-confessional discourse of four army comrades to their captain during a battalion reunion dinner and the continuation of the continuation of an increasingly drunken evening. Among those present are a soldier, a communications officer, a second lieutenant, a lieutenant colonel and their captain.⁴ The complex "intersections" of the *fado* can be summarized as follows: the lieutenant colonel Artur Esteves, widowed upon returning from the war in Mozambique, has a purely sexual relationship with his concierge, then marries Édite, "the cloud of perfume," before having an affair with Lucília, a young clerk from his wife's boutique who exploits and cheats on him with younger men and later dies of typhus; the second lieutenant Jorge is married to Inês, a young girl from an extremely well-to-do family who cheats on her husband with Ilka, "the purple-haired lady"; Inês at the end of the narrative is in a relationship with the lieutenant colonel's daughter, Maria João; Jorge, having lost his wife to her lesbian lover Ilka, has an affair with one of his co-workers, Ilda, and at the end of the novel has moved in with a midget who is a gynecologist, reassured that no one could possibly desire her; the soldier Abílio marries Odete, his uncle Ilídio's step-daughter, who later leaves him for a communist partisan; the communications officer, who lusts timidly after

Odete (Abílio's wife) in her role as an undercover communist agent named Dália, has an affair with Édite, the neglected lieutenant colonel's wife; the captain plays the role of the (mostly) silent listener of the comrades' stories and is the principal narrator of the text, offering commentaries on the disjointed kaleidoscopic reconstruction of the colonial/metropolitan adventures of his comrades.

The male protagonists put into relief the different angles of interwoven discourses with an emphasis on their ostensibly inconclusive sexual and affective relationships. This pervasive feeling of ineptness and failure is perceived as concurrent to a shift from male to female dominance in the individual relationships that can be interpreted as representative of a more widespread transition in gender roles. As Maria Alzira Seixo has pointed out, in *Fado alexandrino* "é a mulher relegada que justamente, de certa forma, comanda os dados narrativos" (118). Chronologically speaking, one of the first emblematic scenes portrays Inês losing her virginity to Jorge in a pine grove, a scene that becomes all the more important in the narrative through its numerable references. The episode foregrounds female pain and dishonor as initial teasing gives way to forceful penetration. Throughout this passage, the emphasis is on Jorge's physical pleasure, his erection, his underwear damp with desire, fondling her with his eager fingers and his lack of reasoning in the heat of the moment set against the symbolic "swelling up" of the throat of the swimming pool in the background, in contrast to Inês's fear, distress and cries of "Stop it you beast you animal I don't want to let me go" (41). Jorge vividly recalls how, at the conclusion of this scene, Inês's vagina expelled his penis leaving "on the tip, the little drop of bright crimson varnish, a brushstroke of blood" (95). It is interesting to note that this episode can be read as a *mise en abîme* of the development of Jorge and Inês's relationship that shifts from Jorge's dominant physical pleasure ("Go down"; "Drink me"; "Grab it"; 32-36) to him ultimately being expelled; his penis is rejected, both symbolically and literally, as she turns to a lesbian lover. When the Revolution erupts, Jorge flees to Brazil with his wife and her family and in the new surroundings, displaced from the fatherland and the law of the Father, the heterosexual Jorge/Inês relationship is fully substituted by the Inês/Ilka affair.

In contrast to Lobo Antunes's previous novels, in *Fado alexandrino* not only are women more prominent, but they are also empowered at the expense of their passive male partners.⁵ This behavior likewise contributes to a feeling of disorientation in what has traditionally been a male hegemonic

culture, from both the standpoint of the Portuguese military in the war in Mozambique and that of the metropolis in accordance with Salazar's treatment of gender roles under the *Estado Novo*. The submissive role assigned to women by the Salazar regime was supposedly based on their "natural sexual difference and for the good of the family"—aimed to anchor women in a socially and politically docile position.⁶ Consequentially, as most predominantly expressed in the third section of the novel in question, the return of the battalion requires an adaptation to a new dynamic of gender roles that the veterans perceive as disturbing. Several telling examples will serve as illustrative of this trait shared by the main female protagonists of the novel.

The cosmetics consultant Édite, more commonly referred to by the fitting hyperbolic epithet "the cloud of perfume," proposes marriage to the lieutenant colonel and gives him a deadline of a week to live with her (330). Abílio, in his relationship with the concierge, submissively lets himself be smothered by her keenness to "mother" him, to mend and launder his clothes, and also moves in with her. In the same spirit, the strong-willed bookkeeper of the furniture moving company quits her job when she cannot convince Abílio's uncle to "hook up with her" (332). Yet without a doubt the most striking example of a domineering female is Jorge's inopportune and overpowering mother-in-law. Her phallacized voice, "the disagreeable, masculine, authoritarian voice" that cut "through [Jorge's] skull like an incandescent dagger" (39), explodes the traditional masculine/feminine binary, as does the demeanor with which she bosses her husband about and repeatedly reminds him of his worthlessness. The effaced paternal figure inspires Jorge's pity, "so useless, so pathetic, so worthless, so extinct, condemned to stroll like a shadow through the enormous rooms or draining melancholy whiskeys in front of the defunct television set" (96). When the Revolution is in full swing, Jorge's mother-in-law patently treats her husband with utter contempt, as visible in the following passage: "And to her husband, secondary, small, useless, huddled in his easy chair with a glass of cognac forgotten beside him, tuning the volume of the anthems on the radio: 'Come, Jaime, get a move on, take care of things, don't sit there like a frightened rag doll, like an ape, it's beginning to look as if you want them to put us in jail. I still wonder, word of honor, why I ever married a lump like you'" (190-91). After the matriarch's death by pancreatic cancer, the father-in-law's newly found liberation is expressed by his marriage to the housekeeper, "a short little woman with a mustache who at that time at least didn't boss him around:

I'll bet he took the servant to city hall like somebody going to Fátima, on his knees, thankful for a miracle" (39).

In these last two examples in particular one can question the caricatural depiction of these masculinized women. Set against the socio-political circumstances of the fall of Fascism, we are reminded that the aftermath of the revolution gave greater power to women only *in theory*. As Ana Paula Ferreira has discussed, "regardless of democratic laws and the efforts of recently formed women's groups to raise public consciousness, deeply rooted beliefs and cultural practices prevented any effective changes from taking place, whether in the so-called private or public spheres" (222).⁷ Or, as explicitly denoted in the novel's epigraph, taken from a Paul Simon song, "after changes we are more or less the same." We can therefore conclude that, in relation to women within this farcical revolutionary scenario, *Fado alexandrino* portrays their masculinization as the only means to access a real political, domestic and social voice that they obtain through the subversion of their gender.

2. Alternative sexualities

As the novel progresses through the different sections of the narrative, what Foucault coined "peripheral sexualities" become increasingly present in the text (39-40). It is as though lesbianism, gay homoerotica, transsexualism and transvestism, by becoming symbolically more visible and literally replacing former heterosexual relationships as a search for unrequited desires, are emblematic of a greater freedom of expression that can be perceived on both a social and literary plane. Eduardo Lourenço identifies a "new cultural space" in the early eighties in Portugal when works dealing with previously tabooed matter and the Revolution itself began to emerge (7-16). *Fado alexandrino*, published during that time period, most certainly attests to the cultural liberation ostensibly present in the overt sexual content of the text.

The narrative projects the passing regime of a no longer immovable patriarchal order embodied by the fall of the Salazar/Caetano government, and this overthrow of dictatorial patriarchy is simultaneous with a greater visibility of "other" sexualities that call into question compulsory heterosexuality, dispelling all illusions of stable sex, gender and identity. The events of the Revolution itself are muted in the background of the novel as the protagonists relate their personal crises that are circumstantially reinforced by a feeling of temporal and geographic displacement in the post-colonial

setting of the metropolis. The destabilization of the continuum sex, gender and desire adds to this already overwhelming sense of estrangement.

Perhaps one of the most striking contrasts of this demise of the law of the Father is the above-mentioned rejection of Jorge by his wife Inês and her relationship with Ilka. Jorge's annulment becomes obsessively present in his confessional discourse as he constantly juxtaposes both relationships and their respective hetero- or homosexuality. Jorge's perplexity as the rejected husband is amplified by his incomprehension at having become the displaced subject of a desire that—to draw from Lacan—requires the presence and reflection of the Other, as its absence or lack, to confirm his “having” of the phallus. Inês no longer regards him as the beholder of the phallus, nor does she choose to supply the site to which it penetrates, inevitably provoking the destabilization of Jorge's identity (Lacan 83-85). Explicitly represented in the constant comparison of both relationships is Jorge's castration anxiety—once “having” the phallus and now fearing its loss—that is here wielded by his non-acceptance of the lesbian phallus in the Inês/Ilka relationship (Butler, *Bodies* 84).

Jorge's interpretation of his wife's lesbianism further denounces her relationship with Ilka as one of masquerade, representing what Judith Butler theorizes as “a feminine desire which would establish an insubordinate alterity to the masculine subject and expose the necessary failure of masculinity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 61). From Jorge's masculinist point of view, his wife's lesbianism is the refusal of sexuality *per se*, as presumed heterosexuality; he is being rejected and relegated, both literally and figuratively, to the position of an observer.⁸ His anguish is expressed by his physical repudiation towards the female sex. Obsessively, his fear spills over into his unconscious as his own (heterosexual) affair with his co-worker Ilda and his wife's affair with Ilka become uncannily one (198). This sexual blurring reaches its pinnacle at the conclusion of the novel, where the merging of the couples is even more disturbing as the scenes move from one couple to the next with graphic sexual content leaving Jorge with an intensified sense of fear and nausea.⁹

Another prominent depiction of “alternative” sexuality in *Fado alexandrino* corresponds to the relationship formed by the soldier Abílio, the blond painter, and his Senegalese lover Désiré, which foregrounds and internally questions the dynamics of homosexuality in the post-revolutionary process. If in Portugal sexual minority practices and homosexuality in particular were considered for over seventy years a crime, during the regeneration following the Revolution there was a re-evaluation of the sexual codes the country had lived with

for decades.¹⁰ As a consequence, the period of transition from dictatorship to democracy witnessed a greater awareness of homoeroticism in a period of progressive cultural liberation. During the reunion dinner, the army comrades discuss this “abrupt” display of homosexuality, as voiced by the second lieutenant’s comment that his neighborhood had “got full of faggotry all of a sudden” (39). The lieutenant’s neighbors, a “fag painter and his black lover from Senegal who babbled French and stumbled over the words” (39), represent this seemingly rapid appearance of “faggotry” in the urban post-imperial setting.

In relation to the concept of lusotropicalism, whereby colonized spaces represent uterine topoi, Luís Madureira discusses the reversal of the gendered tropical topoi in the work of Lobo Antunes—the substitution of “an image of colonialism as impregnation with that of colonialism as ‘sodomy’” (25). Madureira’s enlightening discussion focuses predominantly on Lobo Antunes’s novel *Os cus de Judas*, with the exception of a reference to Abílio in *Fado alexandrino* alleviating his sexual frustration at the sentry post of the native village, “with a machine gun in the right hand and money in the other [...] to get into the fart-hole of a dumb nigger” (70). In yet a different twist, this analogy is extendable to the urban context of the novel where, in the post-colonial setting, Abílio, who once was in a position to *pay* the sodomized twenty contos, finds himself now at the bottom end of the urban class system, and is transformed from sodomizer into sodomized in his relationship with the Senegalese busker and the blond painter (59-60).

Through Abílio’s confession, we learn that after his first chance encounter with the painter, when he happened to be commissioned to move his furniture (one of the many intricate interconnections and chance encounters woven throughout *Fado alexandrino*), if he wanted money to take Odete out, to the movies, for a walk, to the beach, then he would pay the painter a visit. Abílio confesses: “Once we were in bed and right then and there the black man showed up, stripped, dancing, with marks and spirals in chalk drawn on his chest, and he crawled in between the sheets too, squealing: I earned a conto taking care of that queer pussycat couple who would scratch each other, tinkling bracelets, feeling their behinds, biting each other’s neck, meowing in French. Naturally, I never mentioned that to Odete, I’d have sunk into the ground if I ever thought she might have guessed” (64). Apparent in this complex hetero-homo matrix is the fact that the homo-prostitution fuels the money into the hetero-relationship. Yet what is certainly more complex is that in this bizarre *ménage-à-trois* that supplies Abílio with the

funds to court his girlfriend, the soldier becomes despite himself caught in the middle, both emotionally and physically: “Désiré loved to dress up as a woman and spin around on the carpet, with long fingernails, high heels, and a wig, smoking American cigarettes in a tortoiseshell holder, and the man would shove me away to grab him, shrieking in an excited way *Je t’aime je t’aime je t’aime*” (65).

The descriptions of the painter and Désiré translate a challenge to existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements in distinct manners. For Désiré, temporary cross-dressing appears to be little more than a playful masquerade to create an effect of erotic “naughtiness” that, through his obvious hyperbolic femininity and the kitsch staging, toys with the heterosexual economy of desire. The connotations of the black man’s name draw on the meaning of being desired as a male object of desire; however, the fact that the name “Désiré” is most often used in its female form “Désirée” skillfully coalesces both genders.¹¹ Regarding the “old man,” the detailed description that the soldier relates to the Captain focuses on the painter’s clear attempts to become feminized through bodily transformations: “his plump thighs lying on the sheet, [...] the grayish clump of dying hair of his pubes, smothering a prick in its blond-dyed tangle, and then the protruding stomach, the woman’s breasts, the round absence of muscles” (106).

Seen through the eyes of Abílio, the named sexed bodily parts in this anatomic description (pubes, penis, breasts...) point to a restrictive categorization of the erogenous body and a fragmentation of the sexed body as a whole, defying the categories of sex as coherent and unified. As Wittig demonstrates, the integrity of the sexed body serves the purposes of fragmentation, restriction and domination that here are removed by this “overthrow” of universal signifying sexual parts (9-20). It is as though the painter’s “imaginary condition of desire” has exceeded his physical body, that to conform to such desires required some exaggerated and other diminished bodily parts.¹² If on the one hand Désiré fantasizes that he can become a phallic woman by cross-dressing in a fetishistic ritual, the painter gives the soldier fetishistic orders, such as leaving on his shoes and socks (204). The soldier’s position is truly significant in that he becomes the painter’s object of desire, replacing Désiré (203). At the anticlimactic climax of this bizarre love triangle that merges prostitutional and domestic spheres, the painter turns up dead in Cruz Quebrada on the outskirts of Lisbon and Désiré is arrested for the crime. If the narrative portrays the soldier’s relationship with the gay couple

as a duty performed “gritting his teeth,” in the scenes that are related following the painter’s assassination Abílio continues to explore what he refers to as an amusing and lucrative avenue “in urinals and public parks,” thus moving his private “moonshining” activities into an anonymous public sphere (209). It also becomes apparent that Abílio’s nocturnal activities are not exclusively about financial gain but are also driven by libidinal and affective motives. As the soldier states, “it wasn’t always for money [...] it was out of friendship too, out of companionship in loneliness” (210).

In this night arena, the narrator emphasizes Abílio’s intermingling with transvestites, “sexless amphibian animals” (209) whose appearance, gestures and voices, progressively, as the hours roll on, once again become masculine and decisive. This overtly theatrical masquerade, to draw from Butler, “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 137). In this context of the novel, the performative nature of gender is reified by the contents of the transvestites’ compartments: “fearsome piles of men’s and women’s clothing everywhere, dresses, shoes, pants, neckties, a kind of truss to flatten and hide testicles and penis, mirrors with light bulbs all around like theater dressing rooms, and lots of bottles and flasks and atomizers and hooks and razors and photographs cut from magazines” (210). What becomes explicit is the distinction between the “contingent dimensions of significant corporeality,” to quote once again from Butler, that are here played upon: the maleness (of the anatomical sex), the feminine gender performance (displayed in the temporary impersonation), and gender identity (heterosexuality versus homosexuality). This feminine performative *mise en scène* culminates in Abílio’s experience with Tó Zé, “from a good family, son of an engineer, who wanted to be a dancer” (210), “an accident, foolishness” that Abílio confesses, to the disgust of those present during the battalion reunion: “He [Tó Zé]’d had paraffin injected into his breasts to give them shape, he had almost no balls, almost no dick, a little bulge, a few stringy hairs and nothing else, maybe you won’t believe me, but it was practically like being with a woman, believe me, the same smell of the flesh as with women, the same moans, the same movements” (210). In contrast to Désiré and the transvestites of the Cais de Sodré, Tó Zé marks the opposite pole of male subjectivity. Whereas the male cross-dresser or transvestite can be perceived as representing, as Robert J. Stoller suggests, “the extreme limit case of ‘male subjectivity,’ ‘proving’ that he is male against the most extraordinary odds,” the male transsexual “does not wish to be a phallic woman; he wishes to be a biologically normal woman”

(Stoller 186; Garber 96). Pertinent to the description of Tó Zé is the conviction that the penis, “the absolute insignia of maleness,” and his quest to annul this false sign of gender identity govern his subjectivity (186).

These different forms of engendered performativities transgress the idea of fixed norms of sex, gender and sexuality by flaunting disobedience to a heterosexual, binary framework. Whether it is a partial sex change, a temporary mimicry of the opposite (female) sex, or a blatant effacement of a heterosexual paradigm, Lobo Antunes emblemizes the liberatory desire to reconceive gender identities. In this post-Revolutionary era, these newly constructed identities constitute the epitome of post-modern sexuality by exploding the anxieties of binarity and revealing the essential constructedness or performance of gender. Alongside the denaturalization of heterosexuality that the novel sets center-stage through an explosion of sexual discourses and alternative engenderings of desire, the text also denigrates female sex and sexuality, an important aspect of the novel that we will now address.

3. Abject (female) sex

As our analysis has outlined so far, the novel works from the viewpoint of the hegemonic heterosexual male discourse and as a consequence other forms of sexuality are presented as marginalized or outright abnormal. This is blatantly visible, for example, in relation to the Jorge/Inês/Ilka triangle of which there is a one-sided account that focuses on Inês's lesbian relationship perceived through Jorge's narrative voice: “She must have a rotten body, Inês, withered breasts, varicose veins, disgusting folds in her belly, what charm can you find in that crocodile, why do her gray-haired pubes attract you?” (313). This spiteful description of an alternative economy of sexual pleasures independent of the heterosexual attraction views lesbian erotics as abject, valorizing, precisely, the purple-haired lady's rotten body. This rottenness brings to mind Plato's *Timaeus* and the concept that “in the absence of men, women's sexual functioning is aimless and unproductive, merely a form of rottenness and decay” (qtd. in Lauretis 19). This notion is all the more telling here in that, in Jorge's view, Inês has chosen rottenness and decay over heterosexuality and legitimacy.

As a stereotypical topic of male conversation, references to female sex and sexuality constitute a significant portion of the confessional discourse of the battalion members. Focusing on the female genitalia as emblematic of that Other sex, Jorge compares Inês's pubes to a “damp, resting hedgehog which

was licking his fingers with the tender membranes of its mouth” (38). In similar circumstances, the (male) narrator draws attention to her “long biological-science-book mammoth hairs of the vulva” (163). Likewise, Inês is compared to a toad and a turtle, specifically as she lies on the conjugal bed.¹³ At one point, in reference to Ilda, the smell of female sexual discharge is likened to “rotting canned cuttlefish” (192), as Jorge ponders on why he doesn’t enjoy making love to her. Later, a similar reference is made in relation to the “cloud of perfume” by Artur who, once he is able to cure his urea and is at last able to perform sexually, sees Édite as a “beached codfish” (312).

If the novel caricatures female sex and sexuality, there is also throughout a phallocentric censoring of female sexual pleasure. Emblematic of this is Jorge’s fear of Ilda reaching orgasm and how that affects his sexual enjoyment, as though he were repulsed by her female pleasure, so blatantly fitting with the masculinist view of sex that is constant throughout the narrative (194). If on the one hand Jorge struggles to find sexual fulfillment with his lover Ilda, as the cuckold husband that has been replaced by his wife’s lesbian lover, his conjugal sex is also deeply amiss. Trapped economically as his job at the bank depends on his wife’s family, he mentally strives to block out his wife’s lesbianism and accept at face value the excuses Inês and Ilka utter when he catches them in *flagrant délit*. In almost complete denial, he comments: “their bodies tight together, the old woman’s purple locks mingled with Inês’s light brown hair, fingers with long nails interlaced and letting go, cooing, whispering, giggling. You might find it strange but by the following week I’d almost completely forgotten the matter and we even made love from time to time on weekends in silent and mediocre pleasure” (247). He justifies being rejected by his wife and his denial of her lesbianism by his humble background “I’d tried to fly too high for my wings [...] it was only right for me to screw myself up a little, it was only right for me to learn, at my own expense, what I really was: a lump, the son of an old typesetter, an innocent boob just drifting along” (247). Jorge’s low self-esteem and the economical/sexual humiliation that he suffers culminate in their symbolic departure from Inês’s family home at Carcavelos when there is news that political turmoil is underway: Jorge relates how Inês rode in front of him with her lesbian lover in the white Alfa Romeo “with the air of an owner” and he followed their exhaust behind, “as an underling, or just a piece of shit, or a servant” (251).

At the purple lady’s residence, the feeling of humiliation and effacement is prolonged further as Ilka ambiguously offers her servant’s “availability” if

Jorge would need some “scrambled eggs,” orders him to buy cigarettes for her, as she frolics with Inês (314).¹⁴ Deeply perplexed, years later Jorge continues to wonder what his ex-wife saw in that old lady with “shriveled legs, shriveled breasts, the shriveled neck of a chicken [...] what kind of shit draws you to her?” (254).¹⁵ Even more intriguing is the fact that there is a clear reversal of gender roles from one relationship to the other: whereas Inês treats Jorge with contempt and authority, taking a domineering stand, with Ilka she takes the submissive position.

This dissonant juxtaposition, transposed within the lesbian economy, portrays Ilka as identified with masculinity in a play of masculine and feminine that destabilizes both terms as they come into erotic play. This butch/femme dynamic is expressed by reference to their laughter, the purple-haired woman’s “unexpected masculine laugh” in contrast to Inês’s submissive one (256). Inês’s affair with Ilka is channeled through Jorge’s phallogocentric point of view and as such he interprets his wife’s lesbianism in relation to heterosexual norms. Butler addresses this complex identification of lesbian desires in relation to the heterosexual paradigm when she states:

The idea that butch and femme are in some sense “replicas” or “copies” of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic signification of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. (*Gender Trouble* 157)

In the narrative, this “displacement” can be perceived at several levels as Jorge becomes the outsider, a *persona non grata*. Furthermore, in comparison to the hegemonic patriarchal structure, Inês and Ilda’s affair appears all the more “subversive” by being situated beyond the paternal law as Inês’s parents are completely oblivious to, or choose to ignore, their daughter’s relationship, which they discredit on religious grounds given the fact that even before they fled to Brazil “they went to Fátima together to the candlelight procession” (314).

Only the conclusion of the Inês/Ilda relationship provides a short-lived comfort to Jorge. As he sarcastically relates when Inês and her family return to Portugal, the “purple haired lady” stayed behind in São Paulo “shacking up with an ex-nun who would parade in the Rio carnival dressed as a man” (426). As is characteristic of *Fado alexandrino*, when it appears that there could be nothing more “obscure” or alternative to the heterosexual

norm, expectancies are pushed to their extreme limit as in this reference to the Carnival cross-dressing lesbian ex-nun that portrays the epitome of gender obscurity and hegemonic transgression. Jorge's effacement is further reinforced when, years later, he goes to visit his daughter and finds his ex-wife with a new lesbian lover (who also happens to be the lieutenant colonel's daughter), showing impudent signs of affection going at each other like "hungry insects" (427), as if he and their daughter Mariana were not present. However, as the second lieutenant's confession becomes progressively more intimate, he admits that despite his fury, picturing his ex-wife with her lover left him sexually excited (427).

Likewise, another relationship that concludes with the rejection of the male partner is the one between Abílio and Odete, who doubles as Dália, the communications officer's secret contact. After they are married and Odete becomes pregnant, she rejects him sexually and treats him as a "full-fledged idiot," which she justifies by his lack of culture and disinterest in reading (258). Interestingly, in Abílio's case, though the humiliation started almost immediately after they are married and his wife "shows him to be the piece of shit he was" (258), once she becomes pregnant, in true bovaresque fashion he is completely rejected and becomes "a bothersome guest" (267) in his own house and in his own bed. What is apparent here is that Odete's pregnancy coincides with the sexual rejection of her husband, most certainly an indication of the fact that she already has a lover and no longer needs to go through the conjugal motions to mask what would then appear as an illegitimate pregnancy.

Nonetheless, Abílio voices his attempt to keep his dignity by justifying his self-sufficiency through sexual difference: "I stick my diddly up my own ass, Odete, but what do you want to do with the hairy space between your thighs where I can't get lost, can't sink in?" (270).¹⁶ Relating this passage to the writings of Luce Irigaray allows us to contrast this masculinist view with her feminist perspective, according to which female sexuality has the potentiality, on the contrary, to exist autonomously beyond the law of the phallus. In particular, in the now classic text *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray attempts to articulate feminine sexuality and sexual pleasure beyond the realm of discourse produced by men. Abílio's rhetorical interjection expresses the very negation of this female autonomous homo- or autoeroticism.

The disavowal of female sexual autonomy and pleasure and the unilateral view of male sexual dominance as viewed by Abílio in the above-mentioned passage, as well as the general comments of the other army comrades perva-

sively expressed throughout the novel, are temporarily reversed in the only section of *Fado alexandrino* that takes a female narrative voice. Esmeralda, an “old maid” who lives with the communications officer and his godmother behind the Feira Popular amusement park, narrates the section in question.¹⁷ Although Esmeralda is a secondary protagonist who is introduced at the beginning of the novel (in the third chapter of the first section entitled “Before the Revolution”), this chapter which is the only one to allow a female narrative voice, symbolically constitutes the penultimate chapter of the last section, “After the Revolution.”

As Maria Alzira Seixo observes, this chapter has a poetic dimension that further sets it apart from the other narrative voices.¹⁸ It is as though in order for Esmeralda to have a voice, it must distinguish itself from the mainstream narration, the true History told by men. The positioning of the section and its inherent significance project the importance for women to finally express their point of view on the topic of female sexuality, as the last part of this section suggests: “and maybe all women know the same thing I know and are afraid to confess it to other women because they don’t know if they know and they’re afraid of disbelief and mockery, or because men make us that way out of relief and defense” (477). Esmeralda’s autobiographical account focuses on the physical and emotional abuse of having been successively raped. She arrives at the bitter conclusion “that all men are like each other in their depression and their weakness, that they all try to delve into our insides with the keys hanging from their bellies, to deposit in us the drop of snot that they’re made of, and they all get dressed without looking at us, getting tangled up in the dozens of buttons on their clothes, leaving right away, furtively, like thieves of our bodies, thieves of the dull pleasure they’d had” (477).

Esmeralda’s narrative portrays women as dispensable inferior sex objects at the mercy of domineering men, and this feeling of anguish and hatred provokes the physical, sexual and emotive closing of her body to men. The closing of the lips between her legs “with the soft and insistent selfishness of corollas” after her stepfather pierced and perforated her is the literal and symbolic representation of this conscious withdrawal from the realm of male dominated sexuality. As such, Esmeralda considers masturbation the only alternative to an abusive, sexual dead-end for women within the patriarchal impositions of forceful heterosexuality. The description of her autonomous autoeroticism portrays *jouissance* “without hatred finally, devoid of rancor” (470). Esmeralda’s perception of heterosexuality, conditioned by her unfortunate experi-

ences, leaves her with a feeling of utter disgust for sex with men. Her depiction of male anatomy and their genitalia in particular, along with her view of their grotesque sexual tactics, emphasizes images of nausea, death, sterility and dryness (470). This vilified picture of male sexuality reaches its epitome in the humiliation she suffers at the mercy of the husband of the “Lady” for whom she works in Lisbon. Emphasizing the closure of her body, Esmeralda relates her boss’s husband forcefully trying, in vain, to penetrate her, his “enormous hernia of a testicle that made him try to penetrate sideways, unsuccessfully, the closed corolla of [her] womb” (473). Even after his death, she still pictures: “the desperate efforts of the dead man to penetrate her thighs without an opening, the sealing wax of her vagina, the spiral lips of her womb” (473).

In the context of *Fado alexandrino*, and on a greater scale, also that of the majority of Lobo Antunes’s novels, this unique section stands as one of the only passages to take a female voice to explicitly portray female sexuality.¹⁹ This section simultaneously inscribes and questions the viability of the female condition in what is an apparently unbendable phallogentric system. Placed following this polyphonic labyrinth of male voices that constitute the majority of the novel, Esmeralda’s narrative confronts and negates the previous male-sided accounts, though by the same token it also appears as merely one against many, confined to a chapter whose textual existence is contained in a manner similar to that of its oppressed tangential speaking subject who is only temporarily provided with the power of self-expression. Esmeralda ends her days as an “old maid” in a home for the elderly, where she progressively sinks deeper and deeper into silence, madness and oblivion.

This withdrawal echoes Irigaray’s discussion on female sexuality as nothing but a muted threat: “as long as she is not a ‘subject’, so long as she cannot disrupt through her speech, her desire, her pleasure, the operation of the language that lays down the law, the prevailing organization of power [...] there is, for women, no possible law for their pleasure. No more than there is any possible discourse” (95). On the one hand, because of her silence, Esmeralda can no longer be even symbolically a discursive challenge to patriarchy as she recedes into an enclosed society in order to elude submission to male-supremacist oppression. Her sterile womb also removes her further from any “rightful” participation in sexuality, a sexual nonexistence that Lacan relates directly to mothering.²⁰ On all accounts, Esmeralda’s narrative as the creation of a new discourse to confront sexual discrimination on the grounds of gender inequality is but a passing attempt.

4. In/conclusive Sexual Dissatisfaction

Other than the above-discussed thwarted negotiation with phallogocentrism, there seems to be another important challenge to this “norm” and “center” that seconds Esmeralda’s female narrative attempt of revenge on male-dominated heterosexuality: male sexual dissatisfaction. In particular, the topic of dismal sexuality is constantly related to lieutenant colonel Artur Esteves’s sexual impotence (or fear of impotence), perceived as a lack of virility. In references to Artur—more so than to any of the other male protagonists of the novel—the sexual/political overlap is prominent. The obsessively repeated torments “Am I still capable?” “Can I still do it?” and the untiring efforts of the cleaning lady to excite him become a leitmotif that is repeatedly invoked in the text as Artur relates his anguish before an “inexplicable, intermittent functioning” which he attributes to his age (116).

This intermittent impotence coalesces with his political inaptness, portraying him as a political eunuch, fearful of taking a stand alongside the communist activist Captain Mendes and other revolutionaries who want to bring down the dictatorship, and who also refuse to support the Caetano government. The political shame of indecisiveness and inactivity is embodied in the “soft, sad little thing, an insignificant little trunk, a piece of cylindrical skin, worthless” (116). Interestingly, in these as in many other passages, the sexual/political crisscrossing is apparent at the narrative level—the uncanny blending of political with personal and sexual²¹—as well as on a semantic level, through the adaptation of hybrid expressions such as “the revolutionary hard-ons” (276), symbolic once again of dominant, phallic power, but a power that will be short-lived.²²

Artur’s fear of impotence continues into his next sexual relationship with the “cloud of perfume,” Édite, where he fears that he will likewise “cut the usual sad figure [he does] with the concierge” (294). In the first scene with Édite, his paranoia is couched in the distortedly exaggerated vision of the bed as she lures him into her room, like a spider to her web: “and just as the lieutenant feared, the rectangular, gigantic, huge bed, raised up on a kind of altar or platform with two carpeted steps, the lace bedspread, puffy-cheeked twin pillows leaning against one another like loving heads” (295-96). The “cloud of perfume” deals with his humiliation in a condescending maternal way (“Mama’s going to make you big in a minute” [304]), blatantly performing her role as a sexual instrument whose function is to enlarge and to excite the man, focusing solely on size and performance.

In this as in other episodes, what is apparent is the emphasis on the phallic, masculinist discourse of male pleasure; yet, for the most part, these desires remain unsatisfied. Most emblematic of this is the relationship between the communications officer and Dália, Odete's political identification. The communications officer's complete lack of courage, his erotic and obsessive fantasizing to "shit on socialism, lift up [her] skirts, lie down on the grass, hold what [he] can feel growing in [his] shorts and stick it in [her] with a short, hoarse, isolated animal grunt, into [her] hold" remains but an unsatisfied urge as he, and her legal husband Abílio, both take second place to Lenin (274). The communications officer's need for sexual pleasure likewise revolves around the phallus and the objectification of the woman as the sheath; far from being interested in her ideological ideas, it is sexual gratification that he seeks, as expressed in the following passage: "I've got such a craving for your fingers to go up and down my fleshy piston, eagerly, slowly, deliciously" (273). Nothing, however, will come of his sexual cravings towards Dália, and he ends up having an affair with Édite, the lieutenant colonel's wife, who is also sexually unsatisfied. Similarly, the lieutenant colonel's daughter, though only a minor protagonist in the novel, will prefer the Cambodian revolution to her husband. She considers herself a feminist and ultimately has a relationship, through a convoluted twist of circumstances, with Jorge's ex-wife Inês, leaving her husband in distress and faced with the realities of their daily existence, the fact that they "just bought an apartment and haven't yet paid off the car loan" (280).

Perhaps the pinnacle of sexual misencounters is the second lieutenant's experience working in an ornithological laboratory for a Lebanese biologist whose specialty is nothing less obscure than the sexual aberrations of geese and the post-masturbatory melancholy of owls (374). Particularly symbolic in this passage is the fantastical transformation of Jorge from laboratory worker to object of sexual analysis, becoming himself a bird and a specimen of biological research, emblematic of his feeling of social and sexual misidentification following his wife's consumed lesbianism. He ends up overcoming his hallucinations and becoming the lover of a midget, with the assurance that "at least with this one there's no danger, who's going to love her" (434). The cruel description of the midget is extremely grotesque: "microscopic arms and legs, a huge head sitting on an almost nonexistent body, tiny, ugly, disagreeable, misshapen, poorly dressed, you" (433). The description of the "nonexistent body" of the midget leans towards a de-gendered figure that would "fall out-

side the human, constituting the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 142).

In the battalion gathering, Jorge comments on her genitalia and sexuality with equal ruthlessness, portraying her to be somewhat of a sexual curiosity, representative of all midgets: “their vaginas are just the same, it’s just that they wiggle more, get worked up more, are more like caterpillars, more insatiable, have more pleasure” (433). In a bizarre metonymical delusion, the second lieutenant *becomes* the midget, which once again points to “its” de-gendered constitution. He only regains his manliness when he begins the process of his morning shave, a culturally marked ritual that allows him to take on the shape and size of a man (436). It is as though the sexual relationship with the midget transforms him, de-genders him, destabilizes the binary oppositional masculine/female relation between him and his partner, only to regain his own identity once he has accomplished his manly morning rituals and is about to leave the house. Following the night with the officers, it is also this tragico-comical scene that will greet Jorge under the effect of the whiskey and gin: “the midget growled in the vestibule, furious, waving her twisted little limbs at the level of the second lieutenant’s knees” (480). Ironically, Jorge’s relationship with the midget is the only stable heterosexual relationship that exists at the close of the novel—Abílio having long been abandoned by Odete, Artur Esteves living in depression, “waiting in vain for feathers of wings to grow [...] to be able to fly” (406), and his wife having an affair with the communications officer who will be murdered.

More pertinent, however, to our study than the very end of the novel following the anticlimactic “shock of non-shock” homicide of the communications officer is the bizarre crescendo of sexual misencounters that, under the effects of alcohol, reaches its climax as each of the main protagonists and those who have joined the group all try to outdo each other with their most outrageous sexual experiences.²³ Interestingly, at this point, two of the minor protagonists, the magician’s assistant and one of the blond twins, relate their most kinky sexual stories. The magician’s assistant tells of her experience with “a nut who would make her put on his mother’s wedding dress before getting into bed with her, and dress up himself with blue velvet knickers, his hair in bangs, wearing a ruffled shirt, repeating Mama Mama Mama Mama Mama Mama in the little whine of a child. [...] Trying to kiss her ‘peepee place’ and force a lemon lollipop between her legs” (373). The blond twin relates how an engineer paid her to “screw with him and with a clothes dummy called Alfredo

[...]. Making love to a managing director and a pasteboard dummy is a hell of a job, the skinny girl explained, I was beside myself trying to get an orgasm out of Alfredo, two or three mechanical little shakes and that's that, two or three little nothing leaps and all set" (395, 402). The twin explains how Alfredo's wife had died of a stroke and the dummy had filled that affective void.

As both of these examples illustrate, the conclusion of the novel, playing along the line of obscure sexualities and engendered masquerade, takes to its peak the explosion of normal heterosexual boundaries. What is inherent in the conclusion of the novel is the instability of gender and sexed polarities, which become a prime site for the "parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44). Lobo Antunes's challenge to the compulsory heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within that domain pervasively illustrates "gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts," yet his novel takes these discontinuities to the extreme (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 173).

What is ultimately left is a feeling of overall dissatisfaction that extends from the public/political sphere to the private realm of sexuality. This parallelism between sex and revolution permeates the novel, as expressed in a passage by Jorge who, after sex with Ilda, confesses "how quick this all is [...], how horribly unsatisfying and quick this all is" (198). The kaleidoscope of overlapping, unfulfilled desires that fuel the narrative represent the constructed status of gendered performances and un-idealized relationships that are purposely and emblematically set against what was seemingly a meaningless war and a subsequent, manqué Revolution.

Notes

¹ "Gender as performance" is a concept that has achieved prominence in psychoanalysis and gender studies since the 1990s and that has been mostly associated with Judith Butler, who is by no means the first to offer this type of theorization but gives the most detailed (and often overly complex) account. In particular, the distinction made by Butler between performance (as a "bounded act") and performativity ("a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'"), as outlined in the essay "Critically Queer" (*Bodies That Matter*, 234) appears difficult to uphold since both rely upon recitation of the same norms and conventions and the performance is itself performative.

² Butler's arguments for an iterative model of the subject takes as its primary theoretical tool Derrida's notion of citationality that argues that performative utterances are not singular events but the effects of "citational doubling" as explained in Derrida's "Signature Event Context."

³ Here Butler is specifically discussing Monique Wittig's 1981 essay "One is not born a woman."

⁴ Though the narrative consists of the recollections of these four companions and their captain, there are other comrades present who seem to be sitting slightly removed from the group mentioned and to whom there is the occasional reference and who also interject their comments.

⁵ Among the four novels written by Lobo Antunes before *Fado alexandrino*, the silent female interlocutor in *Os cus de Judas* (1979; translated as *South of Nowhere*, 1983) is the most obvious example of this effacement of the female protagonists.

⁶ As Hilary Owen states, "the notorious Addendum to Article 5 (of the 1933 constitution) asserted that women not be afforded equal citizenship on account of 'as diferenças resultantes da sua natureza e do bem da família'" (4). For an overview of the status of women under Salazar, see Ana Paula Ferreira's "Home Bound: The Construct of Femininity in the Estado Novo." For a more general overview of women's issues in Portugal, see Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez's "Women's issues in Portugal."

⁷ In the section of this article entitled "On the Critical Dyad 'Literature and Revolution,'" Ferreira discusses some of the key intersections between the Portuguese Revolution and "the female question," in particular reviewing the legal changes and the position of the woman writer during this period.

⁸ There are several scenes in the novel where Jorge is positioned outside a half-opened door through which he can see his wife with her lover.

⁹ This section is developed interruptedly over several pages (starting at page 485) and ends with the following passage: "Inês, dripping oil, was now slowly caressing her friend's triangle of hair with her nose and chin, moaning as she nibbled at her groin, her navel, her hip bones [...]" (496).

¹⁰ The *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality* states that in Portugal homosexuality "was considered by the law as a behavior against nature and was considered equivalent to the crime of vagrancy. Individuals accused of this crime were kept, sometimes for years, in the *Mitras*, institutions for prostitutes, homeless, and other excluded persons." Only following the revolutionary period did the first gay, lesbian and bisexual groups appear claiming their rights and recognition (Nodin 520). For an overview of the social status of gays, lesbians and bisexuals since the Revolution, see also Fernando Arenas and Susan Cauty Quinlan's *Lusosex*, especially pages xviii-xix.

¹¹ Coincidentally, in Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, a drag queen "Désirée" (Nick Cristina) is depicted several times (45, 47, 59).

¹² This aspect of transsexuality is briefly discussed in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (90).

¹³ This is mentioned specifically in relation to Inês, her "toadlike spasm" (38) and moving slightly "on the mattress like a turtle at the bottom of a fishbowl" (38).

¹⁴ As we will develop, there are butch connotations associated to the "purple haired lady" throughout the text, as the reference to cigarettes in this passage.

¹⁵ Maria Alzira Seixo refers to the desired women in the novel becoming undesirable, and mentions Inês as one of the examples. However, it would seem that Jorge, still obsessively thinking about his wife, continues to desire her through the memory of the shared past (Seixo 139).

¹⁶ The original Portuguese is as follows: "Metó no cu a minha tusa, Odete, mas tu que fazes do peludo intervalo de coxas em que me não perco, em que me não afundo?" (386). The expression "metó no cu a minha tusa" can be interpreted on several levels. On the one hand, it could refer symbolically (as in the English translation) to the self-sufficiency of the male sex, or read as a declaration of "turgid" indifference.

¹⁷ As Phyllis Peres rightly points out, the amusement park world, "The Pit of Death," "The World of Illusion," is really a trope of the ruins of empire (198).

¹⁸ Seixo comments on the different styles of narration as follows: "As únicas personagens

que, para além do capitão, assumem mais longamente o acto de narrar, Esmeralda e o official de transmissões [...] fazem-no com uma dimensão poética que também desvia o texto do seu estatuto regular, oferecendo-nos, especialmente no penúltimo capítulo, momentos de uma rara beleza de escrita e de uma qualidade lírica exemplar”(140).

¹⁹ In Lobo Antunes's next novel, *Auto dos danados* (1985) [*Act of the Damned* (1993)] one of the main protagonists, Ana, will likewise become the narrator in the second section of the text. These two texts mark a stark contrast to the silenced woman in the bar in *Os cus de Judas*.

²⁰ Irigaray quotes Lacan as stating that “woman comes into play in the sexual relation only as mother”(102).

²¹ One of the most symbolic examples of this is the passage in which the fusion of the political fear impersonated by Captain Mendes and the sexual fear of not being able to perform with the concierge become, somewhat disturbingly, part of the same scene (116).

²² The original expression is “tesão revolucionária” (392).

²³ Phyllis Peres comments on this anticlimactic conclusion of the novel in relation to the impossibility to regenerate the nation whose “articulation has become disarticulation”(199).

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