

From Lobo Antunes to Joseph Conrad: The Writing of Post-Colonial Maps and Phantoms

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Abstract: The article delineates some of the intertextual connections between *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo* by António Lobo Antunes and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and it takes as its point of departure the metaphor of the map, which stands for a critical reflection on the West's colonial and post-colonial adventure in Africa. Borrowing from David Spurr's analysis of imperial rhetoric, we further identify that these two works are revealing of how this imperial rhetoric remains present in the discourse and culture of the colonial and post-colonial worlds.

Hão-de existir barcos do Congo ao Alentejo, gente que se recorde
[There will be boats all the way from the Congo to Alentejo,
those who will remember] (Antunes 498)

Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo, by António Lobo Antunes, suggests a wide number of readings, one of the most relevant of which is the novel's intertextual relationship with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This relationship is conveyed through the persistently employed allegory of "maps," which for Lobo Antunes functions as a provocative anaphora for the simulacrum of the action that allows, *inter alia*, dating the critical reading of the imperial project in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo, as with several of Antunes's other novels, fits into the category of texts Roland Barthes would have classified as "script-

able." The purpose of these sort of texts is not to represent, but rather to implicate the reader in the process of production (13). The act of interpreting a text implies appreciating the many possible senses engendered by the narrative.

Thus, *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo* does not follow a logic or grammar of narration (internal order, the balancing out of parts, the representational model); this permits multiple points of entry into a reading of the text, multiple variations and movements in signification, points of escape (that which has been freed from a narrative Law), an opening up in signification that evokes the detritus of voices from other texts and differences that recur endlessly and never rest in a single meaning.

What we have before us is not a (mythological) narrative of action, but rather the vestiges or the questioning of a movement, of a map that suggests a (gnoseological) narrative of knowledge (Todorov 187). In Antunes's works action is ancillary—even secondary. Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness* it is not action that motivates the narrative, but rather a search for knowledge and truth: thus the suppression of any direct reference to Africa or the Congo universalizes the narrative, and it is possible to read it as a witness to the human condition and not merely as an account of Belgian colonization in the beginning of the twentieth century (Meyers).

There are elements, admittedly of a fragmentary nature, that suggest an intersection between the two works, *viz.*, the penchant of the narrator of the *Heart of Darkness* for maps and the constant presence of maps and their metonymic duplicates (reports, notebooks, files, memoranda, ramblings) in the work of Lobo Antunes. On the other hand, the ivory and diamond trades (the whiteness of both like the skin color of the colonizer) connect the two geographic areas on opposite sides of the border—the Congo and Angola. Likewise, the diamond trade in Angola began in the early years of the twentieth century (de Sá) and Marlow (similarly to Seabra / Miguéis / Morais, etc.) makes a trip whose apparent objective (the *target* in Antunes, *Kurtz* in Conrad) is never fully revealed and attained, while the characters in the novel by Antunes are also confronted with the unknown, darkness and horror.

If, on the one hand, *Heart of Darkness*, narrated by Marlow who tells us of his journey, begins with a boat trip down the Congo River, the epilogue of the novel by Lobo Antunes—which takes place in the period after the civil war—ironically (and provocatively) takes place on a boat in the bay of Luanda (which harks back to the beginning of Marlow's voyage and reminds

us that the colonial adventure never ended, that it has merely started anew in a different form); this is related, in a manner both perverse and innocent, through the narrative voice of a child who tells us about the business deal between a Frenchman, a Portuguese national, the owner of the leisure boat and an Angolan admiral. But above all, there is reference to the permanence of colonial prejudices, the lack of knowledge of the Other, and to opinions that are developed in various forms through the behavior and the multiple voices of the characters that inhabit *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo*.

Maps, Space, Writing

In the case of the novel by António Lobo Antunes, there are several types of searches, including for various kinds of knowledge. For example, one of them is the drawing of a “narrative map” that is in the process of continuous transformation, one that escapes (or seemingly escapes) authorial control, making the situation one of perplexed ignorance (comparable, in a certain way, to the Conradian metaphor of darkness) that overwhelms the place or site of writing—“[...] *como se diz isto, quem me ajuda a contar?*” [(...) how do you say this; who'll help me to tell the tale?”] (53); “[...] *não faça perguntas, não procure entender, escreva assim, mal acabara de chegar e [...]*” [(...) don't ask questions, don't try to understand, write like that, it will soon get there and ...”] (59)—and makes the authorial figure intervene in the diegetic process in an attempt to wrest control of the narrative. “[*P*]erdão, eu é que escrevo o romance, o seu pai a comer” [“sorry, but I'm the one who's writing the novel, your father's eating”] (108); here, he reflects on this kind of territorial invasion by a dark force that breaks through the measure of the narrative (in this voyage to another heart of darkness), which ultimately leaves its author disoriented: “*uma traineira não, nem pássaros, nem mulatas que te melhorem o capítulo António, acordas com o romance, adormeces com o romance [...]*” [(...) there won't be a fishing boat, or birds, or mulattas that will improve the chapter, António; you wake up with the novel, you go to sleep with the novel (...)] (121).

This enunciation in the novel by Lobo Antunes reveals a kind of transposition or inversion of the roles of creator and created; the fictional entities—their characters, their voices—seem to gain control over the one who has spawned them, becoming autonomous, alive, while, at the same time, the author is given a fictional existence and witnesses his own phantasmagorical birth:

trazia terra e folhas, ela a sacudir as folhas da blusa, do cabelo, a mirar-me como se atentasse finalmente em mim, como se finalmente eu / (sem importância até então) / principiase a existir, ela mostrando-me o que não havia da mesma forma que quase não havia Luanda, não havia Angola, não havia África, havia um segundo pássaro gordo a rasgar a farda de um segundo soldado morto [...]

[(...) would bring earth and leaves, she would be shaking the leaves off her blouse, her hair, gazing at me as if she had targeted me at last, as if I / (unimportant until then) / had begun to exist, her showing me that there was nothing in the same way that there was no Luanda, no Angola, no Africa, there was a second fat bird to tearing the uniform of a second dead soldier (...)]. (20)

There is a similarly perplexed, and somewhat ironic, questioning regarding the creation of the “scriptable” map of the narrative— “—*Tens o mapa ao contrário*” [“You’ve got the map backwards”] (372)—whose coordinates seem to belong more to the voices that invade and manipulate it. It is a map that becomes, in turn, an index to the fact that the language of the novel has some of the characteristics of the language of the dream (or the nightmare). We notice how notions of time and space are blurred, characters are duplicated, intertwined, and move in some type of indefinite temporal framework in that time merges, for example, childhood with old age; time retreats into the present and is devoid of the apparent rationality of day-to-day life. These are processes similar to displacement and condensation, and, as in dreamwork, non-contradiction is a fundamental element: “[...] *tudo depressa e devagar, feito da matéria dos sonhos, não estou aqui, nada disto acontece, estou lá dentro a dormir (...)*” [“(...) everything fast and slow, made of the material of the dreams, I am not here, none of this is happening, I am inside there sleeping (...)”] (52).

The ambiguity and strangeness of the dream is enigmatic, misleading, and it is similar to the unfolding of the search for Kurtz, the source of attraction in Conrad’s text and, consequently, object of the reader’s desire for narrative knowledge; Kurtz, whose function is identical to that of the (constantly shifting) target in Antunes’s text, is in permanent movement and out of focus: he is not apprehensible, yet this search for knowledge reveals itself to be a guiding force, one that adds to the progression of the voyage, of narrative

development, and the act of reading:

He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the same name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams [...]. (Conrad 27)

In this manner, writing plays a decisive role in the knowledge process; whereas writing should have been the light that would have cast out the darkness—the discovery of the target—it is ultimately not able to achieve this because the explorer, like the reader, has only at his disposal a trajectory of signs made of the same linguistic material as those of dreams and from which he can build, in the case of one, a referent (the reality all around them), for the other the reference (that with which the narrative deals).

But that with which the narrative deals, the reference, the place (the rational narrative order) on the map, is displaced, as much in the work of Antunes—“*que difícil este romance, não obedece, não verga*” [“how difficult this novel is, it doesn’t obey, doesn’t bend”] (120)—and in Conrad’s text, because all that in fact happens is the adventure of the map in the process of being constructed in a seemingly irrational and autonomous manner: the invasion by an unknown language (which follows another logic, that of the unconscious) to deceive, derisively, the enterprise of exploring the river, the land and writing: “What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth” (Conrad 5). In fact, Conrad’s narrative evokes, already in the first pages—when he contrasts Belgian colonization to the conquest of England by the Romans—this lack of knowledge of man, simultaneously with his timeless strangeness and fascination, when he highlights mankind’s own inability to understand mystery and difference:

Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There’s no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, that goes to work upon him. (6)

We could also consider the relation between the writer and the colonial enterprise (a critical theme in the two novels), because, despite the very different motivations behind them, they are connected by the same type of problem: faced by a territory that suggests a cultural void and geographical enigmas, the inscription of writing on the blankness of paper gains the form of a revelation of identity and difference. In effect, this relationship between absence and desire, or between void and imagination, has to do with the very nature of writing. Derrida wrote that desire desires the exteriority of presence and non-presence. In other words, desire is related to the principle of opposition between being and non-being, between lack and a filling up of this lack (167). Writing arises from this ambivalence, and unfolds in the empty space of the page. Thus, being a writer is a very original metaphor for a conqueror, for both conqueror and writer conquer the spaces of consciousness by means of representational structures. However, in the two narratives this space is pursued with the destructuring of representational logic, and the function of writing seems to be to capture a sense of the ever-changing mystery, the inconceivable, the unrepresentable (the unknown, the nightmare, the horror), and the unspeakable:

E recommençar a correr na direcção do Bengo ou de uma paragem na parada do Alto de São João em que o empregado / —Seabrinha / me exhibia um balde de água suja onde se reflectia, em mil pedaços, a minha cara estilhaçada.

[And start to run again in the direction of Bengo or a stopover at the *Alto de São João* where the employee / “Seabrinha” / showed me a pail of dirty water where I saw reflected, in a thousand pieces, my shattered face.] (110)

Thus we see that the texts by Lobo Antunes and Conrad pursue, in their own way, a practice, not necessarily of occupation per se, but a *practice* that questions the occupation/writing process, and also the oppressive power of the representation of the colonial enterprise; functioning as far more than a mere rhetorical figure, the allegory of the map/narrative demonstrates that, in fact, in these two novels writing and the historical moment are never divorced from each other.

The reader wants to know the outcome of the narrative, just as Marlow desires to know Kurtz, and just as Seabra, Miguéis, Moraes, etc. want to know the target. The diamonds of Lunda Norte or the ivory of the Congo are made

emblematic by voices throughout three chapters in *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo*, in a latent disfiguration of the colonial disaster (Lobo Antunes) and as a figurative representation of the impossibility of cultural/territorial occupation (Conrad), and they are narrated between two spaces (Lisbon/Angola; London/Congo).

Still, this desire is frustrated “*na falta de um mapa que não soube decifrar e no centro do qual*” [“by the absence of a map that he did not know how to decode and in the centre of which”] (179) the readers will never get to obtain the truth as they would want. There are multiple versions of Kurtz; there are multiple narratives of the colonial experience by the characters in the novel by Lobo Antunes. Just as it is impossible to know what really happened in Angola, except through a phantom-like memory—“*Não sei se ela disse /—Esta era a casa / ou / (se calhar) /—Há vinte anos atrás / ou / (pode ser não estou certo) /—Morei aqui*” [“I don’t know if she said / —This was the house” / or / (perhaps) / —“Twenty years ago” / or / (maybe I’m wrong) / —“I lived here”] (19)—because it exists as the inheritance of a collective disaster, at the same time that it is the universe of several generations of individual phantoms, as a type of “black hole” (and the metaphor seems apt to designate a memory that has become darkened), or, in the language of psychoanalysis, a “trauma-tismo” (Jorge 142):¹ “*porque África é isto, é só isto, destroços e torresmos e minas*” [“because that’s what Africa is, that’s all it is, wrecks, greaves and mines”] (183). It is equally impossible to attain the dark truth of Kurtz, the undecipherable stuff of a nightmare, situated in the heart of the narrative, a place which could stand in place of the darkness of a real that cannot be named.

Animalization, Dirt, Misery, Abjection

As David Spurr argues in *The Rhetoric of Empire* (a work from which we have borrowed many of the analytic tools in this essay) the discourse of colonialism typical of the classical colonial situation remains subtly residual in those practices brought on by the forces of Western cultural hegemony over the post-colonial world. Post-colonial is here used in two senses: the historical situation marked by the dismantling of the institutions of the colonial power; the revision of that past and the consequent crises of representation and identity of both sides. The relationships between the former-colonized and the former-colonizer have not remained the same, but neither have they disappeared altogether (Lomba). It is this instability which is analyzed here, and we haven taken as bridges between *Heart of Darkness* and *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo*, insofar as both offer a

critical and moral reflection on the nature of (post-) colonialism.

Edward Said argues with regards to *Heart of Darkness* that the narrative is adapted to the present-day vision of the post-colonial world: Westerns may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually. [...] The assertions of this discourse exclude what has been represented as “lost” by arguing that the colonial world was in some ways ontologically speaking lost to begin with, irredeemable, irrecusably inferior. (25)

In the novel by António Lobo Antunes, on the other hand, the voices of the different characters—through the inheritance, we could say, of a collective traumatic memory—speak and reveal diverse types of degrading images typical of colonial discourse, some of which are present in *Heart of Darkness*, and which coexist, phantom-like, residually, in post-colonial discourse.

If racism and the (transgressive) erotic appeal of the Other, physical violence, (colonial and civil) wars and neo-imperialism are some of the more obvious themes in the novel by Antunes, many others are exemplified in the speech of the characters, this aberrant vision of the Western world over the post-colonial map: “[...] *o capim quieto, África não pessoas, capim, queimadas de capim, os tímulos dos colonos com as suas cruces de madeira e as suas datas a navalha / (não nomes, iniciais e datas)*” [(...) the quiet grass, Africa not people, grass, forest fires of grass, the graves of settlers with their wooden crosses and the dates carved with a penknife / (not names, initials and dates)"] (360).

The discourse of colonialism of which we spoke designates a space of language with different rhetorical functions that are bound to a particular historical moment (Spurr). In effect, this discourse represents a European imagination that undervalues the African cultural world when it imposes the (European) notions of civilization and reason in opposition to savagery and madness (of the Other), and when it produces a series of images that revolve around the notion of abjection: “He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of abomination—you know” (Conrad 6).

This constellation of images, figuratively represented around misery, animality, dirt, and in sum, abjection, is seen as the result of a primitive condition, because the physical suffering of the indigenous people is associated with its intellectual and moral degradation. As Julia Kristeva explains, “the abject

shares only one quality with the object—that of being opposed to [...] the abject, as fallen object, is what is radically excluded, drawing me towards the point where meaning collapses” (126). Or, as we witness in the novel by Lobo Antunes:

[...] *a conspirarem nos musseques, chegavam nos vagões de gado disfarçados de carregadores, agulheiros, serventes, víamo-los sumirem-se das sanzalas à tarde / ratos / surgirem nas bancas do mercado / ratos / juntarem-se, separarem-se, conversarem entre si em kimbundu / ratos*

[...] plotting and conspiring in their township, cattle trucks would arrive disguised as porters, signalmen, servants, we'd see them disappear from the plantations in the afternoon / rats / to reappear in the market stall / rats / meeting up with each other, separating from each other, talking to each other in Kimbundu / rats]. (69)

Disease, hunger, superstition, barbaric customs, are all identified as original marks of pre-colonial chaos, and for that reason the constant reproduction of these images justifies colonial intervention; they are also signs of the specific difference between colonizer and colonized.

o Seabra que não só não se habituava a África como não alcançava o que África era, movia-se no meio de destroços e troncos cuidando que troncos e destroços somente, este calor, esta febre, estes animais estranhos, esta violência sem razão (...).

[Seabra not only wouldn't get used to Africa, he couldn't make out what Africa was; he moved in amongst the wrecks and trunks and for him they were only wrecks and trunks, this heat, this fever, these strange animals, this senseless violence (...)]. (118)

The cultural debasement of the colonized also implies a prohibition imposed against which to shore up Western cultural values by force of destructive desire. The principles of exclusion, of the frontier and difference, that are summoned up by colonial discourse are related to this fear that the colonizers will lose themselves in “darkness” and go native: “[...] *a minha mãe em busca da esfregona limpando África do soalho / —Que lixeira*” [(...) my mother in search of the mop to clear Africa off the floor / —What a trash-heap”] (178).

Identity, Contamination, Sickness

The idea of contamination is related to the idea of going native and, paradoxically, the inverse which is desired, the Westernization of the native, is revealed by colonial discourse to be something ridiculous and strange, artificial, a parody, or even grotesque: “[C]onsoante tanto me faz que se matem, que morram, os brancos que vivem com eles pretos também, uma terra de pretos, uma terra suja de pretos que não me interessa onde fica [...]” [“I don’t really care if they kill each other, if they die, or even about the whites who live in their midst, a land of black, a land that’s dirty with blacks, I don’t really care where it is (...)”] (184).

This anxiety of maintaining boundaries is associated with the idea of preserving an identity and, on the other hand, with the fear of transgression associated with the idea of alienation, disease, contamination, “darkening,” pathology and madness. The fear of contamination that begins at the biological frontier anxiously expands and progresses, both metaphorically and metonymically, with the fears of going native.

Time, Voice, Language

Colonial discourse denies cultural history as well as the memory of the space, and it highlights the absence of writing, of a past. In the landscape there are no signs of an ancient architecture, of monuments; there is nothing that will reveal the presence of a transformative process at work. The absence of this inscription of monuments is the sign of another flaw, the register of the difference between nature and culture, between present and past:

Claro que conhecíamos o facto de o alvo ter sido uma cantina do Dondo, afastada da cidade, mas em África chamam cidade a três palbotas desfeitas, chamam cidade a tudo, basta haver uma picada, meia dúzia de cabras com um milhafre em cima, um indígena de pano à cintura a morrer de fome, e pronto, cidade senhor, uma cidadezinha, conhecíamos o facto de ter sido uma cantina ou seja uma loja de vender misérias a pessoas mais miseráveis que ele, comida que os porcos recusariam, mantas de pataco e o alvo, apesar de branco, um cafre como os outros nessa época, descalço ao balcão [...]. (65)

[Of course we knew that the target was a country store in Dondo, somewhat removed from the city, but in Africa they call three huts falling apart a city, they call everything a city, all you need is a stretch of land, half a dozen goats with a

hawk overhead, a native with a piece of cloth at his waist dying of hunger, and pronto, gentlemen, a city, a little city; we knew that all it was, was a store, or rather a makeshift store selling miserable things to people who were even more miserable people than him, food that pigs would refuse, cheap blankets and a target, even though he was white, a kaffir (nigger) like the others, standing barefoot behind the counter (...).]

On the other hand, when we compare the discourse of colonialism to that of post-colonialism, we see the return of the idea of barbarism, of the confusing blurring of space, the emptiness of the map to be filled in, and also the manifestation of a certain imperial nostalgia in the face of the inability of these new countries to peacefully regulate themselves. The prejudices implicit in this imperial nostalgia of the beginning of the twenty-first century approach the notion of horror described by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* in the early years of the twentieth century.

In other words, if Conrad's text is a critical exposition of the colonial process in its heyday, we also see, through the perspective of some of the narrative voices in *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo* that the termination of the colonial process, with the advent of independence and the subsequent years, culminates with the return of images, which are once again dark, and revealing of this progressive loss of control over nature and of horror:

—*Descansem que ele volta porque não existe Angola / existe a poeira vermelha, crianças de muletas, as ruínas dos prédios onde passeiam os cegos, uma primeira rajada de martelos cravando pregos no escuro, mais pregos de uma segunda rajada nas paredes, nos canteiros [...].* (129)

["Rest assured he'll come back because Angola doesn't exist / all that exists is the red dust, children on crutches, ruins of the buildings where blind men stroll, the first blast of the hammers hitting nails into the dark, more nails still from a second blast on the walls, in a first burst of hammers nailing nails in the darkness, more nails of a second blast in the walls, in the flower beds (...)."]

Another of the parameters by which colonized peoples are culturally disqualified by Western thought is the nature of language and the absence of a discourse that is their own; according to this point of view, linguistic devaluation corresponds to degradation and social backwardness. Incoherence, inar-

ticulateness, the scream, onomatopoeia, muteness and silence stand as metaphors for this absence of speech:

não palavras, guinchos de rato, as unhas não iguais às nossas, o cor de rosa dos pretos, o focinho que me busca o pescoço, não é Luanda a pouco e pouco na água, são os ratos senhores [...].

[not words, the shrieks of rats, even their nails aren't the same as ours, the pink of blacks, the snout that seeks out my neck, it's not Luanda, little by little sinking into the water, these are the master rats (...)] (Antunes 196)

A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears ... It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in appalling and excessive silence. "God God! What is the meaning"? (Conrad 40)

The filling in of colonial maps allows for things to be named, which is necessary, because the terror of the void, of the unnameable, produces a confrontation with the abyss, with the absence of representation, with death, with the fear of nothingness. Viewed from this perspective, Conrad's text is exemplary in that it demonstrates that it is not possible to name difference. The text by Lobo Antunes, on the other hand, is revealing—through residual and timeless voices—of how repressed negativity surfaces on to the void of the page, and with it comes all brutality of horror, of the unknown, all revealing of how Western imagination and its means of communication assess Africa.

Before, later and now, they all join in the loss of identity of those implicated in this, of those who have returned, of those who start this trip anew—the imperial voyage—in an incurable contamination which allows us to read Marlow's adventure in post-colonial terms in *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo*:

um mapa num nome de cargueiro cujas letras desciam ao comprido do casco, uma criança a escutar mabecos a seguir à igreja para os lados do Beato

[a map in the name of a cargo ship whose letters descended all the way down the hull, a child listening to wild dogs proceeding to the church on the Beato side]. (181)

Note

¹ "Lacan, em seu seminário RSI, insistiu sobre o facto de que aquilo que Freud introduziu como sendo o recalque originário tem a estrutura mesma do furo, daí ele ter falado do trauma como *troumatisme*, neologismo criado por ele, que associa o trauma ao próprio furo, *trou*." ["In his RSI seminar, Lacan insisted on the fact that what Freud called primary repression has the same structure as a hole, and it is for that reason that he speaks of trauma as *troumatisme*, a neologism which he invented himself, and which associated trauma with the hole (*trou*) itself"] (Jorge 142).

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