

## Writing the War and the Man in the First Novels of António Lobo Antunes

Isabel Moutinho

**Abstract:** Lobo Antunes's first three novels relate silence, or the difficulty in verbal communication, first of all to a natural predisposition to isolation on the part of the protagonist(s)/narrator(s); secondly, to the experience of war. This dialectic of silence and speech, or of entrapment in silence and the urge to break it, is constantly reworked in the entwining of the fiction of autobiography and colonial war. The three novels appear as a powerful effort to undermine the "deafening" official silence surrounding the lost conflict and to place the colonial war under scrutiny in post-Salazar Portugal.

The colonial war is a recurrent theme in much of António Lobo Antunes's fictional work, sometimes more directly, at others more diffusely. But it is in his first three novels that the author engages with the topic in the most personal way because in them the experience of the war is constructed as an essential part of the author's fiction of autobiographical writing. While both *Memória de elefante* (1979) and *Conhecimento do inferno* (1980) are narrated in a third person which periodically slips into a more emotive first one, *Os cus de Judas* (also of 1979) is fully narrated in the first person. The three novels give a strong impression of autobiographical writing. This is due first of all to the frequent entanglement of first- and third-person narration—always based “no ponto de vista único da personagem-narra-

dora" (Seixo 37)—but also to the fact that these novels were published in close succession, so that the reading public became almost simultaneously acquainted with the *personae* of three protagonists displaying striking similarities. Over the years since the publication of his earliest work, the author António Lobo Antunes has become generally known to his public as having participated in the colonial war in Angola and being a psychiatrist, which has served to confirm the readers' initial surmise that these are autobiographical traits. Nevertheless, and especially in the case of an author often very reticent to give interviews and to speak of his private life, one must be extremely careful not to fall into the trap of attributing an autobiographical origin to what is much more likely, either also or principally, a fictional creation.

The illusion of autobiographical writing, then, is created first of all by the alternating of third- and first-person narrative in the first and in the third novels, and by the almost overbearing presence of the narrative I in the second, as well as in all three cases by the strong internal focalisation on the thoughts and fears of the protagonist(s). And the "man" the reader discovers in each of the three successive protagonists is a psychiatrist/doctor who has returned from the colonial war in Angola, the memory of which clearly haunts him in his return to his medical career in Lisbon. Each of the three protagonists is also struggling to become a writer. In *Memória de elefante*, the protagonist struggles to write mostly poems (58, 67, 68, 69, 71), or perhaps "a poem or a story" (76), and then also "the novels and the poems that he perpetrated without writing them" (108).<sup>1</sup> In *Os cus de Judas*, the narrator accumulates "novels [he] still had to write" (*South* 40).<sup>2</sup> He mentions on several occasions his elder daughter and his hopes that she will one day find it easier to write than he: "Talvez que ela escrevesse um dia os romances que eu tinha medo de tentar" (*Cus* 88). In *Conhecimento do inferno*, the protagonist is initially anxious "to complete the novel he was writing, a messy, feverish narrative of war" (38).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the protagonist is revealed to coincide with the author-narrator, with a full-name identification that wholly satisfies the fundamental postulate of Lejeune's autobiographical pact: he is formally introduced by a common friend to another Portuguese writer who makes a brief appearance in the novel, with the words: "Este é o António Lobo Antunes" (*Conhecimento* 77). This comes after another autobiographical disclosure earlier in the novel, referring to the place where

no Verão anterior, passara três semanas com a Isabel para acabar a *Memória de elefante*, que arrastava atrás de si havia meses num desprazer de maçada, construindo capítulo a capítulo na lentidão penosa do costume, à espera da chegada das palavras. (*Conhecimento* 61)

We are, then, in the presence of a character, or three characters, for whom writing does not come easy, a difficulty not dissimilar from that of breaking the silence in any situation of oral communication, which is equally registered in many occasions in these novels.

One of the most striking impressions one often has from reading Lobo Antunes's work is that of being bombarded with images. This sensation of an irresistible abundance is closely tied with the author's characteristically torrential style, in which a true avalanche of words carries forth the rich flow of imagery. The following is a good example of such a torrential style, verging on the baroque, taken from an ostensibly autobiographical passage from *Memória de elefante* [*Elephant's Memory*]:

Como quem enfia sem pensar a mão no bolso à procura da gorgeta de uma resposta mergulhou o braço na gaveta da infância, *brique-a-braque inesgotável de surpresas*, tema sobre o qual a sua existência posterior *decalcava variações* de uma monotonia baça, e trouxe à tona ao acaso, nítido na concha da palma, ele miúdo acororado no bacio diante do espelho do guarda-fato em que as mangas dos casacos pendurados de perfil como as pinturas egípcias *proliferavam a abundância de lianas moles* dos príncipes de gales do seu pai. [...] [C]ostumavam deixá-lo assim horas seguidas na sua chávena de Sèvres de esmalte onde o chichi *pianolava escalas tímidas de harpa, a conversar consigo mesmo* as quatro ou cinco palavras de um vocabulário monossilábico completado de onomatopeias e guinchos [...]. (25; emphasis added)

Such is the style with which Lobo Antunes has made us familiar, with its startling metaphors (*the gratuity of a reply, the drawer of childhood*), its metonymical reduplications (*the chamber pot / his Sèvres porcelain cup*), its unexpected comparisons (*jackets hanging in profile like Egyptian paintings*), in sum, that “endlessly surprising bric-a-brac” of images and figures of literary discourse, which is the hallmark of the author. Moreover, the passage quoted also serves to exemplify the sort of verbal opulence usually associated with the lushness of imagery. On two occasions, the exuberant lexicon amplifies

images from the realm of music (*the composition of variations on a theme, the playing on the piano of timid scales meant for the harp*), and one that readily reminds us of tropical forests (*the jackets proliferating in a liana-like abundance*).

Nevertheless, and this is a fundamental paradox of Lobo Antunes's work, this luxuriant, plethoric prose is most often used to narrate the dreariness in the lives of protagonists who share a somewhat morbid taste for silence, or inability to break it, and a fear of aphasia. The young child recalled in the passage quoted above already presages such situations of oppressive silence, when he is *left* in a position where he can only *speak to himself*, in an imposed, solitary silence that he manages to break, for himself only, with the paucity of half a dozen words, onomatopoeias and screeches.

Lobo Antunes's first three novels very clearly relate silence, or the difficulty in verbal communication, first of all to a natural predisposition to solitude and isolation on the part of the protagonist(s)/narrator(s); second, and no less important, to the experience of the war. This dialectic of silence and speech, or of the entrapment in silence and the urge to break it, is constantly reworked in the entwining of the fiction of autobiography and colonial war, particularly in the early novels. Later works in which the colonial war is still the central theme, such as *Fado alexandrino*, no longer play so strongly on the note of the "real"-life origin of the tensions between silence and the urge to overcome it because the illusion of autobiographical writing is disrupted in the polyphonic narrative construction.

*Memória de elefante*, Lobo Antunes's first novel, focuses on one day and one night in the life of a psychiatrist afflicted by feelings of irredeemable solitude, apparently caused or aggravated by his recent estrangement from his wife. This novel, which seems to be the perfect obverse of the one which followed it only a few months later, stresses the personal and family reasons for the protagonist's isolation, whereas the next one emphasizes the same consequence by pointing rather to his involvement in the war as its cause. In *Memória*, we see the protagonist progressively lapsing into silence, but still making desperate attempts to stay in touch with a few, carefully chosen people. Early in the novel there is a brief reference to his mother's deafness ("conversar com a surdez da mãe afigurava-se-lhe mais inútil do que socar uma porta cerrada para um quarto vazio" [13-14]), though it is not clear whether the deafness is real or metaphorical. Later we learn also of her liking for silence: "Herdei talvez de ti o gosto do silêncio [...]. O gosto do

silêncio e o fitarmo-nos como estranhos separados por distância impossível de abolir” (70).

Whatever the origin of this need or liking for silence, or this inability to fight against ever encroaching silence, its consequences for the protagonist are, at a personal level, an awareness of his growing social isolation and, at a creative level, an immediate difficulty in writing. On the very next page the protagonist equates the arduous practice of writing to a sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation he must attempt on “the remaining graves of deceased words” (71). As to the question of social isolation, in *Memória de elefante* we see the protagonist still striving to stay in touch with others, particularly the friend he begs to meet him for lunch.

If the graphic marking of direct speech on the page of a book can be taken to be the immediate sign of some basic communication between characters, *Memória* does present a considerable amount of dialogue. Read carefully, though, it becomes clear that it is more often than not an appearance of dialogue, or that the dialogue is between other characters, to whom the protagonist frequently replies only with the most laconic of answers (“Porque não?” [41]; “O quê o quê?” [71]). Nevertheless, apart from the professional exchanges between doctor and patient, the protagonist of *Memória* does engage in conversation with some people and, more importantly, seeks to do so of his own initiative. The nurse Deolinda, with whom he works, offers a tacit comfort and understanding which does not need extensive conversation: “De longe em longe cabe-nos a sorte de topar com uma pessoa assim, que gosta de nós não apesar dos nossos defeitos mas com eles, num amor desapiedado e fraternal” (30).

In different circumstances, both the narrator of *Os cus de Judas* and the protagonist of *Conhecimento do inferno* find a similar sort of communion (“a comunhão do isolamento partilhado” [*Memória* 95]) in the few words (and the many silences) each of them exchanges with the medic who helps him: “Foda-se, disse o furriel que limpava as botas com os dedos. Pois é, disse eu, e acho que até hoje nunca tive um diálogo tão comprido com quem quer que fosse” (*Cus* 73). Or again in the silent sympathy Lieutenant Eleutério offers him at a later moment of dramatic impotence, in Chiúme: “O alferes Eleutério [...] pousou a mão, sem falar, no meu ombro e foi essa, percebe?, uma das raras vezes em que até hoje me achei acompanhado” (*Cus* 90). Likewise, in the third novel, we read a similar comment about the quartermaster nurse and the silent understanding between the two men: “Era um ótimo enfermeiro e entendíamo-nos bem, normalmente trabalhávamos sem falar



porque ambos percebíamos o que o outro queria, o que o outro necessitava” (*Conhecimento* 258).

But other signs already point to the protagonist’s increasing difficulties in communicating with others in *Memória de elefante*. During lunch with his friend, the conversation soon becomes a monologue like the one that fills the pages of *Os cus de Judas*. The ever more self-absorbed protagonist talks only about himself, his long monologue merely punctuated by fillers such as “you see” or “you know what I mean” (73-74), which become a regular pattern in the second novel. And as in *Os cus de Judas*, the most heart-rending attempts at breaking the engulfing silence—by remembering or reestablishing a feeling of intimacy with someone much loved and lost (the ex-wife and the mother in *Memória*, Sofia in *Os cus*)—clearly stand out in the text. This is so because, first of all, they use the (familiar) second person pronoun, thus breaking the general he/I pattern, but also because they appear in extremely lyrical passages in either novel. Pathetically, however, the women for whom they are intended never hear such apostrophes. The psychiatrist, therefore, finds himself increasingly in the same situation he recalls from his childhood, namely reduced to talking to himself (“a conversar consigo mesmo” [*Memória* 25]),<sup>4</sup> “like a blind man who continues to talk to someone who has tip-toed out of the room, a blind man screaming to an empty chair” (159).

While Lobo Antunes’s first novel does not make the war experience stand out as much as the second, it still does point out that the war has aggravated the protagonist’s predisposition to silence and his sense of solitude in general. The sight of the Lisbon beggar close to whom the protagonist stands in order to spy on his daughters and with whom he thus establishes some (quite unwanted) complicity reminds him of Africa and the war. And the first memory that comes to his mind is that of the sound of thunder breaking the silence at dusk (“a Baixa do Cassanje se povoava do eco dos trovões” [*Memória* 110]). The three salient memories he then recalls are those of the wait (here waiting for the mail, elsewhere both in *Os cus de Judas* and *Conhecimento do inferno* the wait for an attack or for death itself), illness (here the fever which struck his wife who joined him in Cassanje, as well as their baby daughter), and the suicide of a soldier at Mangando. The Mangando episode returns in full detail in *Conhecimento do inferno* (chapter 10), where it gives rise to a somber meditation on death and the war. In *Memória*, though, the description of the suicide is particularly concise and gory, and symmetrically framed by indirect references to the silence that surrounds the incident: at the beginning,

the laconic “good-night” that the soldier pronounces just before pulling the trigger on himself, and at the end the simple mention “Mangando and the yelping of the cabiris in the darkness” (*Memória* 110), as if only the animals could bear to break the ominous silence under the circumstances.

An immediately apparent consequence of the protagonist’s involvement in the war is that the experience has driven him into even further silence. When harassed by a colleague with different political views, who accuses him of approving of Portugal’s “handing over the overseas provinces to the blacks” (*Memória* 42), the psychiatrist embarks on a passionate tirade against the evils of Portuguese colonialism and the colonial war in Angola. This is evidently called forth by what he sees as the man’s total ignorance about Africa. However, the tirade remains unspoken; all of the doctor’s vehemence is kept to himself, so that “this fellow [...], this cretin [...], this idiot [...], this fool” who has unleashed the diatribe hears nothing of it. Whether the doctor needs to feel cocooned in protective silence or simply suspects that his words would have no effect, the fact is that he does not make his opinion heard.

What is most disturbing is that, in the end, the psychiatrist’s distrust applies also to himself: “que sei eu África?” (*Memória* 43)—formulated in exactly the same way as the previous five questions: “Que sabe este tipo de África? [...] este caramelo [...], este cretino [...], este parvo [...]. Que sabe este palerma de África?” (*Memória* 42-43). This self-doubt needs to be read in the light of the fundamental change the protagonist underwent in Africa: it was there that his feelings of being forever out of place, uprooted, even stateless in his own country (“eu virado apátrida na minha terra” [*Memória* 148]) originated. Whereas in *Memória* it is when the protagonist returns to Lisbon that he becomes aware of his feelings of displacement in his own city (“Esta cidade que era a sua” [*Memória* 97]), in *Os cus de Judas* it is already in Angola that the narrator begins to feel the anguish of no longer belonging anywhere.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, the adjective used in both novels is the same: *despaisado* (“out of place”), as if its introduction in *Memória* signaled the development of the theme in the following novel, where the narrator feels like “an exiled ostrich” (*South* 99) (“um avestruz despaisado” [*Cus* 149]). In *Memória*, the psychiatrist had to choose between war service and exile abroad (“despaisado exílio” [*Memória* 42])—the dilemma of “the war or Paris,” conscription or desertion, to which contemporary novels and poems of the independence wars in Africa often make allusion. In *Os cus*, it is the narrator’s long commission at several outposts of the Angolan northeastern front that has made him feel acutely

displaced, both physically and culturally, but above all has turned him into someone forever incapable of belonging anywhere. His war experience, and his involvement with the (restricted) African civilian populations he also cared for, revealed that the place in which he thought he belonged was not only a place but also a set of values and a time already condemned by history. These are the difficulties of “transmuting time into space” (Ashcroft 35), which we have come to identify as a principal characteristic of post-colonial literature.<sup>6</sup>

Symptomatically, when in *Memória de elefante* the protagonist asks himself “what do I know of Africa?” (43), this apparently simple question reveals much about the political and human sympathies of this man who claims to be almost incapable of relating to his fellow Portuguese after his experience of war in Africa. His service in Angola has opened his eyes to a different reality, which the Africans have managed to preserve as their own despite centuries of European domination. But after his tirade against a colleague who knows nothing about that different world, he checks himself too: is he claiming to know all about Africa? That would be falling into the trap Dominique Chaucé has identified, albeit in a very different context, as perpetuating “le discours du maître.” It would amount to the same sort of colonial arrogance that the narrator of *Os cus de Judas* denounces when he gives to understand that Africa too has a centuries-old history of its own (unwritten, therefore non-existent in European eyes):

os velhos e orgulhosos luchazes, senhores das Terras do Fim do Mundo, vindos há muitos séculos da Etiópia em migrações sucessivas, que tinham expulso os hotentotes, os kamessekeles [...]. Velhos livres tornados reis escravos do arame [...] pelo rancor do Estado colonial. (182)

A claim to know all about Africa in *Memória* would be equivalent to indulging in the disdain that the narrator of *Os cus de Judas* detects in the use of the weight of European historical tradition to ignore the African one and to validate colonial occupation. In *Os cus*, the narrator shows his reluctance to collaborate in the Eurocentric suppression of the Africans' alternative mode of history. Embryonically, in *Memória*, this man now forever displaced (“esta condição de despaisado”) and forever feeling “doubly an orphan” in the uncertain space “[b]etween the Angola he had lost and the Lisbon he had not regained” (*Memória* 98), stops himself short of speaking *for* (i.e., instead of) the Africans, thus perpetuating their reduction to silence under colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Maria Alzira Seixo has rightly emphasised that Lobo Antunes's female



characters in these early novels are invariably silenced, a silencing we can see as mirroring that of the colonised by the coloniser. Nevertheless, Lobo Antunes's first protagonist at least checks himself in time, stopping short of substituting his voice for the Africans'; and the narrator of his second novel does reveal an understanding of the validity of alternative, African modes of perception of reality, time and history. Both characters, then, do acknowledge and even underscore "the possibility of counter-knowledges" (Young 162), which colonialism (like Orientalism) worked so hard to repress. These are the signs of powerful anti-colonial feelings which herald the awakening of a post-colonial conscience.

In Portugal's contemporary fiction there are many novels of the colonial war that rail at the official silence surrounding the conflict which led to the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, but none does so more compellingly than *Os cus de Judas*. That silence, initially imposed by Salazar's regime during the war itself as a means to control the demoralising effect that public awareness of the real number of casualties might have, ended up becoming a generalized habit within Portuguese society itself, even after the war was over—and lost. Having returned to Lisbon after his participation in the war as a conscripted surgeon at the northeastern Angolan front for 27 months, the narrator of *Os cus de Judas* often refers to what appears to him, several years later, to be a conspiracy of silence about the colonial war. In this case, it is no longer only a silence politically imposed and militarily justifiable, but indeed a silence of indifference, accepted and effected by Portuguese society at large, already in post-imperial and supposedly democratic times: "Porque camandro é que não se fala nisto? Começo a pensar que o milhão e quinhentos mil homens que passaram por África não existiram nunca e lhe estou contando uma espécie de romance de mau gosto impossível de acreditar" (81).

The narrator has returned to a society which he sees as split between those who made the war and those who did not—in other words, those who understand and those who do not, whether the dichotomy applies to the despised generals who sent the soldiers to war but never risked their own skin, or to the draft-dodgers who lived safely in Paris or London while the conscripts fought.<sup>8</sup> It is not only to his own war memories that the narrator wants to give voice in his long monologue in this novel, but also to those of the forgotten soldiers who went to the war with him, including the many dead who cannot raise their voices in protest against the reigning silence:

Se a revolução acabou, percebe?, e em certo sentido acabou de facto, é porque os mortos de África, de boca cheia de terra, não podem protestar [...] e nós, os sobreviventes, continuamos tão duvidosos de estar vivos que temos receio de [...] nos apercebermos de que *não existe* [...] *som nas palavras que dizemos* [...] que estamos mortos como eles. (*Cus* 73; emphasis added)

In the case of *Os cus de Judas*, the hushing that the narrator perceives in the society around him contrasts strongly with his enormous personal need to break the general silence and place the colonial war under scrutiny. The novel is a gushing monologue, in which the narrator's outpourings are simply punctuated (rather than actually interrupted) by "bordões da simulação comunicativa" (Seixo 41) directed at his female listener, thus giving the impression that a dialogue is going on. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise here that, while such a torrent of words in the end remains painfully a monologue—never a dialogue—addressed to a sympathetic listener—never literally an interlocutor, the fact is that the written word, the published novel itself, immediately reached (and continues to do so in the subsequent editions) one of the largest audiences ever in the history of Portuguese publishing. Narrated by a returned army doctor who gives the impression of not quite having the emotional energy to take upon himself the role of official conscience of the country, this novel truly did more than any other to rescue the colonial war from oblivion in post-Salazar Portugal. The narrative, undertaken by a man who diegetically portrays himself as a recluse too morose for company, in fact powerfully counteracts "the silencing effect of imperialistic discourse" (Griffiths 153) by dragging the ugly subject of Portugal's Vietnam into focus over most of its pages.

In them, the narrator makes it clear that the memory of the young men who died in Angola despite his desperate efforts to save them will never let him rest easy, so that in effect he speaks also *for* them (though not, patronisingly, for the Africans). He himself, on the other hand, always claims not to feel sufficiently alive to take up such a demanding cause, in a country which prefers to forget its ex-combatants and even to pretend that the whole war episode never happened: "Tudo é real menos a guerra que não existiu nunca: jamais houve colónias, nem fascismo, nem Salazar, nem Tarrafal, nem PIDE, nem revolução, jamais houve, compreende, nada" (*Cus* 240).

Given the general silence and public indifference about the war, the narrator's memory (and his monologue) would remain private, unheard except

by his solitary, odd female companion. It is curious to point out that this narratee's status changes throughout the book (as opposed to her unchanging silence). Initially, the narrator believes that she, like most Portuguese who did not go to the war, cannot understand. Later he praises her endless equanimity, the "tranquil patience of a statue" (*South* 54) with which she listens to him. And at the end of the novel she seems curiously to have acquired, in his eyes, the status of one of those who did go there, for having attentively listened to his narrative. Perhaps, then, the narrator is vaguely aware of the perlocutionary value (Searle 22-28) of his solitary ramblings. And because his narrative becomes a novel, through the act of publication it acquires a public dimension which allows his private memory to fulfill a social role, that of reversing history's amnesia and breaking the "deafening" official silence.

*Conhecimento do inferno* is the least somber of these three novels, not only because of the humour with which certain episodes involving mental patients are narrated, but also because the fiction of the narrator's being prey to severe difficulties in speaking to others or in writing is somewhat resolved in the very plot. The novel further develops themes that are already central in the previous ones, though in different proportions: communication difficulties, psychiatry, and the colonial war, in *Memória de elefante* (the obverse; the colonial war, imposed silence, and existential malaise, in *Os cus de Judas* the reverse). In *Conhecimento do inferno*, the narrator-protagonist is travelling back home to Lisbon on his own in his car, so that the question of the difficulty of oral communication does not arise. Furthermore, presumably he has largely (though, by his own admission, not totally) overcome his fear of being unable to write, judging from the (unstated) feeling of confidence that the finishing of a first book (*Conhecimento* 61) must have given him. It is the meditation on the questionable aims and methods of institutional psychiatry that comes to the fore in this novel, but the war experience as the mark of a profound upheaval in the narrator's life runs a close second, as it did already in the first novel.

The hell of the title [knowledge of hell] refers primarily to mental illness and psychiatric hospitals, but also to the misery undergone at the war front. There seem to be two principal links between the two experiences: firstly the lack of reason in both—the irrationality or non-reason of mental patients, and the absurdity or non-sense of war ("a absurda estupidez dos tiros sem razão" [*Memória* 42]); and secondly, the manifest impotence of the victims of either situation—that of the patients trapped in psychiatric hospitals with no control over their lives or treatments, and that of the soldiers sent to war against their

will (“a aventura imposta” [*Memória* 98]), where they too are “imprisoned [...] behind three barbed-wire fences” (*South* 116). Each group suffers at the hands of an all-powerful elite: the patients are at the mercy of the uncaring psychiatrists, the soldiers at that of ambitious, pitiless colonels.

It is in this context that some of the strangest incidents narrated in this novel (the gallery of penises, the cannibalistic episodes) can best be understood, for they reveal the ambivalent, bipolar position in which the psychiatrist-narrator finds himself. In *Memória de elefante*, the psychiatrist is both powerful as a doctor and powerless as a patient (“um gajo anda aqui a aprender a viver ou a ser *domesticado, capado, desmiolado*” [134; emphasis added]). In *Os cus de Judas*, the conscripted surgeon is in all aspects a victim of the war. In *Conhecimento do inferno*, however, a new element is introduced. The psychiatrist cannot, on the one hand, completely extricate himself from the responsibility for the wrongs of institutional psychiatry, which he criticises but in which he too is implicated. Nor can he, on the other, feel free from blame for his involvement in the colonial war. Thus, in the third novel, the narrator is no longer always the victim of the colonial war but also now shares in the national guilt. He recalls the time when he was already awaiting his departure to war in Angola, but he must first medically examine the general recruits:

Estive alguns momentos [...] a pensar que me haviam mandado a Elvas *não para salvar pessoas* da guerra mas para as enviar para a mata, mesmo os coxos, mesmo os marrecos, mesmo os surdos porque o dever patriótico não excluía ninguém, porque as Parcelas Sagradas do Ultramar necessitavam do sacrifício de todos, porque O Soldado Português É Tão Bom Como Os Melhores, porque o caralho da cona do minete do cabrão do broche da puta que os pariu [...] levantei a cabeça e o meu nariz encontrava-se à altura de dezenas de pénis que rodeavam a mesa aguardando que os observasse, os medisse, *os aprovasse para a morte*. (*Conhecimento* 43; emphasis added)

The doctor is thus placed in a position where he must betray medical ethics: instead of *saving people's lives*, the military hierarchy expects him to certify all these young men as healthy and able-bodied *to be sent to their deaths*. The passage also exemplifies the deconstruction of the nationalist rhetoric of Salazar's regime, which is common in António Lobo Antunes's work, by breaking the series of meaningless political slogans with an impressive list of swear words, more complete even than in the author's best efforts in many



of his later novels. The inclusion of such language, not previously used in Portuguese literary discourse, which Maria Alzira Seixo considers a kind of post-colonial abrogation of standard Portuguese, can also be seen as a highly effective way of disrupting the silence—in the sense of absence of any real meaning—that the repetition of worn-out slogans constitutes.

However, when in the next page those penises which surround the doctor during the recruits' medical examination seem to detach themselves and chase him ("Não eram homens, eram pénis que me perseguiam, me acuavam" [*Conhecimento* 44]), it becomes clear that the doctor's feelings of nausea and terror stem from his sudden realisation that he is now on the side of those *responsible* for the war. He is no longer just another victim. Like the psychiatrists who control their patients' lives, and like the colonels, the political police, and the authorities who dispose of the soldiers' lives by sending them to war, he too has become one of the gaolers ("carrereiros" [*Conhecimento* 211, 263]) or the executioners ("carrascos" [*Conhecimento* 266]).

In addition, the gallery of penises, which initially seems so grotesque and repulsive, in the end appears as a choice justified by the intertextual logic constantly at play in Lobo Antunes's early trilogy. The threatening penises in *Conhecimento do inferno* signal the psychiatrist's bad conscience when he realises that he too has become the instrument of the power structures that sent this generation to war. Still, this is the same country which another psychiatrist, in *Memória de elefante*, describes as an emasculated kingdom: "Terra do camandro: se El-Rei D. Pedro voltasse ao mundo não achava em todo o reino quem *capar*" (*Memória* 67), the same country which Salazar had turned into a domesticated seminary ("o Salazar transformara o país num seminário *domesticado*" [*Memória* 67; emphasis added]). A domesticated seminary, a kingdom where all have been emasculated, or a gagged country? A country that devours its own children, in any case, just as the narrator imagines, in the nightmarish chapter 7, that he eats the corpse of private Pereira, killed at war, whom he was unable to save. But the same chapter concludes with his realisation that he himself is the patient whose flesh his fellow psychiatrists are eating in Sintra, thus confirming that in this novel the narrator feels both a victim and a perpetrator of wrong (both in psychiatry and as to the colonial war). Whether castrated or silenced, nobody in this country has had the courage to vociferate against the colonial war, which in the end explains why the nation now prefers to hide behind an indifferent silence about the subject.



The next three war memories minutely and obsessively described in the novel confirm this fundamental change in the narrator's view of his involvement in the war. The first is a scene of torture of three African men accused of stealing from Portuguese army officers (*Conhecimento* 215-18). To begin with, the episode is narrated in the third person plural, it is the army officers who are taking revenge, but soon two verbs appear in the first person plural, thus implicating the narrator himself. Between the first two actions ("desatámos [...] gritávamos-lhes nós") there is one singular attempt by the narrator ("fechei") to prevent all the soldiers from joining in the brutal scene. Nevertheless, the first suggestion as to how to conceal the ugly evidence of the torture comes from the doctor himself: "Chama-se um fazendeiro do café para lhes dar um tiro—respondi eu a sacudir-me" (*Conhecimento* 218). And the scene finishes with the officers and the doctor asking the very PIDE officer, whom the narrator has so often described as inspiring nothing but scorn and disgust in all of them, for professional advice on how to cover up the torture. While this is one of the most appalling memories recorded in the novel, it is in fact told with considerable (professional?) detachment. And the "friendly" advice ("amigavelmente" [*Conhecimento* 221]) given by the PIDE officer provides the parallel for the narrative to return to the diegetic present and to the repeated equating of psychiatry and torture: "Há maneiras de se fazer as coisas sem se deixar marcas. Um electrochoque [...]. Um coma de insulina [...]. Dez anos de psicanálise não deixam marcas" (*Conhecimento* 221).

The feeling of complicity with the gaolers and the executioners is thus related not only to the practice of institutional psychiatry but also to the war experience itself. And in the end the finger is pointed very personally at the narrator himself, for he too has connived in the cover-up of the ugly truth of the atrocities of the colonial war. Neither does he hide the fact that he too has perpetuated the unpunished, even condoned, rape of colonised women, which has for centuries been the prerogative of the coloniser and above all of invading armies (*Conhecimento* 206-7). The pages in which the narrator recalls the matter-of-factness with which the troops (himself included) have sex with African women, with the tacit (though more likely: helpless) approval of their husbands, make no apologies for his/their behaviour as instruments of colonial subjugation: "no nosso odor pegajoso de invasores" (*Conhecimento* 212).

The final war memory in this novel (the recollection of a soldier's suicide at Mangando) is already included in *Memória de elefante*, and its retelling in *Conhecimento* (repercussions on the already low morale of fellow soldiers and offi-

cers) seems aimed at providing an apology for exceptional behaviour in war circumstances. The conscripts feel dead, many would prefer to die, for their living conditions are appalling: “num buraco como ratos” (*Conhecimento* 256), Mussuma “era uma cova de caixão” (*Conhecimento* 257), their bodies are “inerte[s] [...] fatigado[s] [...] amarrotados e exaustos [...] gastos” (*Conhecimento* 257-8). They would be better off if they were dogs. The war has, in any case, turned them into animals: “—Os animais presos—disse eu—preferem muitas vezes morrer e nós não passamos de animais presos” (*Conhecimento* 256), in much the same way as mental hospitals, according to the narrator, turn their patients into animals (“bichos” [*Conhecimento* 209]).

While Lobo Antunes frequently mentions African, exotic fauna in his work, one of the very last references to the war in this novel revolves around the most familiar of animals, man’s proverbial best friend: the dog. Dogs are ever present in and around camps and *sanzalas* in the author’s novels, often thin, diseased, famished, pathetic dogs. Here, the dogs

farejavam os homens nas macas, lambiam-lhes os braços, o pescoço, a cara, e a seguir afastavam-se, apoiavam o tronco nas patas traseiras, levantavam o focinho e principiavam a latir no estrepitoso silêncio terrível da guerra. (*Conhecimento* 273-4; emphasis added)

In the three novels here studied, the trauma of the protagonist/narrator’s war experience is regularly presented in connection with his difficulty in overcoming silence, both the silence surrounding the question of the colonial war itself and that brought about by his personal difficulty in communicating with other members of society. In *Memória de elefante*, the protagonist tends to see himself as a victim of lack of attention in all personal circumstances. In this as in the following novel, the emphasis is on involvement in the war against personal will, and the fact that this was a traumatic, “imposed adventure.” As such, both characters share feelings of displacement and otherness not far removed from similar experiences nowadays often expressed by previously colonised people. Moreover, in *Os cus de Judas*, the narrator is profoundly concerned with a perceived need to break the official silence surrounding the colonial war, in a society that ostracises its returned soldiers and would rather allow the silence of history to spread over the whole uncomfortable episode. In it he speaks both for himself and for a whole generation that went to the war and either died there or came back to an all-pervasive, oppressive his-

torical silence. The narrator of *Os cus de Judas* breaks that silence in his name and in theirs. In *Conhecimento do inferno*, the narrative voice, now avowedly autobiographical, meditates both on personal suffering during the war (his and his fellow soldiers') and on his own complicity in the historical process of colonialism and in the war that eventually put an end to it. All three novels speak out against the war—never comfortably, but never apologetically either. It is a critically piercing voice that can be heard in this early trilogy discussing and dissecting the colonial war that post-Salazar Portugal largely swept under the carpet. And this is a voice not only vehemently clamouring against the colonial war but also refusing to let any of us feel free from blame in our collective responsibility for the *estrepitoso silêncio terrível da guerra*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are taken from António Lobo Antunes, *Memória de elefante*. When translated, translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the original are taken from António Lobo Antunes, *Os cus de Judas*. Quotations in English are taken from the published English translation, *South of Nowhere*.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are taken from António Lobo Antunes, *Conhecimento do Inferno*. When translated, translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Also: "declarara para si próprio" (119), "disse-se o médico" (124), "Escuta, articulou o psiquiatra dentro de si" (153).

<sup>5</sup> Compare "Esta cidade que era a sua" (*Memória* 97) with his rejection of Luanda in *Os cus de Judas*: "cidade colonial pretensiosa e suja de que nunca gostei" and his belief (then) that Lisbon was still the place where he belonged: "a minha terra são 89,000 quilómetros quadrados com centro em Benfca" (96-7).

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere (2000) I have argued that this as well as some other novels of the colonial war in Africa display many features which are characteristic of the literatures commonly known in the Western academy as post-colonial.

<sup>7</sup> I have in mind the difficulties that colonised people have encountered for centuries in trying to make their voices heard under colonial administration, and even in post-independence times, which Gayatri Spivak has so powerfully disclosed.

<sup>8</sup> For this common complaint amongst returning soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, see Quintais 62-3.

## Works Cited

- Antunes, António Lobo. *Conhecimento do inferno*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1988. Print.  
 ———. *Memória de elefante*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1988. Print.  
 ———. *Os cus de Judas*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1986. Print.  
 ———. *South of Nowhere*. Trans. Elizabeth Lowe. London: Chatto & Windus/The Hogarth

- Press, 1983. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Chaucé, Dominique. *L'auteur en souffrance*. Paris: P.U.F., 1999. Print.
- Griffiths, Gareth. "Being there, being There: Kosinsky and Malouf." *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*. Ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1990. 153-66. Print.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Ed. and foreword by Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988. Print.
- Moutinho, Isabel. "The Colonial Malaise in Contemporary Portuguese Fiction." *Novel Turns Towards 2000*. Ed. J. Gatt-Rutter. Melbourne: Voz Hispánica, 2000. Print.
- Quintais, Luís. "'Um homem escondido dentro do homem inexistente': uma situação de disgnóstico de uma desordem psiquiátrica." *Etnográfica* 2.1 (1998): 55-72. Print.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay on the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969. Print.
- Seixo, Maria Alzira. *Os Romances de António Lobo Antunes*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2002. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988. Reprinted with abridgements in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman. Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 66-111. Print.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Isabel Moutinho is a lecturer in Spanish and Portuguese in the School of Historical and European Studies, La Trobe University, Australia. Her main research area is contemporary Portuguese literature, particularly the novels dealing with the colonial wars in Africa. Other research interests are comparative literature (contemporary European) and literatures from Portuguese-speaking African countries. Some of her recent publications on topics related to the one in this article include: "Images of Africa in contemporary narrative in Portuguese" in *The Paths of Multiculturalism*; "Gestures of Reconciliation: Three Novels of Colonial War"; "*Em África não há bruxas*: o estranho, o mágico e o pós-colonial em *O Dia dos Prodígios* e *Vinte e Zinco*"; "Re-imagining National Identity in Contemporary Portuguese Narrative"; and *Transformations: Re-Imagining Identity*. Her book *Colonial Wars in Contemporary Portuguese Fiction* was published in 2008. E-mail: I.Moutinho@latrobe.edu.au