

## The Geographers' Manual: The Place of *Place* in António Lobo Antunes

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**Abstract:** The abundance of place names in the novels of Lobo Antunes is not, as in some authors, a device used to “ground” their fictions, to make them more real, more down-to-earth. Place is largely what his novels are all about. The author has an especial love for his hometown, Lisbon, whose neighborhoods are often treated as major characters, with the people who inhabit them being occasionally reduced to caricatures, props, scenery. The prominence given to place makes these novels valuable sociological documents and challenges us, à la Copernicus, to realign our thinking. *The Natural Order of Things* and *The Inquisitors' Manual* serve as sample texts for my inquiry.

A manual of geography is what I would *like* to have written, or to see someone else write, but it would take up a book, not an article. Some of António Lobo Antunes's most interesting characters are places, and one could—through his books—travel through the better part of Portugal and a good portion of Angola. In a hundred years from now I can imagine someone doing with Antunes's novels what Franco Moretti has done with those of Jane Austen, Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert and other nineteenth-century writers. In his *Atlante del romanzo europeo 1800-1900*, Moretti literally maps out the England of Jane Austen and the Paris of Balzac. The places in which Austen's fictional plots unfold reveal to us the parameters of her own, real-life world, which

was limited to southern England and—within London—to the residential West End. Within those general boundaries, the specific places in which the characters circulate tell us something about their social background and present position in society. And the opposite is true. The novels of Austen and her contemporaries are valuable documents for learning about places: about their then rather different topography (how streets and neighborhoods were configured) and the social dynamic that prevailed.

The place of *place*, in the work of Lobo Antunes, is so large and multiplex as to become, at times, a bit dizzying. In *The Natural Order of Things*, the characters are constantly on the move—in the present or in their remembered pasts—across the length and breadth of Portugal, from Tavira, on the southern Algarvian coast near Andalusia, all the way up to Monção, on the northern border with Galicia. The novel's crisscrossing narratives (with ten different characters telling their interrelated stories) also crisscross the country, taking us to various points along the western coast—including Esposende in the north, Peniche and Ericeira in the center, the region around Lisbon, and the beaches near Odemira in the Lower Alentejo—and in the interior, where various characters live, for shorter or longer periods, in the far-northern town of Chaves; in Santo Tirso, near Oporto; in Guarda, a town in the Beira Alta not far from Spain; in Mortágua, north of Coimbra; and in the southern Alentejo town of Beja. Not only that, certain characters are also wont to revisit their African pasts—in Mozambique, Johannesburg and Algeria. In *The Inquisitors' Manual*, the remembered and imagined past extends to Spain as well as to North Africa and Angola, but most of the action occurs within a 100-mile radius that includes Lisbon, Setúbal and Palmela, Estoril and Cascais, Alcácer do Sal, and Alverca.

The geography of Lobo Antunes's novels could, on the macro level, be studied as a kind of national photograph that reflects, among other things, the profound changes in Portuguese demographics—with massive numbers of *retornados* and immigrants having flooded into its urban centers since the 1974 Revolution, while rural towns and regions are, more often than not, the nostalgically remembered birthplaces of people now definitively settled in greater Lisbon, where one fifth of the country's population is concentrated.<sup>1</sup>

This author's novels may also be used, and in fact have already been used, to focus on Portugal's long and troubled relationship with Africa—not from a political, but instead from a psychological point of view.<sup>2</sup> Africa was a huge, inscrutable continent that overwhelmed the colonizers. As a mythic space, it is, or was, for the Portuguese a kind of America, a land of dreams and

opportunity. The reality, of course, did not always live up to the dreams, as in the case of Alice, who, in *The Inquisitors' Manual*, recalls with bitterness the twenty-six years she and her alcoholic husband tried without success to make their fortune in the bushland of Angola (214-28). It should be noted that this same Alice, who becomes the foster mother of Paula, the Minister's illegitimate daughter, nurtures no illusions about Portugal, where the misery suffered by people like her and her cousin Alda is no different, she claims, from what they suffered in Africa (220).

Exploited at great cost, feared and coveted, Africa was always an ambiguous obsession of the Portuguese, and no writer has examined its aftereffects as trenchantly as Antunes. In the two novels I've chosen as my sample texts, Africa is not a major motif, but it is a "leit" one, asserting itself at fairly frequent, if irregular, intervals. In *The Natural Order of Things*, Domingos, who spent ten years as a miner in Johannesburg, left behind his crazed wife in a Mozambican mental hospital and returned with his daughter to Lisbon, himself half crazed, which is in a certain way his salvation. For he enthusiastically remembers his years in the mineshafts as a time when he flew, like a bird, in the depths of the earth. "We all fly however we can, that's my theory," he states in one of the chapters he narrates (79-86); further, his way of flying, as an impoverished retiree in Lisbon, is through his memory and upside-down imagination of Africa. That continent, by all the usual standards, broke him as a man, but it is what feeds his salvific life of fantasy. It could be pointed out that doddering Domingos, like Portugal's pre-Revolution political leaders, cannot let go of Africa, but I doubt it is a connection that Antunes wanted to make. His interest is in how Africa entered, and altered, the Portuguese psyche.

The Portuguese fixation on Africa began with the conquest of Ceuta, in Morocco, and the northern part of the continent is evoked often enough by Antunes. In *The Natural Order of Things*, a woman dying of cancer has, we learn in the final chapters, made up most of the story, and the events she remembers from her early childhood in Algiers (255-60) are among the few completely real and happy ones in the book (the other ones being those from Benfica in the old days). In *The Inquisitors' Manual* the Minister, repenting the death of a political prisoner at his hands, imagines that the cheap ring on her finger is from Morocco, Tunisia or Algeria, and he fantasizes about having gone with her on a North African holiday for a few days of silly, thoughtless happiness (398-99). There was, in sharp contrast, nothing happy or romantic about the trip that the Minister *really* made to sub-Saharan Africa. Con-

fronted by the atrocities of the colonial war in Angola, where he was sent by Salazar in 1961, the Minister literally shat in his pants out of fear and horror (429). Africa is or was, for the Portuguese, a dreamland, but also a place of reckoning, a reaping of seeds that were badly or mistakenly sown, as well as an encounter with an incommensurate unknown.

If place on the intercontinental scale offers a rich field of study, a less obvious but perhaps even richer field is furnished by the most local “geography”—that of streets and neighborhoods within a city and its suburbs, and in particular Lisbon, where Lobo Antunes has spent most of his life. Antunes, who knows his city like the back of his hand, winds us through its streets and cross-streets, as well as through its environs, like a taxi driver who also happens to be a sociologist. It’s not just that he’s a good observer; it’s that place and person are inseparable in his novelistic art. He has been accused of being a caricaturist, and there is validity to the charge—validity and virtue, for he employs exaggeration to bring out what is specific in each character and, most especially, what is specifically Portuguese. Minor characters, it is true, may be reduced to one or two hyperbolized traits, and they constitute a gallery of Portuguese types, but major characters are endowed with a psychological depth and emotional complexity that show through their caricatural overlay. Consider, for instance, the Minister in *The Inquisitors’ Manual*, who wears sheepskin boots, habitually smokes a cigarillo, and almost never removes his hat. Or his grandly inept son, João, who wears a rope for a belt and spends his days building a boat in the garage of the farm in Palmela. Both characters are outwardly ridiculous but display, at least in their inner monologues, a wide range of emotional reactions (this is somewhat less true for João, a casualty of his parents’ neglect). In any case the characters—both major and minor—and the caricatures that are drawn for them, are place-dependent. You can take the Minister and his son out of rural Palmela, but you cannot extirpate Palmela from their thoughts and behavior.

Moving closer to Lisbon we have João’s wife Sophia, a pureblood daughter of Estoril’s upper crust, and in this case the caricature is all-defining. Sophia is a carbon copy of her well-to-do mother, who is a carbon copy of so many other bracelet-jangling, bridge-playing socialites from the seaside resort town. Sophia and her mother, whose sophistication is just another form of provincialism, are incapable of seeing anything except from their Estoril-determined point of view. By probing and exemplifying that point of view (reflected in their attitudes toward the middle-class, the poor, the Church

and their own children), Lobo Antunes defines not only his characters but Estoril itself. Places, in the author's work, are themselves major characters, which accounts for why some of the people we meet in his fictions are indeed no more than caricatures, scenery, props, details, whose function is merely to help define the "personality" of the places they inhabit.

In the ensemble of the author's output, Lisbon may be considered his main character, as Dublin was for Joyce (yet as Prague was not for Kafka), whose work (excluding his diaries) was after all rather abstract and not especially site-specific. Lobo Antunes maps out different parts of Lisbon from novel to novel, but it is the traditional neighborhoods that garner most of his attention. In *The Inquisitors' Manual*, he tours us around the Praça do Chile, with its statue of Magellan prevailing over the intersection (310, 313), its TB Diagnostic Center on the northwest corner (294, 344), the Largo do Leão (310) a couple of blocks west, the Deeds Office on the Calçada de Arroios (297-98), and the Constantino Garden (305) several blocks south. He occasionally escorts us up the Rua Morais Soares (295, 310), which departs from the Praça, to arrive at the Rua Barão de Sabrosa (303), the Praça Paiva Couceiro (302) and, further on, the cemetery at Alto de São João (295, 297).

At other times we're taken down the Avenida Almirante Reis (298, 310) to Anjos Church (297-298), to the Bairro das Colónias (305), to Desterro (303), to the red light district known as Intendente (Largo do Mitelo, 355), to the Rua da Palma (287-98), and to Martim Moniz (313, 355), described as "an island of discount stores selling wooden knickknacks, toy horses, toy cars, games with missing pieces, dolls" (313). The Praça do Chile itself is a place "in permanent ferment," "inundated by retirees in slippers who [can] barely walk and by blind people who [bump] into them" and by "the TB victims from the Diagnostic Center so skinny they [fly] about like the leaves swept up at dawn by the municipal cleaning crew" (294).

As a current resident at the Praça do Chile and a frequent passerby at Martim Moniz, I can vouch for the truth in spirit, if not the literal accuracy, of the descriptions. They are given to us through the narrative voices of Milá and her mother, proprietors of a squalid notions store at the Praça do Chile, where they live in an even more squalid apartment. The references to their neighborhood are abundant and ultra-specific, because its immediate vicinity defines the effective confines of their universe. A woman who is used to traveling far and wide, or whose livelihood at least takes her to the far side of town or to adjacent towns, or whose cultural and economic horizons are



broad, is not likely to know—much less speak of—her own neighborhood in such detail.

When, because of her physical similarity to his estranged wife, Milá becomes the Minister's girlfriend, he sets her and her mother up in a fancy apartment on the Rua Castilho, near the King Edward VII Park. But instead of treating us to descriptions of her new neighborhood, Milá, amidst all the enchanting luxury bestowed on her by the Minister, can't help but recall, with nostalgia, her former life as a clerk at the notions store and as the girlfriend of Carlos, a pool shark and small-time smuggler who wasn't even a faithful lover (303-07, 311-13, 322-29). The Minister falls into political disgrace and Milá returns, inevitably, to the Praça do Chile, where her mother eventually dies and she keeps on, tending the miserable notions store by herself and realizing, some twenty-five or thirty years later (342), how *she* will soon join the ranks of the neighborhood's old, lonely women who look out of their tiny windows "baring one or two resentful teeth to the indifference of the street" (343). She imagines herself becoming senile, losing her way around Martim Moniz, and reaching the Praça do Chile only in the wee hours, led back there by scent, "like turtledoves returning to their dovecote" (355). Milá is the Praça do Chile; the Praça do Chile is Milá.

Since Portugal joined the European Union, a sizable portion of its population has prospered; another, no less sizable portion continues to scrape by. The neighborhoods between the Praça do Chile and Martim Moniz have undergone transformation, like the rest of Lisbon, but their residents tend to belong to the old, low-wage economy. Lobo Antunes's novels chronicle, in vivid fashion, the social disparities and changing (or unchanging) economic fortunes of these and other Lisbon neighborhoods.

*The Natural Order of Things* provides us with sketches of various Lisbon neighborhoods, including Alcântara and, within Alcântara, a little-known complex of garden apartments called Quinta do Jacinto (translated as "Hyacinth Park"), Praça da Alegria, Campo Santana (translated as "Santana Park"), Marvila, Chiado, Praça da Figueira, the Intendente district, Santa Apolónia, and Benfica. The sketches are in some cases (Alcântara, Campo Santana, Benfica) detailed enough to evoke distinctive atmospheres even for uninformed readers; in other cases (Marvila, Figueira Square) the sketch is indeed sketchy, and readers familiar with Lisbon will be much more likely to grasp the settings and importance for the story.

This poses dilemmas for a translator, nearly all of whose readers will be of

the uninformed variety. Is it legitimate to help them out, by slightly embellishing or explicating a place name? As a rule I would say no, but it is a rule—like most—that should sometimes be broken, particularly when it is a matter not of characterizing a place but of merely situating it so as to avoid confusion. Near the beginning of the first chapter of *The Natural Order of Things*, for example, I translated “brisas de Monsanto” as “breezes from Monsanto Park” (3), since readers might otherwise wrongly imagine that Monsanto is a town next to Lisbon rather than what it is: a large park inside it. At the beginning of the second chapter, the phrase “rés-do-chão alugado em Odivelas” was, for the opposite reason, rendered as “ground-floor apartment *outside Lisbon*, in Odivelas” (13).<sup>3</sup>

*The Natural Order of Things* is the second novel in the so-called Benfica trilogy, and it is in Benfica, just north of Monsanto Park, that we find ourselves in the novel’s opening paragraphs, for it is to the years he spent there as a child that the thoughts of the insomnia-afflicted narrator naturally drift. It is also where Lobo Antunes lived as a child. The narrator in question (the novel, as already noted, has ten different narrators) is a 49-year-old civil servant—coincidentally the author’s age one year before this novel was published—and what he first of all remembers is lying among the broken-down tombstones of Benfica’s abandoned cemetery. It is a peaceful image—an image of quiet, ancient death. After a vertiginous tour of this and many other neighborhoods in Lisbon, of many other towns in Portugal and of various countries abroad, the author brings us back to where he began, Benfica, this time through the narrative voice of a woman who is dying of cancer. And so it is not only Benfica but also death that opens and closes this novel. The natural order of things is a circle: the eternal, inevitable return to our origins, with Benfica—the Benfica of the old days—continually reasserting itself in the memories of the various characters who live or once lived there.

From Benfica they were made, like the author himself, and to Benfica they return, like Milá to the Praça do Chile. The natural order of things is re-*place*-ment, with once-bucolic Benfica having given way to a neighborhood full of banks, businesses and traffic. The house on the Calçada do Tojal where the woman dying of cancer once lived with her parents no longer exists, and for some years now she has lived in a seventh-floor condo overlooking the new Benfica market (256-59). But the Benfica of old haunts her memory, and it is only when faced with imminent death that she opens her eyes to the new dispensation: “I suddenly realized that I lived alone in this condo above the

market and that by the natural order of things someone (my daughter, a relative, a stranger [...]) would occupy it as soon as I vacated" (260).

To entertain her final days and to distract herself from fear, the woman writes a novel in her head entitled, perhaps ironically, *The Natural Order of Things*—a rather disordered story of the places where she herself lived or which she "invented," as she says (278), because she knew them only peripherally, or vicariously, having freely rearranged the facts about the people and events associated with them. The Latin *invenire* means "to come upon" or "to find," and the woman's novelistic technique of finding and reordering describes that of the real author, whose fictions are born out of facts, with preeminence given to real places, particularly those he knows well. "I didn't invent Benfica, no, not Benfica, I didn't invent Benfica" (278), insists the woman—or Lobo Antunes through her?

Someone will naturally point out that the psychological importance of a geographical place depends on memory, and we don't need Freud to know that childhood memories are our most formative and informing ones. According to this point of view, it isn't Benfica per se that matters for the 49-year-old civil servant, for the woman dying of cancer or for Lobo Antunes himself, but their respective childhoods, which by chance happened to unfold (partly or wholly) in that particular neighborhood of Lisbon. Similarly, it isn't the west African nation rich in oil and diamonds whose capital is Luanda but the Angola where he faced the shocking horrors of war that so strongly impressed itself on the mind and imagination of Lobo Antunes. Yes, we could say that the crucial places of our lives depend on *when* and *what*, on our memory and its content, but we can say just as truly—and this is what António Lobo Antunes *does* say—that memory depends on *where*, on place, without which it would have nothing to remember. Place is at our origin; memory comes later. And wars take *place* in specific locations, for reasons that usually have to do with land, territory, *place*.

Rather than abstracting or spiritualizing human existence, Lobo Antunes has chosen to root it in geography, places, facts, and minutiae. What is more, he continually reminds us that it is places, rather than people (and their struggles, their wars), that endure, evolving slowly or quickly, and sometimes beyond the recognition of those who lately walked there. But even if they change hands, their form of government, and the names by which we call them, those places resist. We die; they keep going. And so the work of Lobo Antunes, outstanding as a literary achievement and important as a sociological record, is also a lesson in humility for our species.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Retornados* are people of Portuguese descent who returned to the homeland after the African colonies won their independence from Portugal in 1974-75.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Paulo de Medeiros's "Hauntings: Memory, Narrative, and the Portuguese Colonial Wars"; Arlindo Castanho's "*Os cus de Judas* di António Lobo Antunes: Memória di una Guerra Assurda"; and Roberto Vecchi's "Experiência e Representação: Dois Paradigmas para um Cânone Literário da Guerra Colonial."

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of various problems, including that of place names, that I confronted as a translator, see "A desordem natural de Lobo Antunes e como destraduzi-la." *A Escrita e o Mundo em António Lobo Antunes: Actas do Colóquio Internacional da Universidade de Évora*, eds. Eunice Cabral, Carlos J. F. Jorge and Christine Zurbach, Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2003, pp. 395-401.

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