

V. Reviews

Anticorpo: A Parody on the Colonial Ambition by Patrícia Lino

An audiovisual book review by Isaac Giménez

In *Mythologies* (1957) Roland Barthes discusses myths not as stories but as “acts of signification”: “Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates” (155). *Anticorpo: A parody on the colonial ambition* (expected publication in 2020) forms a collage that elaborates on this “privation of history” in order to challenge discourses assuming the greatness of an empire that never existed.¹ Patrícia Lino’s audiovisual and parodical book departs from a similar place as João Pedro Vale’s installation “Coragem portuguesa, só vos falta ser grandes” (2010) [Have courage Portuguese, all you are missing is greatness]. Exhibited at the Berardo Collection Museum in Lisbon this piece provokes a doubly ironic effect. On the one hand, the brightness and large size of the letters made of light bulbs affixed to an iron structure make for a prominent wall that contrasts with the message it illuminates. On the other hand, this reinterpretation of the original assertion by the modernist poet José Almada de Negreiros, includes aspirational greatness that is both rousing and absent in the Portuguese national identity.² However, *Anticorpo* goes one step further: by disassembling the weapons of the colonial engine, Lino reclaims the individual bodies disregarded by it.

In the last few years nationalist right-wing movements have been gaining public notoriety and political representation in many countries. Portugal seems to be no exception, as the resurgence of colonial supremacist discourses as well as the rising popularity of parties like *Chega* and its candidate André Ventura suggest. In response, Lino appropriates videos published by Portuguese far-right political groups on their Youtube channels and highlights their *pathetic* nature (*pathetic* in the double sense of insignificant and ridiculous).³ The artist-author seems to adhere to Audre Lorde’s well-known assertion “the master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s House”⁴ when opting to combine humor, performance and interdisciplinarity as a

contentious *antidote* that challenges pre-established notions of literary genre, domain, and the material nature of the book itself.

It is important to mention that this review engages with an unfinished version of the *Anticorpo* screened at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa on December 17, 2019. What in other cases might denote a lack of critical rigor becomes somehow irrelevant for a review of an audiovisual book divided in chapters that do not necessarily follow a linear structure. After various screenings in California, Portugal, and Cape Verde, the final version will soon be released by the Brazilian publishing company Guarupa in the form of a paper boat. Once the boat is unfolded, a QR Code will digitally connect the reader to the audiovisual content that will include a few more chapters. Just by looking at its cover, *Anticorpo* deploys its own title by negating the materiality of the book. From an etymological perspective, the prefix “anti” means both, “in front of” and “against” something. The individual body invisibilized, negated, and nullified by colonial (collective) discourses manifests in the nature of the work itself. In it two forces clash: a country looking nostalgically to its past, sweetening its history and attempting to impose control over individuals and the silenced disruptive/undisciplined *others*. Like a paper boat, this book contends with an idea of empire that drowns in its own inconsistencies and inferiority complex, but nevertheless persists.

Most of Lino’s works confront readers/spectators (as well as reviewers) with their own prejudices. Not only does *Anticorpo* defy the idea of a book, and by extension literature, but more importantly it requires an engagement that goes beyond the *logos* and the solemnity associated with it. Traditionally, parody has been considered an inferior genre, a mere inversion of the original codes whose main aim is to critically tackle an issue through the lens of humor. In this sense, Lino’s playful elaboration does fulfill its purpose: to provoke an unpleasant and corrosive laughter that’s both infuriating and relatable. Perhaps the personal, ludic appropriation and repurposing of archival images is not new in the Lusophone arts, but it is definitely rare within the Portuguese literary field. The artifice and performativity found in the original images are only accentuated by the writer’s interdisciplinary *praxis*. The reader/spectator should approach *Anticorpo* following the same principle that guided its elaboration: the dehierarchization of images, words, sounds, music and performance.⁵ As part of a bigger conversation proposed by the author in different

mediums, – the book *O kit de sobrevivência do descobridor português* (2020), the visual poem “Portugal” (2019), and the miniature poem “Museum of Discoveries” (2020) to name some– *Anticorpo* reminds us that the process of unlearning and decolonizing knowledge necessitates the comprehension and incorporation of other languages and signifiers.⁶ The challenge is monumental, especially when considering that Western ideologies (and the metanarratives sustaining them) have long relied on the verbal and communicative dimensions of language to effectively permeate (and legitimate) other cultures.

The unfinished version of *Anticorpo: A parody on the colonial ambition* is divided into nine chapters, each of which explores a particular issue related to the idea of empire. The overarching themes are patriarchy, education, religion, colonialism, the Estado Novo (1933-1974) and popular culture. Contrary to what one might think, sound is the organizing principle structuring the materials, some of which repeat themselves to bring back and forth constructions of the national identity. According to the author, this work seeks to intervene in an old and difficult conversation not sufficiently addressed in Portuguese literature: the insufficient circulation of texts, authors and debates falling out of colonial narratives (including non-Eurocentric, feminist, and heterodox readings of the national literary and historical traditions). Not surprisingly, the introductory chapter is the most narrative one: the voice-over (from the author herself) recounts in an intentionally pretentious tone the discoveries of Portuguese *navegantes* between 1415 and 1543: discoveries, trade routes, a new map of the world, and the scientific and technological advances brought by European colonial powers from XV-XVII to the colonies. The dynamic images of vessels in black and white, the Portuguese waving flag, rhythmic music and a fast editing activate fabricated memories of heroic, ambitious, and civilized people conquering the world.

Distinct sounds play a very significant role throughout the book. The modulations in rhythms, melodies and instrumentation in the background together with the intermittent canned voice of the narrator changing in frequency and tone reveal the sardonic tone that gradually escalates. While we see black and white images of different groups involved in commercial and productive activities (from picking grapes to selling fish at the harbor, from the blossoming of urban development to folkloric dances), we hear the voice-over narrating the property rights that Portuguese colonizers had over the bodies and

emotions of enslaved people. The repetition of this sequence and the rhythmic percussion music suggests temporal continuity until, right after, the sound of a drowsy voice and big white letters displayed upside down on a black screen interrupt the narration: “Blah, Blah, Blah”.

The juxtapositions of opposites and dissociation of languages are two of the prevailing techniques used in *Anticorpo* to confuse, shock, and disrupt the readers. However, quite often the critique is explicit, direct and reiterated: “Império, impostores, impróprio, impossível” [Empire, impostors, improper, impossible]. One by one in bright color-changing backgrounds, we repeatedly see these words in bold letters flashing on screen. The voice-over enthusiastically pronounces them in slow motion. The next segment continues revisiting the official colonial history by showing its counterpart: images of black people dancing joyously are played over a narrated passage about the punishments suffered by enslaved people. Later on, red letters on a black background, together with the voice of the narrator, remind us of the incommensurable human loss directly caused by enslavement and displacement of more than 13 million Africans who, for centuries, were trafficked to the Americas.

In big white capital letters on a black background, we are confronted with three rhetorical questions: “De onde viemos? / Quem somos? / Para onde vamos?” [Where do we come from? / Who are we? / Where are we heading?]⁷. The tribal chant in the background subverts the orientation of these questions: who has the right to pose and respond to these questions? The first chapter ends with the images of the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar hoisting the Portuguese flag and a faltering national anthem sung by a boisterous choir in the background. From the era of the *navegantes*, we transition to the Portuguese National Dictatorship and Estado Novo (1926-1974).

Chapter 2, “O império ou o elogio da pobreza” [The empire or the praise of poverty] centers two main ideas: “O império é só império quando o português agradece por ser pobre: e o pobre segue pobre, e o nobre segue nobre” [The empire’s continuity depends on the Portuguese thanking to be poor: the poor ones continue being poor, and the noble ones continue being noble] and “O império existe para fora, porque existe para dentro” [The empire exists to the outside because it exists for those inside]. Images of large crowds waiving to Pope Paul VI during his visit to Portugal (1967), a *Mocidade*

Portuguesa (Portuguese Youth) marching like a military parade, and “The Lord’s Prayer” in the background reinforce the strong ties between the catholic church and Salazar’s dictatorship.

“A tara portuguesa” [The Portuguese’s fault] is, in my opinion, one of the most exhilarating chapters. It examines colonial constructions of masculinities and the role of men in reinforcing the idea of empire. The voice-over changes in frequency until it breaks down into two voices of different tones, one echoing the other. The original images show large groups of young men doing gymnastics together. Their movements in slow motion, and a subsequent series of close-ups of young men aiming a shotgun juxtaposed to a rhythmic and repetitive melody, create a witty and fierce message: “A alma do homem português é universal, tão universal, que só ele a entende” [the soul of the Portuguese man is so universal, that he is the only one who understands it]. This point is further developed in the next chapter, “O colonizado sustenta o patriarcado” [The colonized supports the patriarchy], which starts with Salazar’s speech thanking Portuguese women for their fidelity and participation in the demonstration on April 28, 1959. Playing with different frames on the screen, we see alternating images of women demonstrating in support of Salazar and footage of women in Brazil demonstrating against Bolsonaro. The vitality of Brazilian demonstrations takes over the whole frame, the sound vanishes and we are left with the mute, visible euphoria projected onto women’s bodies and faces.

Chapter 5: “Fruta ou a morte do império português” [Fruit, or the death of the Portuguese empire] is a reflection on the delusional logic of colonial education. Instead of teaching about local produce, children in Santo Tomé were made to learn about fruits like apples, pears, and oranges — foreign items they had no conception of. Like a memory game, we participate in a sequence that involves sound, images, words, objects and bright colors: avocado, mango, jackfruit and papaya.⁸

“Versão renovada de um hit nacional” [Renewed version of a national hit] is a hysterical, almost surreal chapter that subverts the logic of the music video “Conquistador” [Conqueror], a song performed by the Portuguese band Da Vince in the 1989 Eurovision Contest, by following the karaoke principle and changing the lyrics. Chapter 7, “Não falo, mas grito por dentro” [I don’t speak but I shout inside] reflects on the Portuguese colonial wars in Angola,

Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique between 1961-1974. In the same vein, “Adeus Macau” [Bye Macau], focuses on the loss of the last Portuguese colony in 1999, in an intended solemn and yet ironic tone. Lastly, (as far as this unfinished version goes), “Virar do avesso o país” [Turn the country upside down] revisits efforts of monumentalisation and commodification of history present in contemporary Portugal. Images of the *Monument of the discoveries* in Lisbon and the *World of discoveries* interactive museum and theme park in Porto, two sites that flagrantly celebrate a heroic version of the colonial past, alternate with direct oral and visual messages. The phrases “Decolonize”, “Nationalism is an insult”, “Dismantle the idea of empire” are repeated in a mantra-like motion. The quick-hit, repetition of images and electronic beats echoing 1990s music seem to underline the relation between brainwashing techniques and mainstream pop culture.

Anticorpo: A parody on the colonial ambition is both an aesthetic exploration and an exercise of civil responsibility that responds to the resurgence of colonial discourses among far-right groups with critical humor. In this piece, Patrícia Lino addresses three dimensions inherent to colonialism and patriarchy: marginalization of certain bodies and identities; the militarization of human relations, and the pervasiveness of nostalgia that suppresses any form of dissent in returns to the past. Colonialism, as the politics of fear, invents “the other” and disciplines those who seem to belong. This audiovisual book defamiliarizes these relationships and exposes a parodical image of the national identity based on the elusive idea of empire. As a poet, scholar and multifaceted artist, Patrícia Lino reminds us once again that in order to build, we first need to unlearn. The process of unlearning must involve taking on different forms of expression and encompassing different forms of knowledge, because as Roland Barthes once noticed, “[there is] still far too much heroism in our languages”. A larger imagination is required to critically undertake one nation’s history moving away from myths, heroes, and ideologies that underlie in our languages and invade our literatures. *Anticorpo* opens a space for it.

Notes

1. The notion of the Portuguese empire encompasses the age of the explorations in the 15th Century until the end of the decolonization process in 1975. It is important to mention that Patricia Lino's work casts a shadow over the concept of "empire". Instead, she reckons with colonial regimes that sought to legitimate themselves. The trailer of *Anticorpo* is available on Youtube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=022lKqhjyBk>>.

2. In "Ultimatum Futurista, as gerações portuguesas do século XX" ["Futurist ultimatum to the Portuguese generations of the 20th century"] (1917), Almada asserts: "Portugal é um país de fracos, Portugal é um país decadente. [...] O povo completo será aquele que tiver reunido no seu máximo todas as qualidades e todos os defeitos. Coragem, portugueses, só vos faltam as qualidades" [Portugal is a country of weak people; Portugal is a decadent country. [...] The people will be complete when they gather the maximum potential of all their qualities and flaws. Have courage Portuguese, only the qualities are missing].

3. The videos were found in the following sources/Youtube channels: 24 Direto, Amílcar Martins, Caleb Gattegno, CANTVM MENSVRABLE, Cinemateca Portuguese, The Kino Library, Viriatos Militararia, Michael Rogge, and other identified authors and sources.

4. In *Sister outsider: essays and speeches* (1984), p. 110.

5. In this regard, it is important to mention the contribution of Brazilian Concrete Poetry that emerged in 1956. The movement imprinted powerful images on the public imagination and projected the combined forces of Brazilian poetry and plastic arts as the vanguard of an international aesthetic movement. Poems became "verbivocovisual expressions", it is to say, poems were equally shaped by words, sounds and graphic elements. Later on, the Neoconcrete movement will incorporate the special dimension of poetry, turning poems into objects.

6. For more information about Patricia Lino's work, visit her personal website: <<http://www.patricialino.com/>>.

7. In reference to Paul Gauguin's famous painting *D'où Venons Nous? Que Sommes Nous? Où Allons Nous?* (1897).

8. A preview of this chapter is available on Youtube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjLZ1kSf5lc>>.

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