

## “War is not Measured by Uniforms or Rifles”: Resisting Portuguese Colonial Wars through “Marginal” Sexual Behaviors

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I've fucked in London.  
I've fucked in Spain.  
I've even fucked on the coast of Maine.  
But I'll never be happy,  
I'll never be free,  
Until I've fucked the army  
the way it fucked me.  
(in Lemer 117)

Álamo Oliveira's *Até Hoje. Memórias de Cão* tells us the story of João, the novel's protagonist who, in 1967, is drafted into the military to serve in the Guinea Bissau colonial war.<sup>1</sup> João is from the Azorean islands, and the trip to Lisbon and then on to Guinea marks his first time outside his island of Graciosa. He spends two idle years in Guinea, in the Binta barracks, where he awaits action with his fellow soldiers. Except for an incident where they are attacked and which causes the death of an important character, no military action takes place. The plot then alternates between the tedious and anxiety-filled days of expecting to fight and João's memories of his childhood and adolescence in Graciosa.

Simultaneously, the protagonist starts to question the Estado Novo's rhetoric and ideology: “very strange was how faith and empire were spread”<sup>23</sup> (Oliveira 41). Soon enough, João is told by a comrade that “it is no one's fault that you come from an island of mutes, governed by half a dozen blind men as well”<sup>4</sup> (63). The State's rhetoric and its ideology are spread throughout the islands. This ideology is one that produces “a people subjugated by unquestionable obedience”<sup>5</sup> (29) and that has, as a basis, “‘God-Fatherland-Family,’ a trinity turned dogma, undisputed authority over the nation's present and future, as stated on the April in Portugal poster”<sup>6</sup> (29). It is the power of this trinity that makes João hide and, at some point, not completely understand his own

sexuality. João's homosexuality is something forbidden, and Álamo Oliveira's decision to bring it at the literary level into relation with the colonial wars is worth exploring. The author's intertwining of war and homosexuality thus provides another angle from which to deconstruct a rotten political regime and its insistence on maintaining a senseless war. It is my hypothesis that Álamo's novel strategically poses the question: does homosexuality entail a resistance to war?

Portugal has traditionally been a conservative country, especially in matters of sexual behavior and the expression of one's true sexual tendencies. One reason is the insidious presence of the Catholic Church, which has sought to standardize people's lives and behaviors; another reason is the discourse of social elites. This means that any behavior considered deviant from the moral norm must be severely punished. Homosexuality was one of those deviations that started to be punished by the 1886 Criminal Code, in accordance to articles 70 and 71. These articles remained unchanged until 1982. Nonetheless, the word "homosexuality" is never mentioned in the Code; it is only implied: "it is prescribed that to those who habitually give themselves to the practice of vices against nature . . . measures of safety will be applied,"<sup>7</sup> measures such as "internment in criminal asylums, workhouses or agricultural colonies, probation, a pledge of good conduct and the prohibition to practice a profession"<sup>8</sup> (Almeida, par. 5). Over time the condemnation of homosexuality becomes more rigid. According to Susana Pereira Bastos, the "July 1912 law provided a definition of 'vagrancy' close in meaning to that of the Criminal Code, which specified that it applied to homosexuality"<sup>9</sup> (238). Homosexuals challenged the social order and the established morality, and therefore represented a danger to the State. Several places were assigned to intern homosexuals caught by the police, like the *Mitra* internment camp, created in 1933, which also served as the final destination for vagrants and beggars.

At the cultural and literary levels, the Portuguese vanguard is repressed even before the implementation of the *Estado Novo* (New State); authors start to witness their books being censored, as they themselves become targets of persecution and ostracism.<sup>10</sup> For decades, homosexuality is expressed in an "encrypted and cryptic way"<sup>11</sup> (Almeida, par. 13). However, the regime was cynically selective and did not persecute its own supporters. Within certain elite intellectual circles, homosexuality and bisexuality were open and accepted by the establishment. This does not mean, however, that homosexuality was accepted as normal. Science and scientific truth were part of the heterosexual definition of "normality," which served the ideology of the New State. The 1949 Nobel Prize recipient in Medicine, Egas Moniz, defined homosexuality as a disease. For this reason, even

members of the elite did not always escape psychiatric treatment and electric-shock treatments (Almeida, par. 26). Homosexuality was consequently considered subversive because it was viewed as a deviation from the “norm;” it jeopardized masculine honor, the notion of the family, and those gender identities promoted by Salazarism.

This is not, however, an exclusive feature of the New State but rather, as Michel Foucault explains, something related to the notion of power and knowledge and the way they are reproduced in western societies. According to the French philosopher, “it is the nature of power—particularly the kind of power that operates in our society—to be repressive, and to be especially careful in repressing useless energies, the intensity of pleasures, and irregular modes of behavior” (37). This being the case, he continues, “we must not be surprised, then, if the effects of liberation vis-à-vis this repressive power are so slow to manifest themselves” (37). Foucault also argues that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). It is discourse that “transmits and produces power” (101) but, at the same time as it reinforces it, it also undermines and exposes it, “renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101).

As Foucault further explains, the “appearance in the nineteenth-century of psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion . . . made possible a strong advance of social controls into the area of ‘perversity’”(101). That is one of the reasons why in Portugal until 1982, when homosexuality ceased to be a crime, homosexuals still lived with the fear of being caught by the police, interned, beaten, and humiliated. Nonetheless, as Foucault argues, this kind of discourse “also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf” (101). And even if in Portugal it was being spoken in “encrypted” ways, it was nonetheless being spoken. In this sense, the Portuguese *Estado Novo* produced a type of discourse against homosexuality that enabled it to transmit and to impose only up to a certain point an “accepted” power. It created the sexual “norm” which, as we shall see, considered the subversive acts or behaviors that went against it as “homosexual.”

In 2003, the writer and literary critic Eduardo Pitta published *Fractura*, the first Portuguese essay in which literary texts are studied through the lens of gay studies. In *Fractura*, Pitta reveals what he deems obvious: “in a society traditionally hypocritical and sexually repressive (even at the level of expression), as Portuguese society continues to be, where the indescribable TV *trash* of the last few years has done more for the ‘liberation’ of the proscribed than the 1974 Revolution, no one will be surprised that the denial of gay

writers is a collective and peremptory attitude. Now, without gay writers, there can be no gay literature”<sup>12</sup> (9). The critic adds that it is not advisable to speak of a pre-Stonewall<sup>13</sup> Portuguese gay culture, even though one can and should speak of a homosexual culture *tout court* and of its literary representations (11).

In literary criticism the terms “homosexual” and “gay” are often treated as synonyms, and in this essay I, too, use them interchangeably when discussing the phenomenon of same-sex desire. I do this because I am, in most cases, referring to homosexual practices, and not to the political demand for recognition of a social identity. Nonetheless, in the case of *Até Hoje. Memórias de Cão* arguably João, Zé Domingos and Mastigas can be considered as seeking to establish a gay identity recognized and accepted by others.

It is important to note, however, that literary and cultural theorists sometimes distinguish between “homosexual” and “gay” on an historical basis. “Homosexual” embraces a particular swath of history—concretely, from the late nineteenth century to the 1969 Stonewall Riots—while “gay” demarcates a post-Stonewall period of political affirmation of gay culture and identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick incisively observes that, “‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’ seem more and more to be terms applicable to distinct, non-overlapping periods in the history of a phenomenon for which there then remains no overarching label” (17). Hence, in order to designate “‘the’ phenomenon . . . as it stretches across a larger reach of history,” she uses one or the other term interchangeably (17).

Sedgwick’s periodizing of the usage of “homosexual and “gay” helps to elucidate Pitta’s own distinction between homosexual and gay literature. In Pitta’s view, the former reflects sensibilities and experiences free of pre-determined political meaning, while the latter always has an ideological bent. Thus Pitta affirms that, until relatively recently, gay literature did not exist in Portugal; what did exist was a literature written by homosexuals. In 2000, Pitta publishes three short stories under the title *Persona*, where he fictionalizes the State’s trial of several Portuguese soldiers for their homosexual practices during the Colonial Wars. In the anthology’s last story, “Pesadelo” [“Nightmare”], the reader encounters this intriguing thought by the mother of a suspected soldier: “Laura thought it was all very bizarre. Why investigations directed at military homosexuals suspected of not sympathizing with the regime? And why only homosexuals and not others?”<sup>14</sup> (45). Three years later, Eduardo Pitta refers to this situation in his essay *Fractura*: “At the beginning of the 1970s, arbitrary legal proceedings, based solely on the testimony of letters confiscated from soldiers, began on all three fronts of the Colonial War and involved all branches of

the armed forces -The process leveled charges of *nefarious* conduct against more than one hundred soldiers and officers”<sup>15</sup> (30).

This attitude by the military is not surprising if we look at the history of homosexuality within the context of war in general. Allan Bérubé, in his compelling study on the dynamics of the relations between gay Americans serving in the military during World War II and their government, which established antihomosexual policies within the armed forces, tells us that “[t]he massive mobilization for World War II relaxed the social constraints of peacetime that had kept gay men and women unaware of themselves and each other, ‘bringing out’ many in the process. Gathered together in military camps, they often came to terms with their sexual desires, fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and began to name and talk about who they were” (6). However, while gays were experiencing self-discovery, “the military’s expanding antihomosexual policies also forced many citizen-soldiers and officers to come out against their will” (7). According to Bérubé, “draftees were brought out whenever induction examiners publicly rejected them for military service as homosexual, or when they were caught or ‘declared themselves’ to escape harassment and received undesirable discharges” (7). He adds:

From draft boards and induction stations to the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific, members of the armed forces lived out daily tensions between the expanding antihomosexual policies, the need for the efficient use of all personnel, and their private sexual lives. In the process gay male and lesbian soldiers discovered that they were fighting two wars: one for America, democracy, and freedom; the other for their own survival as homosexuals within the military organization. (7)

This situation was also true for the Canadian military during the Second World War, as *One of the Boys*, a book by Paul Jackson, informs us. According to the author, “the institution increasingly tried to purge itself of homosexuality through policies, regulations, and policing. . . . During the war, queer people were derided as innate ‘liars,’ ‘phonies,’ or ‘three-dollar bills’” (xiv-xv). This led to people being frightened by the consequences of exposure: “public humiliation, social ostracism, and financial ruin” (xv). Jackson also conveys the view that how history was written probably did more to harm gay rights by omitting the history of homosexuality than psychiatrists and police.

Simultaneously, as Christina S. Jarvis’s study shows, an imaginary was created, by the U.S. and German governments, of the male body when using the display of male musculature for propagandistic ends. This imagery highlighted a physique that symbolized

“strength, vitality, and heroism during the 1930s and 1940s” (44). Associations between servicemen’s bodies and “iron,” “steel,” and “nails” were made. As Jarvis states: “Shirtless or in undershirts, the men reveal their strength through carefully defined, muscled upper bodies. . . . The image suggests that America too has its own mechanized men who will take part in the United States war machine” (48).

While over the years much has changed and homosexuals have gained legal rights in western societies, other prejudices still remain, especially in the military. In his recounting of the year he spent fighting in the Iraq war, Bronson Lemer, a gay who joined the army to prove to himself that those two aspects of his life were not incompatible, and that he could survive in an organization that did not acknowledge or understand his lifestyle and sexuality, asserts that “by silencing gay men and women the military is really missing an opportunity to educate the troops about acceptance and tolerance” (162). This perpetuation of non-acceptance by the U.S. military, masked until recently by the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that has not yet been attitudinally eradicated from the military ranks, makes homosexual soldiers find subtle and original ways of connecting with each other during war. As Lemer describes in his autobiography:

I first started to notice graffiti invitations for sex, from one male soldier to another, and I began to wonder about the seedy underbelly created by the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.<sup>16</sup> Straight soldiers could simply be themselves. . . . Gay soldiers, however, had to resort to graffiti invitation for sex. . . . I was both creeped out and intrigued by these invitations. While I had no intention of answering these invitations, I was glad that there were other soldiers like me – gay men hiding behind the military uniform. The outhouse graffiti was my only proof that I was not alone. (117)

One of the striking aspects of Lemer’s book rests on his descriptions of heterosexual soldiers who, within the context of war, start “feeling” gay or make sexual comments about other men; some decide to turn gay until their return to the U.S. In the following citation, Lemer expresses his bewilderment at his colleague’s comments:

I used to dread days like this because I figured sooner or later, while I was sitting around getting comfortable with the men in my platoon, I’d let slip that I was gay and be ridiculed for the rest of the deployment. But I really haven’t had a problem getting close to these men *and* still keeping my distance. They are a bunch of jokers and if I did accidentally tell them I was gay, I could always brush it off. Once, while sitting outside our tent, Lake

stated that he was going to be gay until he got back home. King chimed in with his support, saying what a good idea it was. I just laughed and shook my head. Something about the desert makes straight guys think they are gay. I think it may be the sun. (Lemer 88)

This behavior by heterosexuals during war seems commonplace when we look at other writings on the subject. It is also a topic explored in the novel that we are examining, Álvaro Oliveira's *Até Hoje (Memórias de Cão)*.

Several critics have written on this 1986 novel, published soon after the end of the Portuguese colonial wars in Africa. It is a novel among those that focuses on the wars conducted by the Portuguese regime to maintain its colonial empire. A major study of colonial war literature is Margarida Calafate Ribeiro's *Uma História de Regressos: Império, Guerra Colonial e Pós-Colonialismo*. Ribeiro focuses on the three Portuguese imperial cycles, basing her theoretical framework on Boaventura de Sousa Santos's sociological concept of Portugal's semi-peripheral position within Europe and its hierarchy among nineteenth-century colonial powers. According to Ribeiro, Portugal's imperial imaginary was used as a compensatory strategy for its loss of influence and consequent peripheral condition, such an imaginary sought to exaggerate Portugal's own importance. Ribeiro analyzes four colonial novels, excluding Álvaro Oliveira's *Até Hoje*. Eduardo Mayone Dias, in his study on the novel of the Portuguese colonial wars, divides these novels, which he calls "literature of war," into three different cycles, placing Álvaro Oliveira's *Até Hoje* in the second. In this group, according to Mayone Dias, works of fiction may be found that "describe the abrupt transition from a life of relative freedom to one of strict order"<sup>17</sup> (388). These books are marked by an "emphasis on the traumatic adaptation to the harshness and on the absurdity of life in the barracks; the lack of conformity on the part of the protagonist"<sup>18</sup> (388).

On the other hand, Rui de Azevedo Teixeira's *A Guerra Colonial e o Romance Português: Agonia e Catarse* stresses the military and political aspects of the colonial wars. His thesis is that the fictional works on the colonial wars express, at the textual level, the final of the empire; at the sub-textual level, these novels represent a personal cathartic exercise for the authors. Teixeira points out some of the major characteristics of this literature and, in addition to those dealing with guilt and generational differences, they include:

A background of intellectual sociopathy that views the truth as an option, and expeditiousness (mainly political) as an imperative; . . . heavily autobiographical ; . . . plots that unfold along homosexual relations; . . . the

concept of the irrationality of living between the absurdity of killing and the absurdity of surviving ; . . . the common interest for the collective memory; the inability to convincingly describe combat situations.<sup>19</sup> (108-09)

It is thus that we have “a literary corpus—defined by Africa as a *mental continent*—that is profoundly distinct in Portuguese contemporary literature<sup>20</sup> (Teixeira 110).

For her part, Isabel Moutinho bases her study on the colonial wars included in contemporary Portuguese fiction and the role of memory, be it traumatic, personal or collective, featured therein. This critic offers both a postmodernist and a postcolonial study of these narratives, calling them “anti-colonial” (10) and imbued with an “all-pervasive pessimistic” spirit (12). Moutinho describes Álvaro Olivera’s novel as a *Bildungsroman*, that is, “a novel that examines the spiritual, social and human development of a young man, in a process that eventually leads him to a fundamental change of direction in life” (36).

While Moutinho focuses on the role of memory, I would like to concentrate on the role of homosexuality—not forgetting, however, that memory plays a fundamental role in the narrative. As noted, *Até Hoje* sets its plot mainly at the war front in Guinea where the protagonist, João, starts to question the role of his country in this war as well as an ideology that keeps its people “screaming . . . the tragedy of being plain folk and Portuguese” (Oliveira 10).<sup>21</sup> During his military service in Guinea, João has enough time (two years) to look back at his life, his island’s social life, and the official rhetoric of the regime. One of his challenges is also to clarify who he is, a challenge that involves admitting his homosexuality, something considered to be a sexual deviation that puts him at odds with Portuguese society.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist is described thus:

He was raised on stale bread. . . . Roped into work by an only crime: having been born into poverty. At the age of eighteen, he was a man of scant face hair and even fewer words. He was tall, cold-natured, adroit, with an adult demeanor, and a tawny complexion that withstood the sun’s rays. Handsome João, open, easy to feel out. And those green eyes, intensively green. . . . Those eyes attracted girls. He would smile, yet make no promise, always leaving himself a way out. . . . He was incredibly shy, with a peculiar sensibility; he was fond of his sisters’ needlework, their embroideries pont-à-jour.<sup>22</sup> (14-15)

We should emphasize João’s *peculiar sensibility*, which is the first sign given to the reader of the protagonist’s probable “flaw” in his masculinity. And then the reader is informed that

João has an “intimate fear kept in a safe of silence”<sup>23</sup> (15). The admiration that his sisters show for his drawings on fine stationery (“papéis de açúcar da marcearia”) is one that “unmasked him, [making him feel] a fearful nudity because it was forbidden, the crimson shame that the community imposes, the secret that he will never reveal”<sup>24</sup> (15). João’s upbringing does not escape religious and social credulities, since he believes that, by revealing his secret or being discovered, it would mean that “hell would lick him with its flames, though he was a bird.”<sup>25</sup> (15). The comparison of João with a bird appears in the narrative more than once. It is important to notice that the protagonist reveals his sense of being caged when he is on the ship that takes him to Lisbon and that will take him to Guinea: “here wishing to return to the island, feeling like a fish out of water, surprised like a bird in a cage; here desiring not to learn how to become a man”<sup>26</sup> (12). João is caged like a bird, caged by war, by political and social constraints (the urgent need of becoming a man), by a non-official relationship with his platonic girlfriend, Isabel, and by his fear of revealing his homosexuality.

During the trip to Guinea, the reader gets acquainted with the environment on the ship, and the descriptions are not of men getting ready for war, but of men sleeping with their skinny dirty bodies, bodies that do not suggest the heroism of war, but rather the other side, the suffering, the fear, the fatigue. João dreams sexually of an angel “printed in Italy.” The protagonist’s religious background leaves a mark that is hard to erase. When he was a child, a priest said that “angels do not have sex, they are only ghosts, souls that enjoy beatific visions”<sup>27</sup> (35); that was enough for him to believe in the concept. To have an angel masturbate him in a dream clearly demonstrates the influence of religion in João’s mind. And then there is a flashback to his first sexual experience with three pre-teenage friends who initiate him into the pleasures of masturbation. They nonetheless have to hide acknowledgement of the act because it is a sin. João, once again, is described as innocent and shy, his first masturbating session was performed alone, and he is not one who shares his intimacies (39).

Nothing in the novel points out the heroism of the soldiers; in contrast, it shows how war episodes are nothing but degrading and dehumanizing. These soldiers represent “individual surrender, the chronically hepatic, the cripple, the vanished, the deserter, the dead. They are there spare parts, screws, pots, needles, breeches, and even hearts, targets, heads and, who knows, souls—all resumed in the hollow and worn-out truth that is cannon fodder”<sup>28</sup> (45). They are just a number among many<sup>29</sup>—“They would not let him be a man. They would not let him be João”<sup>30</sup> (48)—“shreds of resignation,” they drag their feet,

drunk and drugged. They move around the barracks stunned, with dull and empty eyes (49). João, like the others, is transformed by the war although he has killed no one or seen action. He decides never to say a word about Guinea, and to lie, were he to be pressed on the subject; he will never talk about his “misfortune, the miraculous truth of men turned into rags”<sup>31</sup> (53).

The setting is 1967, and a general sense of defeat pervades, of a war with no future. A most relevant decision among soldiers who have seen mutilated bodies, gangrene wounds, ulcers bursting, is to “save their own skin, above all, and fuck it!”<sup>32</sup> (62). At the beginning, João avoids making friends; he feels that he was just passing through. This is also a characteristic of Lemer’s account: a way of hiding homosexuality is to avoid contact and personal relationships. The other side of the coin is that it is impossible to survive alone during war “because so much of what goes on in war involves trusting the man standing next to you” (Lemer 27).

According to Moutinho, João’s “first encounter with Fernando, a fellow soldier in the Binta barracks, seems to awaken his homosexual proclivities. Struck by Fernando’s handsomeness, João realizes that ‘there is an accursed bird that now awakens and flutters, though repressed’” (48). João and Fernando start sharing a shelter, and a new friendship arises, a “weird and dangerous friendship . . . one that leads to a tenderness brought about by unbearable silences”<sup>33</sup> (70). Nonetheless, Fernando confesses to João that he is married and has a daughter, a confession that makes the latter feel sad, lost, and indolent. The protagonist decides that it is better to forget: “What were you thinking, João, while looking for a needle in a haystack?”<sup>34</sup> (74).

Fernando is an interesting character, for the reader can never be sure that he is homosexual, because he states that he does not know why he so likes João (76), and insinuates that he would prefer that João were a woman: “the pity that I feel for you not being a woman”<sup>35</sup> (107). That he is at war makes Fernando choose this path. Whether he is trying to make João understand that it is necessary to “destroy the tedium, the fear, the bitterness, the time [of war]”<sup>36</sup> (77), or whether he discovers his true sexuality while at war, he wants to have a relationship with João. João remains the center of attention and desire, not just for Fernando, but also for all of the men in Binta’s platoon: “‘Do you want to go to bed with me, João?’ the invitation, the invitations, more desires than invitations”<sup>37</sup> (91). Nonetheless, they agree that the protagonist will be Fernando’s “lover” (91). But João keeps resisting Fernando, as well as other men throughout the novel, although Fernando is frustrated because he has decided to be faithful “to the untouchable body of João”<sup>38</sup> (126).

They all become used to João's ways, to "his behaving like a scared gazelle, to his clear and volunteering spirit, his cultivated way of speaking—acquired not from books, but from life itself. Without looking like a faggot, he also does not have the look of a tough macho. And they thought he was pretty"<sup>39</sup> (126).

The protagonist starts to come to terms with his sexuality when he sees Fernando kissing another man. Though he denies his jealousy—"he would not make a jealous scene"<sup>40</sup> (161)—his world falls apart: "The world suddenly tumbled, everything reduced to nothing. . . . João did not expect to find in war a bird of poetry. That attitude was mushy, shitty, effeminate. But he wanted Fernando's heart, blood and all. It was a coward's desire, postponed until a golden opportunity arose."<sup>41</sup> (160-161). For João then, not engaging in a sexual relationship with Fernando has to do with a sensibility that visualizes the consummation of love in a "movie scene," not inside decadent barracks. João accepts his love for Fernando—"He loved him like fauns loved gods—openly and naked"<sup>42</sup> (171)—and acknowledges that he does not consume this relationship because he is blocked by shame and because he is scared (171).

For João war thus serves as a way to discover his true sexuality and to face it. Africa and his island home have in common the "emptiness, the painful abyss"<sup>43</sup> (171). Once home was where he tried to run away from his own desire (164), Africa now is the place where he can no longer hide. To accept his homosexuality is also to accept his true self, a process of learning in a liminal context, one that also makes him understand the truth about the regime: "He would write, 'God-Fatherland-Family I don't understand it . . . ' 'Faith and Empire, I loath them'"<sup>44</sup> (170). Only in Lisbon is João able to consummate a sexual relationship with Fernando, knowing nonetheless that he will never see him again. He goes back to his island and then decides to emigrate, choosing a new life, a new beginning, where war and its memories stay behind locked in his bedroom on the island, the windows of which he will never open again. Until today. (Até Hoje).

All these soldiers engage, in one way or another, in homosexual relationships. It seems to be a common practice. There is no moral condemnation even when a soldier claims that he would have had sex with a "blond man made up like a prostitute"<sup>45</sup> (162) in Bissau if the price was right. Other soldiers comment that they would have done it for free. One homosexual couple, Mastigas and Zé Domingos, end up dead. Zé Domingos was shot at the moment of the only military attack because he was drunk and unable to react; Mastigas, because he could not live with the pain of Zé Domingos's death, commits suicide.

According to João, “Mastigas’s suicide was the most authentic of all the messages that could be sent about the uselessness of war”<sup>46</sup> (183).

What Álvaro Oliveira’s novel seems to be pointing toward is homosexuality as a way of negating war. In an environment where war seems never to come, and in which homosexuality is condemned by the State as a marginal sexual practice, it serves in the novel as a means of personal liberation. No one seems to be exempt from homosexuality when placed in an environment where life or death is at stake. Making love—especially in the cases of João and Fernando, and Mastigas and Zé Domingos—seems the best way to contradict the senselessness of war. Nothing happens in Binta because these men are turning their backs on the war and concentrating on the power of their own sexuality:

In Binta, war passed by on the side, not because of fear or predestination, but on account of indifference or neglect. The men felt worn down, consumed by inertia, an increasing anemic laziness. We drank as if with every beer an entire day went by, or at least an hour. And one made love a lot, sex versus sex, the brief happiness of eating up time.<sup>47</sup> (90)

Not only through its development of the character of João, but also through its representation of the soldiers’ impulse to engage in homosexual relations, the novel directly links homosexuality to a political critique of the *Estado Novo*. In and of themselves, of course, neither the phenomenon of homosexuality nor its representation is necessarily political. Nevertheless, when set in the context of colonial war and the State’s repression of homosexuality, the novel’s representation of same-sex desire reveals the weakness of Portuguese imperialism at the same time as it affirms João’s journey of sexual self-discovery.

The emotional effect of Álvaro Oliveira’s combining of representations of homosexuality and colonial war in *Até Hoje* recalls to a certain extent the slogan made popular world-wide by radical social movements during the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. “Make love, not war” was chanted by young men and women alike. Although it may sound naïve, one would do well to ask what it might mean if one were to discard such simple, yet vital, emotion. Sex in *Até Hoje* obviously forms part of a complex array of behaviors aimed at soothing the anxiety and mitigating the boredom of life in a combat zone. At the same time, however, and no matter what gender choices it might manifest, sexuality in the novel affirms life, provides the warmth of human touch, and can satisfy an existential yearning for spiritual connection.

War damages the inner life of those who are forced or duped into it. Homosexuality, at least in Álamo Oliveira's portrayal of it, cannot, and does not, bring about an end to war. In this regard, same-sex desire does not constitute "resistance" to war in the sense of staging an organized political opposition. But same-sex desire, as represented in the novel, does constitute a *rejection* of an unjust war and a putrid regime. Indeed, it offers a sanctuary of love and self-discovery for some, and a temporary refuge of physical release and emotional solidarity for many.

Finally, homosexuality in *Até Hoje* also functions as a way to undermine and to challenge the discourse of State power. The practice of homosexuality produces another discourse, one that in fact resists the rules imposed by a hypocritical regime. Here we may return to Foucault's vision of the complex relationship between sex and power: "if sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (6). Álamo's novel and characters make perfect sense in this light. João and the other characters precisely embody what Foucault expresses: "A person who holds forth in such a language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming of freedom" (6).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Isabel Moutinho states, “Of the three colonies where the Portuguese army fought against pro-independence uprisings, Guinea was the most feared posting, because this equatorial territory had the highest number of military fatalities, the most widespread guerrilla insurrection, and the most elevated incidence of tropical illness” (36-37).

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> “bem estranha era a forma de dilatar a fé e o império” (41).

<sup>4</sup> “Ninguém tem culpa de vires de uma ilha de mudos, também governada por meia dúzia de cegos” (63)

<sup>5</sup> “um povo curvado por obediência intocável”

<sup>6</sup> “‘Deus-Pátria-Família’, a trindade transformada em dogma, regência indiscutível do presente e do futuro da nação, colocada no cartaz do Abril em Portugal” (29).

<sup>7</sup> prescreve-se que aos que “se entreguem habitualmente à prática de vícios contra a natureza” passam a ser “aplicáveis medidas de segurança” (Almeida, par. 5).

<sup>8</sup> internamento em manicómio criminal”, “internamento em casa de trabalho ou colónia agrícola”, “liberdade vigiada”, “caução de boa conduta” e “interdição do exercício de profissão” (Almeida, par. 5).

<sup>9</sup> “A lei de Julho de 1912 apresentava uma definição de ‘vadio’ próxima da do Código Penal e que especificava que se aplicava ao homossexual” (238).

<sup>10</sup> Examples of such censored books included: Judith Teixeira’s *Decadência*, António Botto’s *Canções* and Raul Leal’s *Sodoma Divinizada*.

<sup>11</sup> “de forma cifrada [e] críptica” (Almeida, par. 13).

<sup>12</sup> “numa sociedade tradicionalmente hipócrita, e sexualmente repressiva (mesmo ao nível da expressão), como continua a ser a sociedade portuguesa, onde o inenarrável *trash* televisivo dos últimos anos tem feito mais pela ‘liberação’ dos interditos do que a revolução de 1974, a ninguém espantará que a negação dos escritores gay seja uma atitude colectiva e peremptória. Ora, sem escritores gay, não pode haver uma literatura gay” (9).

<sup>13</sup> The term “pre-Stonewall” is used by Pitta to refer to the Stonewall riots in New York City on June 28, 1969. Police tried to arrest patrons at the gay Stonewall bar, but were resisted and pushed back by those present. This episode is usually considered to mark the beginning of a politically conscience and organized movement for gay rights in the United States. It also served as a reference point for similar movements throughout Europe.

<sup>14</sup> “Laura achava aquilo tudo muito bizarro. Uma investigação dirigida a militares homossexuais suspeitos de pouca simpatia pelo regime? E porquê só os homossexuais? Os outros eram irrelevantes?” (45).

<sup>15</sup> “No início dos anos 1970, um processo colectivo de contornos obscuros — desencadeado em simultâneo nas três frentes da guerra colonial e nos três ramos das forças armadas, com base em devassa de correspondência—*arguiu* para cima de uma centena de militares de todas as patentes, indiciados de crime *nefando*” (30).

<sup>16</sup> Lemer adds: “Their conversation reminds me why I hate the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy. It’s not the ‘don’t ask’ part. . . . It’s the ‘don’t tell’ part that really makes me angry. The policy creates an environment where it is OK to ridicule someone because of their sexuality since gay men and women cannot stick up for themselves or others without fear of being ostracized and outcast, and that is the last thing a soldier wants during a deployment. The policy reinforces ignorance and stupidity by forcing people to keep their mouths shut. It also stifles a community that cannot grow, trust, or support each other because some of the members aren’t allowed to speak up or express who they are” (162).

<sup>17</sup> “descreve a brusca transição de uma vida de relativa liberdade a outra de estrito ordenamento” (388).

<sup>18</sup> “acentua-se o traumatismo da adaptação à rigidez e mesmo ao absurdo da vida de quartel [e] a falta de conformidade do protagonista” (388).

<sup>19</sup> “um fundo de sociopatia intelectual que encara a verdade como uma opção e a conveniência (política sobretudo) como um imperativo; . . . uma grande carga autobiográfica; . . . enredos que se desenvolvem tendo por fundamento uma relação homossexual; . . . a ideia do absurdo de viver entre o absurdo de matar e o absurdo de viver; . . . a incapacidade para a descrição convincente de situações de combate” (108-09).

<sup>20</sup> “um corpo literário—marcado por África como *continente mental*—que é profundamente distinto na literatura portuguesa contemporânea” (110).

<sup>21</sup> “grita . . . a tragédia de ser povo e português” (10).

<sup>22</sup> “Foi criado a pão duro. . . . Preso ao trabalho por crime de pobreza e necessidade. Aos dezoito anos era homem de pouca barba e menos falas, alto, seco, ágil, porte adulto, pele de pêssego impenetrável ao sol. João bonito, desenhado, fácil de apalpar, tipo maçã-camoesa. E os olhos verdes, intensamente verdes (...). Era a esses olhos que as raparigas se prendiam. Ele sorria sem deixar promessas, mantendo as asas soltas (...). Era incredivelmente tímido, possuidor de sensibilidades estranhas, um admirar os trabalhos das irmãs, os bordados *pont-à-jour*” (14-15).

- <sup>23</sup> “um medo íntimo guardado no cofre-forte do silêncio” (15).
- <sup>24</sup> “Era uma admiração que o despia, nudez temida porque proibida, o rubro pudor que a comunidade impunha, o segredo que não revelaria nunca” (15).
- <sup>25</sup> “o inferno que o lamberia com as suas chamas de fogo, embora fosse pássaro” (15).
- <sup>26</sup> “aqui com a vontade de regressar à ilha, peixe fora de água, surpreso pássaro engaiolado; aqui com o desejo de não aprender a ser homem” (12).
- <sup>27</sup> “Os anjos não têm sexo, são apenas espírito, alma e gozam de visão beatífica” (35).
- <sup>28</sup> “São os da rendição individual, do hepático crónico, do estropiado, do desaparecido, do desertor, do morto. Estão ali como peças sobresselentes, parafusos, panelas, agulhas, culatras, e mesmo corações, alvos, cabeças e, quem sabe, almas — tudo resumido na verdade mouca e gasta de carne para canhão” (45).
- <sup>29</sup> In *Álamo’s novel* we can read more than once João’s dissatisfaction with being treated by superiors as a number, not as a person, one from among many: “his memory broken, the horror of the name in number, a vague 127, hanging from his neck (...) in case of death and be able to, at last, have the right to the name” (14). [“A memória partida, o horror do nome em número, um vago 127 dependurado ao pescoço (...) no caso de morte e poder, enfim, ter direito ao nome”]. The similitudes with Lemer’s description are striking: “(...) forced to wear a uniform that makes us all look the same—nameless soldiers blending into the sand. I could die here, be buried in the sand — . . . and nobody would ever know” (120).
- <sup>30</sup> “Não o deixariam ser Homem. Não o deixariam ser João” (48).
- <sup>31</sup> “nunca da sua desgraça, da verdade miraculosa de homem transformado em trapo” (53).
- <sup>32</sup> “Salvar a pele, acima de todas as coisas e foda-se!” (62)
- <sup>33</sup> “uma estranha e perigosa amizade resvalaria para uma ternura feita de silêncios insuportáveis” (70).
- <sup>34</sup> “Quem te manda, João, querer figos lampos em janeiro?” (74).
- <sup>35</sup> “A pena que eu tenho de não seres mulher” (107).
- <sup>36</sup> “destruir o tédio, o medo, a amargura, o tempo” (77).
- <sup>37</sup> “Queres ir pra cama comigo, João?”, o convite, os convites, mais desejos que convites” (91).
- <sup>38</sup> “ao corpo intocável de João” (126).
- <sup>39</sup> “o seu comportamento de gazela assustada, o seu espírito claro e voluntarioso, o seu falar de homem cultivado—não pelos livros mas pela vida. Sem que se pareça com um maricas também não tem aspecto de machão embirrento. E achavam-no bonito” (126).
- <sup>40</sup> “Não faria cenas de ciúme” (161).
- <sup>41</sup> “Desabava de repente o mundo, tudo reduzido a nada. . . . João não esperava da guerra uma ave de poesia. Isso era lamecha, caca, mariquice. Mas do Fernando queria o coração com o sangue todo. Era um desejo de cobarde, adiado para momento de ouro” (160-61).
- <sup>42</sup> “Amava-o como os faunos amam os deuses—clarificados e nus” (171).
- <sup>43</sup> “o vazio, o abismo doloroso” (171).
- <sup>44</sup> “Escrevia, ‘Deus-Pátria-Família não os entendo.’ . . . ‘A fé e o império abomino-os” (170).
- <sup>45</sup> “loiro pintado que nem puta” (162).
- <sup>46</sup> “Mastigas fora a mais autêntica de todas as mensagens que podiam emitir-se sobre a inutilidade da guerra” (183).
- <sup>47</sup> “Em Binta, a guerra passava ao lado, não por medo ou predestinação mas por indiferença ou incúria. E os homens sentiam-se corroer, desgaste da inércia, uma preguiça anímica cada vez maior. Bebia-se, como se em cada cerveja um dia passasse, uma hora ao menos. E amava-se muito, sexo contra sexo, a alegria breve de consumir o tempo” (90).

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