Sounds of Portuguese democracy: “Pretugal” as a contemporary reality¹

Sons da democracia portuguesa: “Pretugal” como realidade contemporânea

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Abstract: In this essay I analyze, within the conceptual framework of Sound Studies, the role of the aural dimension of the Portuguese postcolonial experience in contemporary fiction, specifically in the novels *O meu nome é Legião* by António Lobo Antunes (2007), *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* by Aida Gomes (2011) and *Esse Cabelo* by Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2015). In each of these works, the aural — what is heard and/or what is not heard — strongly denounces the blind spots of post-1974, democratized Portuguese society. One of these blind spots has to do with the representation of racial differences and, in particular, the obstacles that African descendants need to overcome in an attempt to find their own space and agency. The fiction of these three contemporary writers emphasizes two relevant themes in Portuguese society: the end of the colonial empire and structural racism.

Keywords: sound; silence; racism; Afro-Portuguese.

Resumo: Neste ensaio analiso, dentro da proposta teórica dos Sound Studies, o papel da dimensão aural da experiência pós-colonial portuguesa na ficção contemporânea, especificamente nos romances *O meu nome é Legião* de António Lobo Antunes (2007), *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* de Aida Gomes (2011) and *Esse Cabelo* de Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida (2015). Em cada uma destas obras, a auralidade — o que é escutado/ouvido e/ou o que não é escutado/ouvido — denuncia um dos nós cegos da sociedade portuguesa democratizada. Um desses nós cegos prende-se com a representação literária das diferenças raciais e, em particular, com os obstáculos que os afrodescendentes precisam de transpor na tentativa de encontrar o seu próprio espaço de fala e agência. A ficção destes três

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Isabel A. Ferreira Gould for challenging me to write this text. I found great inspiration in our conversations about the “listening turn” and particularly in her groundbreaking essay “Acoustic Remains: Listening for Colonialism and Decolonization in Isabela Figueiredo’s Life-Writing.” I also acknowledge the insights and helpful comments of Naomi Parker and Frank F. Sousa.

escritores põe em debate dois temas relevantes na sociedade portuguesa:
o fim do império e o racismo.

Palavras-chave: som; silêncio; racismo; afro-portugueses.

"(...) sounds and their meanings are shaped by cultural, economic, and
political contexts in which they are produced and heard (...)"

Mark M. Smith, 2001, p. 3

Koração lá e korpo ká em pretugal
Mentalmente encarcerados ká em pretugal
Segregados p'ra ã sermos ninguém em Portugal
Chullage, *Rapensar* (CD-ROM), 2004

Introduction

Literary critics interested in issues related to sound and listening reimagine fiction as a space in which sounds and silences acquire meaning. With issues of aurality in mind, I propose to reimagine fiction as an aural practice, as a space of listening. Using the theoretical framework of Sound Studies, I intend to investigate the meaning of the aural dimension of the colonial heritage and the postcolonial experiences in three contemporary Portuguese novels, in an effort to answer this broad question: How does one listen to the difficulty Portuguese society has in accepting and respecting the African dimension of the identity of some of its citizens and immigrants? This study of the centrality of sound in postcolonial narratives is inspired in part by the following statement by Isabel A. Ferreira Gould: "Scholarship on colonialism and decolonization benefits from listening to the past, as hearing and sounds were central to the construction and demise of European empires" (2020, p. 1).

The three novels to be discussed in this essay present fictional versions of contemporary Portuguese society, a society both democratic and postcolonial.² Aida Gomes' *Os Pretos de Pousaflores* succinctly narrates the lives of a Portuguese former settler/colonialist in Angola and his three mixed-race children who, in the aftermath of the April 25, 1974 Revolution, arrive at a Portuguese village where neither mixed-race nor black people have been seen before. *O meu nome é Legião* by António Lobo Antunes narrates the

² Portugal is a postcolonial society still negotiating its colonial heritage. One sign of the current relevance of the past is the heated debates about racism in Portugal, Portugal's colonial history, Portugal's responsibility for the slave trade, and the project of erecting a museum celebrating the Discoveries (such a museum runs the risk of continuing to ignore the negative aspects of the historical period considered the pinnacle of national history).

crimes committed by a group of youths (mainly mixed-race) living in a neighborhood located on the outskirts of Lisbon, detailing their inner conflicts, those of their family members, and those of the policemen who interact with them. Lastly, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida's *Esse Cabelo* presents a first-person account of the experience of being Portuguese and of African descent in Lisbon.³ The narrator's convoluted relationship with her hair reveals the African dimension of her identity and serves as the point of departure for a reflection on practices of racism in Portuguese society.

If, for Marília Librandi-Rocha, "aural writing" in the context of Brazilian literature presupposes "an ethic of opening one's ears to hearing the voice, the sounds, the noises, of the groups without access to the official education system" (2015, p. 133), the literary texts which concern us here presuppose an ethic of opening one's ears to hearing those who have no voice in contemporary Portuguese society or, to quote the narrator of *Esse Cabelo*, characters who inherit an "ancestral alienation" (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 16). The novels by Gomes, Lobo Antunes and Almeida invite us to listen to what is said by and about Afro-Portuguese characters, and also what is not said, but simply implied by the text. They present fictional trajectories marked by the absence of voices (and, consequently, spaces); these characters seek to be heard, but encounter multiple obstacles on their journeys. As such, these novels can be read as counternarratives to the political discourse that prefers to celebrate a cosmopolitan, inclusive, contemporary Portugal that supposedly is neither racist nor xenophobic, instead of questioning the contradictions and complexities of post-revolutionary and post-imperial Portugal.

In the article entitled "Listening", Roland Barthes explains that listening presupposes the construction of meanings and the creation of an "intersubjective space" in which the idea "I am listening" also signifies being listened to ("listen to me") (1985, p. 246). It is by considering this psychological dimension of listening that we can re-examine the literary and ethical project of these writers. I say literary and ethical project because the three novels under consideration reflect on the concept of citizenship, namely the right to

³ Fernando Machado uses two terms to describe the postcolonial demographic reality: "Luso-Africanos," to identify "africanos de nacionalidade portuguesa, de condição social média ou elevada e muitas vezes racialmente mistos, que optaram por se fixar em Portugal na sequência da independência dos seus países de origem," and "os novos luso-africanos," to designate the descendants of the former group or of the remaining African immigrants who "já nasceram e/ou cresceram em Portugal" (1999, p. 112). Machado's distinction is not relevant for the purpose of this essay. I will use the terms Afro-Portuguese and Portuguese of African descent synonymously.

inclusion and the right of all Afro-Portuguese citizens to exercise all of the political and legal rights due to them as members of Portuguese society.⁴ Given that, as Francine Masiello explains, “a sentient body is a placeholder for a larger discussion of the effects of state practices on its people and, alternatively, it traces the ways in which the population resists or transforms social life” (2018, p. 3), my analysis will further examine two additional questions: In what way does the reader of these novels participate in the construction of Portuguese democracy? And what transformative role does listening play in this construction?

The Prevailing Soundscape of Portuguese Society

The importance of listening in the construction of democracy is, for instance, explained by political scientist Susan Bickford in her study *The Dissonance of Democracy: Listening, Conflict and Citizenship*. She argues that listening is an activity that is crucial to the practice of citizenship, given that quality listening (that is, listening based on collaboration among the participants in a conversation) allows the listener to overcome misunderstandings generated by unequal power relations and, in this way, favors collective action, neutralizing social dissonance.

Bickford identifies the social and political advantages of the construction of “a public space in which all voices are heard” (1996, p. 156). After referencing the debate about the key role of vision in the apprehension of the world, Bickford emphasizes the connections among the senses (especially among vision and hearing) to underline the importance of listening in the dynamics of interdependence, given that listening allows us to be available to the person who is speaking. Thus, the activity of listening necessarily implies communication, obliging the “hearer” to reply, even if his/her reply takes the form of silence (which, in and of itself, can denote various attitudes, such as resistance, indifference, agreement, etc.). Through the aural dimension of their writing, Antunes, Gomes and Almeida exemplify Bickford’s thesis, in the sense that in their work they depict a public

⁴ I am referring here to the debate about the bureaucratic difficulties in accessing Portuguese citizenship encountered by segments of the population that arrived in Portugal before, during and after the decolonization period, and by their descendants. Among other sources, see: <https://www.publico.pt/2016/11/13/sociedade/noticia/a-geracao-de-portugueses-imigrantes-a-viver-em-portugal-1749977>

space – Portuguese society – in which not all voices are heard and in which the need to hear those voices is ever more evident and urgent.

The three novels in question here require receptivity to what is said; to what is not said but understood; and to what is heard by the characters against their will (and received second-hand by the reader). As David Le Breton explains, audition, like smell, is involuntary and compels reception, regardless of the listener's intent: "the sounds of our surrounding environment leave us defenseless. Sounds overcome obstacles and make themselves heard in total indifference to our intentions. The ears are always open to the world" (2017, p. 63). Consequently, we can accept or reject those sounds that reach us, but it is more difficult to have any effect on them, thus we are vulnerable, unable to defend against the potential aggression of the outside world, as the anthropologist emphasizes: "Penetrated by sound against our will, we are in a position to welcome or reject sounds, but less so to act on them" (idem, p. 63). He also adds, "hearing is defenseless against the intrusion of unwelcome sounds from the outside world" (idem, p. 71).

This state of complete vulnerability and powerlessness within the surrounding acoustic landscape takes shape clearly in *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, a novel by Aida Gomes which concerns the experience of the family of the colonialist Silvério Prata and his three mixed-race children who arrive in Portugal during the decolonization process. When Ercília hears the insult "Guinean black" in school; when Belmira hears her boss declare, "I had another black before you;" and when Justino hears the remark, "Hey, black boy, get to work!" what the reader hears is an aggressive and offensive chorus that, in unison, marginalizes the Portuguese-Angolan siblings. None of the three siblings can avoid hearing the insults; nor can they react directly to them. This unwanted acoustic universe effectively reveals the racial prejudices existent in the various social spaces in which the characters live – school, work, and the street.

In the following excerpt, the insults Ercília and Belmira listen to at school mingle with the sound of an accordion and the songs of birds that fly towards the heavens, constituting a chorus of a hurtful song. This music intones a kind of plea for help on behalf of the defenseless sisters:

The sky is a blue space and from the eaves and the branches of the olive trees sparrows, crows and flycatchers swoop. Flags fly, a thousand ribbons and colorful flowers wave to the sound of an accordion. The echo of a chorus of herons beseeches the blessing of the heavens.

- Here they come! Here they come! The black girls from Guinea!

It was on our first day of school in Pousaflores. We approached the low walls.

- Here they come, here they come!

Hand in hand with Belmira on the path of tar and stones. At recess, Antonio, Rita and Manuel sang: **Here they come, here they come, the black girls from Guinea.** (GOMES, 2011, p. 110)⁵

The repetition of that insult underscores the impossibility of the sisters' intervening and directly addressing what they hear. The young girls' capacity to respond to the sounds they hear is limited to their imagining a hypothetical situation in which they exact revenge by beating their tormentors, assisted by eminent warriors. However, none of their imaginary plans neutralizes the insults, because their response takes the form of a comment which is never made: "I will say to them: we've never set foot in Guinea, and you are very ignorant people".⁶ Unlike the reader, the aggressors are never confronted with the Prata sisters' retort. And if they were, what difference would it make, given that the entire surrounding environment is hostile to the sisters because they represent a minority?

The same difficulty in taking action and achieving desired results appears in the domestic space in which Belmira goes to work after leaving Pousaflores a few years later. Referring to the colonial period, her boss says to her, "You aren't my first black girl. I had another one, from Guinea, from Cacheu".⁷ She also declares "Black girls, when they want to, cook better than white ones."⁸ The comments of Belmira's boss, which are expressed with the naturalness of one who is innocently repeating accepted and well-known facts, deepen Belmira's silence. It remains to the reader to ask whether it would be possible for Belmira to deconstruct the vestiges of the colonialist ideology in Dona Bela's comments without suffering reprisals that would threaten her very survival.

The marginalization Ercília and Belmira undergo is echoed by the experience of Justino, their brother. The following excerpt openly reflects the colonialist mentality,

⁵ All translations of the three novels examined in this essay are mine. The original text will appear in a footnote. "O céu é um espaço azul e dos beirais e ramos das oliveiras saltam pardais, gralhas e papa-moscas. Voam bandeiras, mil fitas e flores coloridas ao som de um acordeão. Em coro, o eco das ave-marias roga a bênção dos céus. / – Lá vêm elas! Lá vêm elas! / As Pretas da Guiné! Foi no nosso primeiro dia de escola em Pousaflores. Acercámo-nos dos muros baixos. / – Lá vêm elas, lá vêm elas! / De mão dada com a Belmira no caminho de alcatrão e pedras. No recreio da escola, o António, a Rita e o Manuel cantavam: Lá vêm elas, lá vêm elas, as pretas da Guiné" (Gomes, 2011, p. 110).

⁶ "Digo-lhes: nós na Guiné nunca pusemos um pé, mas vós sois gente de ralé" (idem, p. 131).

⁷ "A menina não é a minha primeira preta. Tive outra, da Guiné, de Cacheu" (idem, p. 204).

⁸ "As pretas, querendo, cozinham melhor do que as brancas" (idem, p. 206).

according to which the African is assigned the responsibility of the work and the Portuguese is assigned the privilege of giving orders:

Wouldn't you know it, **suddenly a tuga in a bad mood** appears out of nowhere, sticks his head out of the window of the car and **shouts: Hey, black, go to work!**

'Damn! Do you see what it is?'

These tugas are difficult, they frustrate a dude. They're rude. They come here in the summer to vacation at our lakes. Occupy our space. They stare at us, like, are we bugs or what? We were the first to get here. This shit was the bush, now it's the guys' summer playground? Bathing caps, tents on the beach? Old-school biquinis? Patterned shorts? Are we in Florida or what?

'Fuck it, Vladimiro, let's roll. **Those Africans really have it hard.** (...)'

'Vladimiro, are you listening to me?'

'Not at all, bro.' (idem, p. 285-286).⁹

As one can easily conclude, the spontaneous insult directed at Justino is gratuitous; it is not even the result of a reaction to an attitude of his, which clearly corroborates the idea that racism aimed at mixed-race youth (and, by extension, everyone of a similar color) is a commonly accepted practice that has been normalized by the society. In addition, one also hears/reads — between the lines — the illegitimacy of the colonial occupation which, in the text, is ironically related to the current occupation, by vacationers, of the southern bank of the Tejo, the area in which Justino now lives. Lastly, one also recognizes the difficulty Justino has in making himself heard, even by the friend with whom he shares some of his daily frustrations. It is worth noting that the same difficulty can also be found, tragically, in the relationships between the three siblings, who are incapable of being united as a family. The lack of communication and affection between the siblings seems to be reinforced by the internalization of the negative discourse present in Portuguese society, and ultimately leads to the gradual dissolution of their bonds.

Justino's process of marginalization is as lonely as it is for his sister Belmira, whose "poems" no one hears, i.e., whose feelings recorded in her "notebook" no one is aware of (idem, p. 271). However, what the reader comes to know, through Belmira's ability to listen, are the stories of the men with whom she engages in prostitution. The reader hears "the

⁹ "Não é que de repente aparece do nada um tuga maldisposto, põe a cabeça fora da janela do carro e grita: ó preto, vai trabalhar! / 'Porra! Estás a ver o que é?' / Estes tugas são lixados, criam frustração num gajo. São mal-educados. Vêm aqui às nossas lagoas veranejar. Ocupar o nosso espaço. Ficam a olhar para nós, tipo, somos bichos ou quê? Fomos os primeiros a chegar aqui. Esta merda era mato cerrado, agora virou área banhar dos gajos? Toucas de banho, barracas de praia? Biquínis fora de moda? Calções estampados? Estamos na Flórida ou quê? / 'Porra, Vladimiro, vamos bazar. O africano sofre no duro. (...) / 'Vladimiro, estás a escutar-me?' / 'Nem por isso, meu irmão'" (idem, p. 285-286).

sonorous voice” of the former agent of the Secret Police who “spent many years in Africa and sometimes misses shouting and beating blacks” (idem, p. 256)¹⁰; the complaints of Fabricante, the stuffed-animal seller who is bitter about the bleak future of his business; and the authoritarianism of Aspirina, the pharmaceutical representative who forces Belmira to perform eccentric rituals. These three masculine voices (vaguely individualized) produce a discourse that clearly describes the persistence of the colonialist and patriarchal mentality in Portuguese society.

Marília Librandi-Rocha reminds us that audition implies a zone of contact in which the receptivity of the hearer supersedes the source of the sound. This idea inheres not only in the journeys of these three mixed-race siblings, but also in those of the young people of African descent in *O meu nome é Legião*. The lives of these characters are marked by a paradoxical dynamic involving the constant noises and insults which they hear involuntarily and the silence they are obliged to keep. In none of the characters do we note the production of a discourse capable of effectively altering existing power relations.

To read this novel is to commit oneself – with no protective shield –to listening to voices that swarm in a constant whirlwind. Of the three novels we are examining, this is the one in which the aural dimension stands out most, given Lobo Antunes’ polyphonic and labyrinthine style, and the self-reflection evident in the sudden intrusion of the fictional author in the narrative, who, for example, confesses that he feels pursued by the characters’ voices: “I’m writing a book, my hand writes what the voices dictate and it’s hard to listen to them, but if the voices dictate something, what they say isn’t a lie, that’s exactly how it is” (ANTUNES, 2007, p. 256).¹¹ One notes interestingly that not only do the voices pursue the author; they also come to control him, deciding on his behalf the content of the writing: “this narrative frustrates my plans, what I wouldn’t give for the voices to assign me a different story to tell” (idem, p. 265).¹² The author finds himself completely defenseless in the face of the voices that invade him: “if it depended on me and it doesn’t depend on me (what depends on me?)” (idem, p. 49); and “if only I didn’t have to write this text, but a voice

¹⁰ “voz sonora (...) passou muitos anos em África e às vezes tem saudades de berrar e espancar pretos” (ANTUNES, 2007, p. 256).

¹¹ “estou a escrever um livro, a mão escreve o que as vozes lhe ditam e tenho dificuldade em escutá-las, se as vozes ditam não é mentira, é tal e qual” (idem, p. 265).

¹² “este relato contraria-me, dava sei lá o quê para que me encarregassem de uma história diferente” (idem, p. 255).

compels me to" (idem, p. 327).¹³ It bears noting that by emphasizing the reception rather than the production of the text, the writer posits himself as a transcriber of the surrounding aural landscape, a landscape the reader must decipher and become familiar with.¹⁴

In this way the intense acoustic landscape of *O meu nome é Legião* can be seen in light of what Librandi-Rocha calls "echopoetics" (2018, p. 6). The words are echoes of voices, whispers and sounds that surround and disturb the writer. This novel depicts the violence of a postcolonial aural landscape, which is characterized by gratuitous insults, constant humiliation, and racial tension. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, the reader is bombarded with the racial prejudice inherent in colonialism (one notes the repeated use of animal imagery and expressions such as "creature of an inferior race").¹⁵ The neighborhood 1º de Maio is merely an acoustic microcosm of this violence, composed of the moans of a sick child, the croaking of crows, the metallic sound of bullets and, above all, the diverse and intrusive voices which obsessively occupy the emotional and mental space of the characters. One example of this would be the voice of the mixed-race woman born in Portugal, who relates a lengthy story of uninterrupted discrimination:

I hear other voices, voices that died before I was born speaking in a Portuguese of blacks because we are all blacks and we don't have a place that accepts us, except for the wild fig trees and the thorns, **if I told my [white] husband about the voices**, no matter how much he bent his ear to

¹³ "se dependesse de mim e não depende de mim (o que depende de mim?)" (idem, p. 49); "(se me fosse consentido não escrever o presente texto mas uma voz)" (idem, p. 327).

¹⁴ In the identification of the author as a listener, one perhaps can glimpse the "listener's function" described by Veit Erlmann in the following terms: "Giving Foucault's famous concept of the 'author function' an aural twist, one might say that the listener is not simply the recipient of an indefinite number of significations that fill his or her hearing, nor does he or she come after the work. Rather, the listener is a function that fixes these meanings with the goal of circumscribing and prescribing the auditory ways in which individuals acknowledge themselves as subjects" (2010, p. 24). Let us consider another example of the author's consciousness of the aurality of his writing: "as figueiras bravas sem galhos e os polícias arrepiados nos cactos, os mesmos desde que comecei a escrever se é que pode chamar-se escrever ao que faço, já garanti ser uma voz que dita umas ocasiões tão depressa que não a acompanho e outras silêncio horas a fio e eu de bico no papel / - Então? / enquanto vozes mais miúdas que salvo uma frase ou outra / - Vertemos o comer na tigela dos cães como ela gosta / ou / -Filho / ou então sou eu / a empreender que / - Filho / (...) / (aí está a voz a ditar-me) / (...) / (a voz muito mais rápida, não consigo copiá-la)" (Antunes, 2007, p. 140-141).

¹⁵ The reproduction of colonial racism and power relations in the postcolonial present emerges at various moments and in different forms, sometimes very explicitly. One example is the nostalgic comments of a Portuguese man who had lived in Africa and who decides to fight his loneliness by marrying a mixed-race young woman, despite being deeply racist: "tão maltrapilhos como dantes e lambendo-nos as mãos numa esperança de dono visto precisarem que tomem conta deles para não morrerem de fome a mastigarem raízes e a catarem piolhos à entrada das cubatas de modo que cá os temos a norte de Lisboa enchendo as quintas abandonadas onde restos de palacetes de fidalgos que ninguém sabe quem foram e tijolos e zinhos e os pretos lá dentro com uns cabritos (...) enquanto os netos em bando na Amadora com manias de branco vestidos como uma caricatura de nós" (idem, p. 224).

the ground (...) **he wouldn't hear anything but the wind in the bushes.**
(ANTUNES, 2007, p. 173)¹⁶

The aural dimension of the narrative plays an equally central role in the depiction of the death of the youths and the destruction of the neighborhood 1º de Maio. One notes, for instance, the indecisiveness of the narrator (the voice of the policemen tasked with the investigation?) regarding the best adjective to use to describe the silence that cloaks the space of the neighborhood following the police raid:

in the neighborhood a rat or a mole that did not die when we burned the targets, **a muteness** I was going to describe as lunar but what do I know about the moon, probably storms and sand **a screaming child** and moreover what an adjective, lunar, while in the neighborhood **the silence** of the waste which moves without wind, even the brook, that is to say, lumps between stones, do not imagine frogs and birds, the last one I noticed, a crow (idem, p. 352)¹⁷

When the listener has no means of escaping the sounds and noises surrounding him, the unwanted and intrusive aural landscape tends to produce suffering, thus hearing can be considered the sense of interiority, in the words of David Le Breton:

Hearing is the sense of interiority. It seems to draw the world deep within the self, while vision projects us beyond ourselves. But hearing is captive. While sight, touch, and taste impart a sense of sovereignty, hearing is defenseless against the intrusion of unwelcome sounds from the outside world. Noise is an affliction of sound that becomes a source from the outside world. Noise is an affliction of sound that becomes a source of suffering if the ear is constrained and has no escape. Sound becomes noise when it has lost its meaningful dimension and imposes itself with an aggression that leaves people defenseless. (2017, p. 71)

This reality described by Le Breton is obvious in Lobo Antunes' novel. The interior conflicts of the characters are transformed into deafening noises, underlining the difficulty and/or impossibility of communicating with others. It is as if the characters cannot take advantage of their ability to hear because there is too much noise within them, and these

¹⁶ "são outras vozes que oiço, finados de antes do meu nascimento num português de pretos porque somos todos pretos e não temos um lugar que nos aceite salvo figueiras bravas e espinhos, se contasse das vozes ao meu marido [branco] por mais que se inclinasse para o chão (...) não entendia se não o vento nas ervas" (idem, p. 173).

¹⁷ "no Bairro um rato ou uma toupeira que não arderam ao incendiarmos os alvos, uma mudez ia escrever lunar mas que sei eu da lua, provavelmente tempestades e areia uma criança gritando e além disso que adjetivo, lunar, enquanto no Bairro o silêncio dos desperdícios que se deslocam sem vento, até o ribeiro ou seja, grumos entre pedras calado, não se julgue que sapos e pássaros, o último que dei conta, um corvo" (idem, p. 352).

interior noises prevent them from listening to others. As Barthes stated, "If the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection or intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured" (1985, p. 247). Thus, perhaps one can venture to say that there is no communication among these characters, only stifled shouts which the reader hears owing to the expressive use of repetition and the constant silences – it is common, for example, to encounter in this narrative words or phrases which end abruptly, negating the possibility of continuity, or remarks in parentheses that, by suspending time, create the false impression of dialogue.

Although no "real" communication exists, the reader perceives that the characters are begging to be heard; they seem, in fact, to be shouting out this desire, as evidenced by the barrage of sounds that proliferate in the narrative. Lobo Antunes constructs, linguistically, a kind of spiral of sound in which everyone speaks but no one listens; only the reader can hear each voice. In addition, when the characters speak, what the reader hears is not precisely what they say, but what remains unspoken, between the lines – what the characters avoid saying or what they deny. There is a clear dissonance between what the characters say and what they feel, and the reader is acutely aware of this dissonance, these gaps.

The physical and emotional space in which the majority of the characters operate – the neighborhood 1º de Maio – is a place full of voices and noises, a kind of orchestra of cacophonous sounds and, at the same time, a place full of silences. For instance, the strident buzz of Miúdo's little tin airplane – Miúdo being the newest member of the group of young people – travels through the narrative but, one observes repeatedly, Miúdo's voice is never heard. This absence is indicative of the lack of options in the Portuguese social space for these mixed-race young people. There is no way out. Not even Georgete, the white prostitute who lives in the neighborhood with the only young black member of the group, whom Miúdo loves like a son, knows his voice: "I never heard him speak, I only heard him imitating the buzzing of an airplane" (idem, p. 103).¹⁸

The soundscape of the neighborhood 1º de Maio is composed of sounds that denote physical or psychological violence. The "buzzing" of Miúdo's airplane and the continuous "bleating" of the crows mix with the sound of bullets and the fire when the police invade the neighborhood. All of these sounds suggest a kind of war zone, in which the unresolved

¹⁸ "nunca lhe escutei a voz, só o avião de folha a zumbir" (idem, p. 103).

social tensions are violently repressed by the authorities. Furthermore, the reader observes that it is not by chance that the voice of the only black member of the group of young people is absent.¹⁹ What is not absent, however, are the various discriminatory remarks made about the color and smell of his skin. Also revealing is the way he addresses Georgete as “Senhora,” which immediately recalls the dynamic of subservience that characterized colonial relationships between white master and black servant.²⁰

Searching for a New Postcolonial Soundscape

The aural dimension in the novels by Gomes and Lobo Antunes is also conspicuous in *Esse Cabelo*, but it resonates differently here. Almeida’s novel is imbued with a tension resulting, in large measure, from the contrast between her perception and the perceptions of those around her. The perceptions of others are conveyed through discriminatory remarks voiced by intrusive or vaguely identified speakers, and function as a kind of enduring noise that suggests the exclusion to which people of African descent are relegated in Portugal – a noise that, according to the narrator, “fell” to her to report (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 15). In other words, these discriminatory remarks underline the physical appearance of those of African descent with the intention of excluding them: “I was once told that I am a ‘mulata of the stones’, that I have bad hair and am second-class” (idem, p. 16), and “a visiting cousin says that I am a very fake Angolan” (idem, p. 33).²¹ Furthermore, the reader encounters explicitly racist remarks, such as those of an eight-grade classmate who “stated that she would rather have an abortion than have a black child” (idem, p. 103)²², or those of a stranger who accosts Mila to tell her that she must look like her mother since she likes white men (a reference to the white boyfriend who is with her).²³ The reader also encounters other comments that, though articulated by relatives of the narrator,

¹⁹ The absence of “figures of African resistance” (GOULD, 2020, p. 11) is noticeable in the Portuguese literary production.

²⁰ The antagonistic relationship between “master” and “servant” can also be seen in the dynamics between Gisela and Madalena Micaia, characters in *A noite das mulheres cantoras*, Lídia Jorge’s novel published in 2011. The trajectory of Madalena offers another example of silence in postcolonial Portuguese society which could also be included in this essay.

²¹ “Em tempos disseram-me que sou uma ‘mulata das pedras’, de mau cabelo e segunda categoria.” (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 16); “Um primo de visita comenta que sou ‘uma angolana mais que falsa’” (idem, p. 33).

²² “declarava preferir abortar a ter um filho preto” (idem, p. 103).

²³ This scene clearly illustrates one of the conclusions presented by Gould in her analysis of *Notebook of Colonial Memories*: “The soundscape of Portugal after the Revolution reverberated with ostracism and misogyny” (2019, p. 13).

unhesitatingly assign the narrator a position of alterity that excludes her both from “being Portuguese” and from “being Angolan”:

To the sound of the songs, I instinctively swung my body to the rhythm, to Grandma Maria's shock. ‘Look at you shaking your ass like these guys!’ a cousin remarked, laughing at me, **an inept beginner at Kizomba**. He called me **‘little Portuguese’** all summer, making me blush. The affectionate insult testified to the mistaken belief that in Portugal one would only listen and dance to traditional folksongs. (idem, p. 49)²⁴

To these sometimes very explicit acts of aggression one can add instances of what anthropologists like Jorge Vala have termed “subtle racism.” In this novel, this reality can be seen, for instance, in the impossibility of accepting as common the existence of interracial relationships. One recalls the day that a stranger asks, with an “abominable curiosity,” if Mila and her father belong “to the same family” (idem, p. 66). Like the episodes which involve the Prata brothers, these scenes echo a general animosity toward difference, toward the ethnic and cultural other systematically marginalized in Portuguese society. Artist and activist Grada Kilomba asserts that this animosity exemplifies the reality of the “daily racism” that is inseparable from the colonial past (2016, p. 138).

However, the aural landscape that surrounds Mila is not limited to barbs flung by exterior agents; it is also the result of the internalization of those insults. It is with this knowledge that one can comprehend the emotional impact of the “supremacist’s voice” which, within the narrator, “whispers” against her and, by extension, against all those with whom she shares physical traits or, in Mila’s words, all those who, through “excusing themselves”, must avoid making others uncomfortable and must avoid making their presence known when they are in public spaces (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 103).

Silence, as a way of not being seen, or of trying to defend and protect oneself, can thus be justified as a choice. Indeed, Mila never shares her personal story with the African hairdressers who do her hair. Is this because she is shy, or because she realizes her privilege as someone of mixed-race raised by her white grandparents, or is this because she doesn’t yet know what to say, or all the above? The fact is that in these public spaces, in which she tried at all costs to tame her rebellious curly hair, she was never able to express herself, as if

²⁴ “Ao som dos cantares, abanei instintivamente o corpo acompanhando o ritmo, para espanto da avó Maria. ‘Olha-me para ti a abanar o rabo como estes tipos!’, notou um primo entre gargalhadas apontando para mim, inepta aprendiz de kizomba. Chamou-me ‘portuguesinha’ o verão inteiro, fazendo-me corar. O insulto afectuoso atestava a crença errónea de em Portugal se ouvir e dançar folclore” (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 49).

the time to speak had not yet arrived, and thus she states: "I've never shared" (idem, p. 127), choosing to listen in silence.

With the passage of time, nevertheless, the auditory memories reverberate until they create an impression so powerful that the narrator cannot avoid treating them as "reality," that is, until she discovers her own voice and can defend herself, exposing the incongruence and injustice that permeate that "reality" (idem, p. 126). Throughout her journey, Mila is more of a listener than a speaker, a voice. Telling the story of her hair is, consequently, a defining moment in which she gains the courage to speak and to make herself heard, that is, the moment she becomes a producer of discourse. In this context of ideas, the Barthesian expression "listening speaks" (1985, p. 252) gains profound significance. It might not be by chance that the book ends with the question "Who is Mila, after all?" (ALMEIDA, p. 156), as if, in writing the story of the misadventures of her hair, Mila finally managed to find her voice, her identity. This book is a manifesto of the search for a voice; the narrator asks to be heard, given that so many others who are physically similar have no voice. The reflections on the cleaning women whose work the narrator imagines to be invariably silent illustrate the difficulty the lower-class African has in gaining agency in Portuguese society.

One can affirm that in Mila's voice the silences of the Prata brothers also resound. In fact, the Prata brothers never have the opportunity to make their voices heard, arriving as they do in the former metropolis at a time at which the public discourse revolves around differentiating the nation from the Salazar regime and the colonial past, by insisting on a European identity. Their journey is devastating: not having managed to fulfill his dream of being a musician, Justino returns to Angola; Belmira emigrates to Switzerland without anyone having heard and/or appreciated her poems; and, as for Ercília, the only one of the siblings to remain in Portugal, nothing is conveyed of her feelings or of how she has become integrated into the society. Nevertheless, it wouldn't be difficult to imagine her being a target of the same kind of aural aggression described by Mila – or even worse, due to her social position as a *retornada*.

In addition to the silent "cleaning women (...) in public offices" (ALMEIDA, 2015, p. 120) and the "African sisters" (idem, p. 130) with whom Mila crosses paths on public transportation, Mila's maternal grandparents also give expression to the silencing of the African communities of Portugal's former colonies. Her grandfather Castro – who arrived in

Portugal in the eighties, thanks to the bilateral agreement that provided medical treatment to children from former colonies – dies with his dream of obtaining Portuguese citizenship unrealized, after having lived in Portugal for two decades and coming to feel that, in his own way, he is Portuguese. He is a particularly tragic figure because no one wants to listen to him. The hymns he sings silently during the bus ride from his neighborhood to work allow the other passengers to see him as “crazy” (idem, p. 44). No one hears him or is interested in hearing him, which might be the same as saying that in postcolonial Portugal no one recognizes his presence as relevant and legitimate. If Mila’s grandfather is considered “crazy,” an even heavier silence reigns over her grandmother, who lives in severe isolation. Her grandmother, who is sick and lives on the outskirts of Lisbon, only knows the capital from what she has “heard about it” (idem, p. 45). She exists at the margins of Portuguese society.

Esse Cabelo is a first-person narrative, a testimony regarding the experience of being mixed-race in contemporary Portugal. It is a testimony that presents the construction of an identity that is defined by an open dialogue between being Portuguese and being African. It is through writing that Mila does the work of self-discovery that is essential to recognizing and claiming those aspects of herself that belong to her Portuguese-Angolan identity, something that the Prata brothers and the descendants of Africans in *O meu nome é Legião* could never do, given the successive physical and emotional losses that they have suffered. Unlike the journey of these other characters, Mila’s journey involves learning to say “I” and to make herself heard; thus writing, in this book, can be considered synonymous with speaking. If the meaning of what one hears takes time to become recognizable (cf. BARTHES, 1985, p. 253) and if the “acts of listening are acts that denote absences” (GOULD, 2020, p.14), one can thus understand the time it takes Mila to recognize and claim the losses and absences which were often merged in the insults she heard and the silences she maintained. It would not be unreasonable to affirm that *Esse Cabelo* is suffused with a dissonance which captures the nature of the inner conflict of the narrator and, by extension, the dissonance present in a Portuguese society which resists hearing the various identities that exist within it.

Esse Cabelo results from an urgent need to tell a story that is less about the forgetting of the past than about the silencing in the present. This silencing is reflected in the difficulty Portugal has in incorporating into the social fabric the ethnic and cultural

diversity of its citizens and immigrants. The different treatment of Africans and descendants of Africans who arrive in Portugal during the period of decolonization or, later on, within the context of politically or economically motivated migrations, reproduces the relations of domination and subordination that existed during the colonial period, as many critics and activists have asserted. In Susan Bickford's opinion, listening plays a crucial role when collective identities are affirmed or questioned. It is impossible to deny that Portugal's cultural identity and democracy are openly questioned in these novels. The multiple noises that make up the aural landscape of these narratives denounce the imperialist dimension of a Portuguese society that continues not to want to recognize cultural plurality and thus continues to repeat, in the postcolonial period, colonial dynamics and standards of behavior. These narratives, therefore, alert the readers, above all, to the danger of being deaf to Portugal's present-day diversity.

Final Remarks

The soundscape of these three books undeniably unveils the current vestiges of colonial racism and emphasizes the difficulty that those of African descent have in making themselves heard in the Portuguese space. In *O meu nome é Legião*, the ending is tragic – all of the young people are killed by the police – and in *Os Pretos de Pousaflores*, the futures of the Prata brothers are very uncertain – the reader observes that they arrive in Portugal as a family and that the family becomes progressively fractured as they go their separate ways. To these aural landscapes – a pessimistic landscape, in the case of Lobo Antunes, and a realistic one, in the case of Aida Gomes – Djaimilia de Almeida adds a proposal: to repair what should have begun to be repaired a long time ago. *Esse Cabelo* interrogates the reader and requires him/her to become aware of a reality more visible than ever before – the reality of “Pretugal,” a space in which everyone can and should exercise his/her power of speech and demand to be heard, and to be able to respond, either by speaking or by choosing to be silent. Used by the rapper Chullage in a song, the term “Pretugal” reflects, on the one hand, the challenges of social exclusion faced by descendants of Africans, since “black” is commonly read as a synonym for African and he who is “black” is not seen as legitimately Portuguese. On the other hand, the term “Pretugal” also refers to the impact and the

importance of self-affirmation, allowing other stories to be heard. In the words of the historian Elizabeth Buettner:

Much more than simply a resistant and oppositional form of affiliation, **'Pretugal' serves as an invitation to rethink dominant notions of what Portugal and Portuguese culture are – and who the Portuguese are – so that lusotropicalism might finally be laid to rest and ancestry-based conceptions of nationality surpassed.** "Pretugal" signals a hybrid Portuguese reality shaped by a convergence of global and local cultures and identities, and actually existing cultural hybridity quite distinct from idealized versions that fuelled self-congratulatory lusotropicalist assertions that a carefree tolerance of mixing, difference, and multiculturalism was a common Portuguese trait. (...) "Pretugal" allows a different story to be told, one of deeply-embedded inward flows of peoples and cultures alongside outward migrations. (2016, p. 410-411)

While this essay does not seek to define these novels as mirrors of Portuguese society, one can persuasively state that the artistic value of these narratives allows them to capture historical anxieties that the methods and rigor of the social sciences cannot address. Through compelling characters, imaginative literature brings to light the inner life and the subtleties of human communication and, in doing so, provokes reflection on social realities. These three novels attest to that in their dialogues with social themes relevant to contemporary Portugal. By aesthetically highlighting the physical violence and psychological aggression directed at those of African descent, these novels depict a democracy fractured by the difficulty of accommodating debate about the past and of recognizing the impact of colonialism on the present. We – the readers – can and must participate, listening critically and perhaps accommodating new voices within our own voices so as to become capable of deconstructing internalized and frequently unconscious prejudices and stereotypes. To revisit one last time Roland Barthes' essay, "to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside' of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden)." (p. 249). As a reader of these novels, I feel vulnerable when confronted with the sounds and silences which reveal my privilege as a white Portuguese woman, but I also feel that this discomfort is a fundamental part of exercising my citizenship. Only by being aware of our complex cultural heritage can I – can we – really hear what the other has to say to us.

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