

*Estudos Literários & Comparados***AFROFUTURISM AND BLACK UTOPIA IN AN ERA OF NAUSEA:
ALINE FRANÇA, ANA PAULA MAIA, AND ELISA LUCINDA**

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ABSTRACT: The disenchanting realities of black life in Brazil often force writers such as Aline França, Ana Paula Maia and Elisa Lucinda, among others, to opt for radical magical realism as a coping strategy. Anchored in the creative power of innovative cultural mythmaking, each writer creates protagonists who are part human, part bestial, and part divine to evoke their anti-heroic qualities as essential characteristics for their transcendence. Furthermore, these writers' heroic protagonists are endowed with supernatural powers that lend credibility to their ritual origin from the labyrinth of myth and history to teach eternal morals. Through the compelling lens of these superficial snippets of existential realities, I argue that the three Afro-Brazilian female writers analyzed in this work strike a common chord with the strange absurdities of the human condition, as their works seek to transcend this estrangement from the alienating condition through of creative escapism.

KEYWORDS: Afrofuturism; Aline France; Ana Paula Maia; Elise Lucinda.

The disenchanting realities of black life in Brazil often compel writers like Aline França, Ana Paula Maia, and Elisa Lucinda, among others, to opt for radical magical realism as a coping strategy. By embracing Afrofuturism and utopia, these authors subvert the daily existential experiences of oppression, repression, violence, brutality, and social death through the creative imagination.¹ Despite the traumatic conditions of dehumanization, the three writers find consolatory outlets in fantasy and science fiction, as in *A Mulher de Aleduma* [Woman of Aleduma] (1981) by Aline França; beastification and apocalyptic allusions, as in the *Saga of Brutes* trilogy (2016), as well as in *De Gados e Homens* [On Cattles and Men] (2013), *Enterre Seus Mortos* [Bury Your Dead] (2018), and *Assim na Terra como Embaixado da Terra*

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¹ Afrofuturism refers to a cultural aesthetic that explores the intersection of African diaspora culture with technology. Coined by Mark Dery in 1993 and developed in the late 1990s by Alondra Nelson, it is invested in the manifestation of science fiction in cultural productions that some Afro-Brazilian works are beginning to explore in different ways. The film *Black Panther* (2018) is an ample example of such a fantastic cultural imagination. For a detailed definition of Afrofuturism, see Isiah Lavender III, *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (Columbus: Ohio State U Press, 2019), 1–21.

[Same on Earth as It Is Under the Earth] (2020) by Ana Paula Maia; and compassion within nihilism, as in *Vozes Guardadas* [Voices Kept] (2016) and *Fernando Pessoa: o Cavaleiro de Nada* [Fernando Pessoa: The Horseman of Nothingness] (2015) by Elisa Lucinda. With the creative power of innovative cultural mythmaking, each writer creates protagonists that are part human, part bestial, and part divine to evoke their anti-heroic qualities as essential for their transcendence. In addition, the heroic protagonists of these stories are endowed with supernatural powers that lend credence to their ritual provenance from the labyrinth of myth and history to teach eternal morals.

Aline França's protagonist Aleduma embodies the mythic transformation of reality, and the imagined planet of Ignum sings to her as if to recuperate Africa's religious values and glories: "The waters of Oxalá / Will wash my head / The children of Africa / Are coming to look for me. / I am going, I am going to Africa to dance / To my father Oxalá" (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 94). Beyond this celebratory yet romantic ancestral connection with Africa, Maia's narratives, especially *Carvão Animal* [Animal Char], tragically and apocalyptically present the transitory nature of life, where soil and water are contaminated by the toxic liquid draining from human bodies in decomposition. In turn, Maia appeals to our sense of human indignation in the face of horror: "Some decades or centuries from now there will be more bodies beneath the earth than on it. We'll be stepping on our ancestors, neighbors, relatives, and enemies, as we step on dry grass: without even noticing it" (MAIA, 2016, p. 146). Finally, when absurdity seems to have lost all of its potential to shock, Lucinda finds compelling inspiration not in the Afro-Brazilian condition but in the classic personality of multifaceted Fernando Pessoa, for whom, according to Mía Couto, audacity can compel us to "write like someone who is feverish, and who comes close to the fire in order to engulf himself with its warmth" (COUTO, 2015, p. 7). Through an analysis of these cursory snippets of existential realities, I argue that these three Afro-Brazilian women writers strike a common chord with the estranging absurdities of the human condition. Meanwhile, their works seek to transcend that estranging and alienating condition through creative escapism.

Aline França: Inventing Utopian Afro-Brazilian Identity

Though her engagement with Afrofuturism and black utopian identity are less pronounced in *Negão Dony* [Black Dony] and *Os Estandartes* [Standards], and more in *A Mulher de Aleduma* [Woman of Aleduma], there are a few echoes in the former two works as they celebrate black identity in Afro-spirituality and the preservation of nature, respectively. Her poetry, anthologized in *Poetas Baianos da Negritude* [Bahian Poets of Negritude] (1982),

synthesizes her ideological commitment to the improvement of Afro-Brazilians, especially their awareness of their ancestral connections with Africa and how their existence is permanently linked with the past, the present, and the future of pan-African consciousness. In “Mensagem dos Nossos Ancestrais” [Message of Our Ancestors], the poet articulates her belief in a utopian idea that, through pan-African solidarity, Brazil and African can save oppressed Afro-Brazilians from their misery and escapist forms of coping culturalisms in carnival and religiosity: “Wake up, blacks all over the world / Go on struggling for better days / Together Brazil and Africa! / We shall continue to inspire your hearts / and shall provide the strength ... / Zumbi dos Palmares will always be / with each one of you” (VIEIRA, 1982, p. 9). In both her poetry and prose, we echo Ana Rita Santiago’s view that “The novelty of her works lies in the novelist’s black female and Bahian protagonism in dealing with socio-cultural issues of blackness in conjunction with mythology and the fantastic; thus creating narratives that show a mythical transformation of reality” (SANTIAGO, 2012, p. 87-88). In her works, Aline França fulfills her desire to create a fantastic journey of return to cope with her own alienation from Africa, her self-declared and spiritual motherland.

Aline dos Santos França was born in Teodoro Sampaio on February 15, 1948. She gained her sensitivity to nature while working in agriculture with her parents as a child. She joined the Federal University of Bahia as a civil servant in the 1970s, working as a telephone operator at the Biology Institute. In 1982, she was elected as an alternate for a councilor by the PMDB party in Salvador. She has served on judging committees of competitions such as Miss Afro-Bahia (1982) and Festival de Música Popular (1985). She published her first novel, *Negão Dony*, in 1978. She published her second novel, *A Mulher de Aleduma*, in 1985. Her poem “Mensagem dos Nossos Ancestrais” was included in the anthology *Poetas Baianos da Negritude* in 1982. She published her third novel, *Os Estandartes*, in 1993. Aline França’s main themes are the preservation and revitalization of the cultural values of the black world so that Afro-Brazilian readers can be proud of their origins, their cultural heritage, and their identity. As I have expressed elsewhere, “Anyone familiar with Salvador-Bahia, will appreciate the cultural and political contribution of Aline França in her various efforts to connect Bahia with Africa, Brazil with the world, and Brazilians as well as Bahians with the absurdity of racial oppression” (AFOLABI, 2009 p. 318).

In other words, a frustrated creative mind seeks positive inspiration in mythologies and allegories that reinvent the Afro-Brazilian personality as a way to feel better about their cultural value systems. By reinventing African myths, religious traditions, and customs, Aline França reaches out to ancestral memories to create fantastic archetypes and supernatural

protagonists. Mixing the narrative style typical of African oral traditions, in which marvelous and magical realism collide to teach didactic morals, with the daily realities of Afro-Brazilians who seek pride in their identity even as they celebrate love and revenge in the midst of an oppressive social space that forces them to fantasize about a mythical African past, present, and future. Consider Aline França's powerful opening of *A Mulher de Aleduma*:

In a certain continent of the Earth, millennia ago, a black man with a divine appearance emerged from the innocuous space, with a mission to initiate the proliferation of a race that in the future would become of relevant importance in the history of that continent. It was Aleduma, a black deity, of superior intelligence, from the planet Ignium, ruled by the goddess Salófia. His haughty beard, shiny skin, slight hunchback, with feet turned backwards, beard bristled, fallen to the ground, gave him a unique appearance. He came to choose the place where the black race would develop. (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 7)

In this opening excerpt describing the world of old Aleduma, Aline França symbolizes the preservation and revitalization of Afro-Brazilian cultural and political values. Aleduma is described as heroic, courageous, black, divine, super intelligent, supernatural, and futuristic in his resolve to found a “new” African world in which the black race will reinvent itself well beyond the African continent and in which a black goddess, Salófia, Aleduma's wife, will indeed be the Queen. Aline França's surrealistic imagination seems to parallel what has been accomplished with *Black Panther* and the imaginary kingdom of Wakanda. As futuristic and utopian as her imagination is, it is also a reminder that such magical realist worlds are necessary to escape from the current Afro-Brazilian world of poverty, squalor, and oppression.

Of the very few critical responses available on the corpus of Aline França, I find Esther Jones's “African-Brazilian Science Fiction: Aline França's *A Mulher de Aleduma*,” the most compelling.² Jones situates França's work within a broader science fiction imagination and the history of black women's writing in the United States, in which either women writers are white and male writers are black, leaving out completely black women. Against this background, she asserts that “Aline França is more than brave; she is a brazen, trailblazing black woman of science fiction in a culture that clings to mythic ideal(s) of the nation, the literary, and the black woman's place within these. She is Brazil's Octavia Butler” (JONES, 2012, p. 17). Meticulously deconstructing Aleduma as a figurative Edenic space reminiscent of colonial conquest, Jones privileges the dilemma of Maria Victória as a raped Afro-Brazilian

² See, for example, Edvaldo Brito, “Apresentação: Uma Ode aos Valores Culturais da Raça Negra,” in *A Mulher de Aleduma*, Aline França (Salvador: Editora Ianamá, 1981), 7–8; Ana Rita Santiago, *Vozes Literárias de Escritoras Negras* (Cruz das Almas, Bahia: UFRB, 2012), 211–22; and Moema Parente Augel, “E Agora Falamos Nós: Literatura Feminina Afro-Brasileira,” in *A Mente Afro-Brasileira: Crítica Literária e Cultural Afro-Brasileira Contemporânea*, ed. Niyi Afolabi (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2007), 21–45.

woman, whose power as a goddess is thus diminished and whose high spirituality is defiled by the colonial rapist, Hermano, a white Brazilian entrepreneur, who looks forward to a time when the magical Island of Aleduma is developed into a tourist attraction such as a resort island. Tadeu, the ideal husband, is thus displaced as father of the bastard child, who later dies and is buried by the “tree of life” according to Yoruba rites to purify his soul. Instead of reading Maria Vitória as a victim, the critic credits her for “operating in the shifting, liminal interstices of black female subjectivity, a sacred time-space continuum, and an African spiritual belief system that resists ongoing subjugation” (JONES, 2012, p. 18). I contend that the death of the unborn bastard child is indeed the death of mythical “racial democracy” in Brazil, while the eventual birth of Datigum, the prince of Ignium, is the rebirth of a true democratic society typical of the defunct Palmares maroon settlement of the seventeenth-century, even if utopian and futuristic. Datigum represents the hope of Afro-Brazilians of reliving the revolutionary aspirations of Zumbi dos Palmares: “Awake! Awake! My people! Datigum was born, son of Maria Vitória! ... Datigum, grew up a healthy, cheerful and intelligent boy, he ran in the flowery fields, he visited the elders to hear the stories of the island. He turned into a handsome young man and behaved as if he were really an IGNUM prince.” (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 80). It is against this regenerative consciousness and the sublime that I read Afro-Brazilian utopian identity in França’s *A Mulher de Aleduma*.

You are said to experience the sublime whenever you are dumbfounded, petrified, startled, and unable to express what you have just seen or experienced. When Edmund Burke surmises that “terror is the ruling principle of the sublime,” he is relating it to the dialectics of terror and beauty, where a destructive act can also transport one into the realm of epiphanic beauty or perfection, as if the same act has provoked in us a sense of awe in the face of a supernatural manifestation that defies human comprehension (BURKE, 2018, p. 25). Likewise, in França’s *A Mulher de Aleduma*, the writer invents the Island of Aleduma, a magical realist (*quilombola*) community that is conscious of its African spirituality and matriarchal power, yet it is disrupted by a colonial intrusion that violates this sacred land, as embodied in Maria Vitória’s loss of purity, her position as a community goddess and leader, with her violent rape by Hermano. In a magical twist of fate, Maria Vitória gives birth to Datigum, the son of the Afro-Brazilian Tadeu, as a symbol of the land’s regeneration against colonial violation. Hermano may have “revenged” Maria Vitória’s rejection of his son as a future husband, but in raping this sacred woman, he has also offended the deities and must be punished, hence the death of his bastard offspring. Such a violent transgression evokes a sublime moment worthy of analysis in terms of the consequences for the community. França

constructs Afro-Brazilian identity and dignity in sharp contrast with the dominating, alienating, and oppressive identity of Hermano and his cronies. These tensions manifest themselves in the binary dynamics of Aleduma Island versus the Big City; Hermano versus Tadeu; Dagitum versus Bastard Child; the rape of the black female body and rape versus the powerlessness and subservience of blacks; Maria Vitória versus the *Graúma* women; and spiritual power versus political power. In sum, the triumph of the Island of Aleduma against the Big City, representing modernity and progress, symbolizes the victory of tradition, which the writer celebrates against oppressive technological advancement.

The *quilombola* (maroon settlement) Aleduma Island, previously known as the Island of Coinjá, contrasts with the Big City, as well as the tensions inherent in it. The former is focused on developing Africa-derived community and cultural values, and the latter is prone to technological development, modernization, and capitalist exploitation of natural resources, such as turning the island into a resort and mining its minerals. It is remarkable that the islanders resist the strategic agenda and greed of Hermano. Hermano represents the Big City, and he is indifferent to environmental degradation and climatic change and is invested in exploiting the innocent Afro-Brazilians of the mythic Island of Aleduma, who are more interested in their harmonious relations with the Earth than with the ephemeral exploitation of natural resources. In contrast to Hermano, who exploits the Aleduma community and rapes their goddess (Maria Vitória), Tadeu is the ideal Afro-Brazilian savior, the fatherly figure who marries the sexually violated Maria Vitória to maintain African continuity. By combining myth and science fiction, França reclaims Afro-Brazilian female identity, even if futuristic and utopic. Reversing the stereotypical images of the Afro-Brazilian woman from being a sexual object, a domestic, and an unlettered entity without any viable political agency to being a spiritually powerful goddess and community leader, Maria Vitória represents the new Afro-Brazilian woman, with all the qualities of her dignity and political dynamism. Tadeu, meanwhile, is a victim of the erotic actions of the *graúmas* (hyper-sexualized women) from Gruta de Coinjá [Agreement Cave], whose polygamous king expects all the women to please him sexually or else he threatens the sea waters to rise to destroy these women who fear water. These objectified women are so “valued” that, when the Coinjá community welcomes male children, they often do not take good care of them but rather allow them to die off. The female offspring are more valued because they serve the exclusive and perverted sexual appetite of the king. The irony here is that, while the king enjoys these hyper-sexualized and objectified women, they are also subjected to excision as early as fifteen years old. Their existence is thus purely utilitarian, as they do not enjoy sex but volunteer their bodies

to provide pleasure just to men. França critiques the plight of these women and praises the loyalty of Tadeu to Maria Vitória because he is not aroused by their actions due to the mysterious character they exude: “the women began to laugh and quickly took off Tadeu’s loin-cloth to caress his penis in a veritable libido; then made several piles of sand, sat down with their legs open, stirred up with erotic force. Tadeu didn’t feel any excitement; he was rather scared, as he watched the reddish-colored liquid that spilled from the women’s breasts in a row” (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 81). The startling experience of Tadeu, as well as those of the exploited women, can only be explained as sublime. The most striking character portrayals are those of the bastard child and of Datigum. While one is rejected as the fruit of a violent sexual encounter, the other is embraced as the fruit of passionate love. While one is castigated and punished with death and buried ritualistically, the other inherits a royal position as a prince. Not only is rape condemned, but the stereotypical powerlessness and subservience of women is also subverted. Maria Vitória emerges as the quintessential Afro-Brazilian woman of the future, an ideal embodiment of dignity, power, and spiritual leadership.

Reminiscent of the biblical Edenic garden, where God created humans in His own image and “blessed” them after their fall to populate the Earth, the Island of Aleduma is populated by a couple from the planet of Ignum, the black ancestors of the old Aleduma, where the goddess Salófia, Aleduma’s wife, reigned supreme. They lived in total harmony with nature until white Hermano and his cronies came to the Island to transform it into a tourist paradise. Given the oppression of Salófia’s children by the whites, Aleduma decides to return to Earth as a refuge to protect her descendants. By privileging female superiority over male chauvinism, França is at once correcting the age-long dominion of men over women by shifting the paradigm and by assigning governing and spiritual leadership to women. In the same vein, Maria Vitória and Irisan are given roles as intercessors between the Ignum kingdom and the Island of Aleduma, while the inhabitants of these earthly spaces are obedient to them. With the sudden arrival of Hermano, representing the colonial intruder, the harmony of the Island is disrupted. In its stead, colonial exploitation and sexual violation became the norm, as symbolized by the rape of Maria Vitória. Despite the respect accorded Tadeu by the community of Aleduma, Hermano tries to create discord among them by alerting Tadeu to the fact that Tadeu comes from a privileged background and is not a poor black man like the others. Rather, he was adopted by an ambitious white businessman who had murdered his real parents and had picked Tadeu as his black inheritor. During a pep-talk to secure the assistance of Tadeu to help discover where the rich natural resources of the community of Aleduma are located, Tadeu responds in solidarity with his people:

- Don't count on me Mr. Hermano, it will be much better to leave things of the Island the way you met them.
- What is the point of your protecting these primitive blacks? Is it because you are also a black man? But you are different from them, you have a different background ...
- You are mistaken, I am just like any one of them. (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 65).

By resisting Hermano's corruption and manipulation, Tadeu stands tall against the colonizer's will to oppress his people. The same Tadeu becomes the hope of the future of the people when he marries Maria Vitória, who gives birth to Datigum, the inheritor of Tadeu's wealth. Although Aleduma is eventually transformed into a nudist paradise and invaded by tourists, the old progenitor, Aleduma, swiftly destroys the island but preserves the inhabitants, who are invited to a congress at Ignum by the goddess Salópiá, during which the people sing and dance to Ijexá, a regenerative celebration that signals, in closing, that "the Island of Aleduma may be no more, but black people remain represented" (FRANÇA, 1981, p. 95). França's vision of a new Afro-Brazilian society where harmony reigns in absolute communion with nature, where all races are equal, and where women and men are equal, but also where women are deified and dignified, may be utopian and futuristic, at best, but it also restores hope that such a desire is ultimately realizable. To have envisioned such a radically subversive world is indeed to have invoked it into reality, as the reader is now overwhelmed by such a possibility, however speculative and surreal.

França's other works, namely *Negão Dony* and *Estandartes*, share some commonalities with *A Mulher de Aleduma*. They focus on celebrating African divinities, reinventing Afro-Brazilian identities, deifying Afro-feminine identities, and deploying ancestrality as a counter-strategy against social oppression, violence, poverty, and racial discrimination. Invoking the *fortiafri* people particularly as agents of preservation of the environment, the writer envisions a time when their sensibility to ecological sanity will help them spread their message all over the world: "Here, from this forest, the *fortiafri* people emerged; and one day they will spread all around the world, they will prove that ecological imbalance will change human behavior" (FRANÇA, 1995, p.24). These supernatural acts are not limited to the *fortiafri* people but are also reminiscent of the female heroines in *Negão Dony*, where, amidst a long list of black female characters like Isabela, Eugênia Calixta, Mãe Dona Sinhazinha, Kely, Joana, Orquídea, and Dona Florença, among others, Mãe Maria de Obí, the spiritual leader of a Candomblé house, is the most significant. She not only embodies the characteristics of the deities that populate all França's narratives, including Oxum, Oxalá, and Yemanjá, but she is also a practical problem-solver. She frequently resolves both material and spiritual issues her devotees

have brought before her, such as the case of Manequinha de Aleluia, an old man in his sixties who cannot satisfy his “passionate and hot” wife. Followed the instructions given to him by Mãe Maria de Obí, he returns months later a the satisfied wife and a baby to be baptized: “Mãe Maria de Obí gave him a bottle with several roots of infusion for him to drink the liquid contained in it and advised him not to cuddle his wife for seven days in a row” (FRANÇA, 1978, p. 21). Whether surrealistic or futuristic, the narratives of Aline França resist all forms of cultural degradation by advancing hope for Afro-Brazilians, in general, and strength for Afro-Brazilian women, in particular, as they are empowered to take on leadership roles in a patriarchal society without sacrificing their Africa-derived values and identities.

Ana Paula Maia: Dehumanization and Humanization

Ana Paula Maia is no doubt one of the contemporary voices of Brazilian literature, and she reminds one of existentialist writers like Clarice Lispector, Albert Camus, Dostoevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, and Quentin Tarantino, all of whom may have been her literary influences. Born in Nova Iguaçu in December 1977, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, she grew up in a loving family, where her mother was a teacher of Portuguese language and literature and her father a bar owner. Her exposure to books in her early years may have also influenced her love for writing. As a writer and screenwriter, she has produced a remarkable *corpus* of works that attests to her childhood influences of horror films, as well the violence of the neighborhood in which she grew up. After studying Theater at the Artes de Laranjeiras and serving as a drummer for a rock band, she finally graduated with a degree in computer science and social communication. In addition to the seven novels that she has published, some of which have been recognized with awards and been translated other languages, including, Spanish, German, Italian, and French, she has also participated in several anthologies, one of which is *Je Suis Toujours Favela* [I Am Always Slum] (2014). In a short story published in this collection, “Cimetière Clandestin” [Clandestine Cemetery], Maia exposes the absurdity of the human condition, a sentiment that pervades most of her works. She presents the reader with a group of innocent boys playing soccer who suddenly witness the indiscrete burial of fragments of battered human bodies, brought in bags loaded on a truck by two men. After the men leave, a curious boy comes into the cemetery, jumps the wall, and, with a bag in his hand, ravages through the human debris, deciding to take a mandible with him. After the boys return home, looking forward to the next soccer game, the curious boy has a dream-like reflection about the mandible, as he wonders whether it once belonged to the corpse of his father: “He walks around the field while the others finish their game. Among the bones

and scattered bone fragments, some sacrum, thin skulls, forearms, femurs, mandibles, ribs. He bends down, tries to identify which part of the body it is. He finally decides for a mandible and stuffs it in his bag” (ANACAONA, 2014, p. 71). This seemingly innocent narrative of young boys playing soccer and discovering men burying strange fragments of human bodies raises several questions: From where are these human fragments coming? Who is responsible for their demise and fragmentation? And why have they been buried clandestinely? Maia relishes in heightening the agitation of the reader, as one tries to understand the complexity of human violence and total disrespect for the dead. These random acts of violence that preoccupy Maia leads us to explore the concepts of dehumanization and humanization in the works of the writer.

Inspired more by male writers than female writers, Maia’s characters are mostly men who work in dangerous and dirty jobs, such as slaughterhouses, garbage collection, fire-fighting, and coal mining. Her penchant for the macabre, morbid, violent, and existential may have come from her realization that men hold power in a patriarchal society. The desire for that power lures her into the world of men, where she sees them in their most violent yet pathetic or even dehumanizing states of being. Edgar Wilson (inspired by one of her literary influences, Edgar Allan Poe) is a recurring character in most of her stories. Maia is struck by man’s relationship to his work or source of livelihood, and the reader is heightened to a state of stupor and nausea as these workers are dehumanized as a matter of survival. Like the two who are disposing of the human remains in the story “Clandestine Cemetery,” the writer herself hesitates to pass any value judgment, leaving the reader to probe the motifs and consequences of the work of men. From *O Habitante das Falhas Subterrâneas* [The Dweller of the Underground Faults] (2003) to *Entre Rinhas de Cachorros e Porcos Abatidos* [Between Dog Fights and Pig Slaughtering] (2009) and *O Trabalho Sujo dos Outros* [The Dirty Work of Others] (2009), which were published together as *Saga dos Brutos* [Saga of Brutes] and are considered part of a trilogy completed by *Carvão Animal* [Animal Charcoal] (2011), Maia has mastered the art of chronicling the daily lives of pig slaughterers, garbage collectors, and firefighters, as they travel through a world of estranging events that force them to reflect on their own lives. Even when these works can easily stand alone, Maia makes the effort to draw some intersecting connections between them to the extent that her characters live on the frontiers of human and non-human violence, trauma, and death. Other works, like *De Gados e Homens* [On Cattle and Men] (2013), *Assim na Terra como Embaixador da Terra* [On Earth as well as Under the Ground] (2017), *A Guerra dos Bastardos* [The War of the Bastards] (2007), and *Enterre Seus Mortos* [Bury Your Dead] (2018), reflect on the societal compulsion for the consumption of

meat and the implicit horror of killing animals; the psychological torture and degeneration of the prison system for the imprisoned population; the gory details of brutality and violence; and the dilemma of removing dead animals from the roads, respectively, and also reflect on the human condition as it affects the larger environment and cosmos.

As an award-winning writer, who won the “São Paulo Literature Award” for the best novel for two consecutive years (2018 and 2019), Maia has indeed come of age and is well-deserving of her recognitions. Focusing on *Saga of Brutes*, which collects three narratives, namely, *Between Dogfights and Pig Slaughtering*, *The Dirty Work of Others*, and *Animal Char*, the trilogy presents the reader with heroes who find themselves in tragic conditions, including slaughterhouse workers, garbage collectors, and cremators of bodies. Like the bodies and objects they process, they all end up as sheer nothingness, just like the very miserable work they must endure on a daily basis as a matter of economic survival. By calling the attention of readers to these “invisible” social characters who have been ignored, neglected, and marginalized by the fact of the deplorable work they do to render a service to humanity, Maia demonstrates how they navigate a brutal and cruel world for their own survival. Whether the character is a pig slaughterer, garbage collector, or firefighter, Maia creates an intimacy between the reader and those men who are victims of their own livelihood. As the writer puts it, rather crudely, “beastly men, who work hard, survive on very little, expect the bare minimum in life, and silently carry their burdens and those of others” (MAIA, 2011, p. 5).

From this sociological perspective, the reader gains a richer understanding of the exploitative relation that exists between humans and non-humans. In her “Ecocriticism in Brazil,” Leila Lehnen draws upon Maia’s works to argue that there is an ecological crisis in the representation of the “wastelands” as a metaphor for rethinking the environmental imaginary in Brazilian fiction as opposed to the idealized vision of nature. Drawing on the wastelands of late capitalism, Maia surmises that interactions between humans, their landscapes, and non-human animals is essentially exploitative and degrading. She goes on to affirm that “one can read the apocalyptic trope in recent Latin American literature as a critique of economic practices that perpetuate relations of power between global south and north, between elites and disenfranchised social sectors within Latin America, and between species” (LEHNEN, 2020, p. 24). My conceptualization of dehumanization and humanization is further supported by Maia’s characterization of the protagonist in *Enterre Seus Mortos*, who is constantly surrounded by the permanence of death: “Edgar Wilson has never known work that was not linked to death ... He doesn’t know what kind of ending is in store for him. But before the dead, whether human or animal, he does not remain insensitive. There is no feeling of

contempt greater than abandoning the dead” (MAIA, 2018, 59). Such balance between the precarious mortality of man and animal, along with the sensitivity of the one entrusted with taking care of their corpses, is what makes Maia’s fictional world macabre, arbitrary, and transcendental. This lowly worker, Edgar, is obliged to see death as a common denominator between the animals he is slaughtering or burying and his own humanity.

The same Edgar Wilson character shows up in *Entre Rinhas de Cachorros e Porcos Abatidos*, interacting with his helper and friend, Gerson, as both are linked by the duty of slaughtering pigs. Through their interactions, the reader absorbs many strange and ironic situations, which Maia normalizes to force the reader to reflect on the absurdity of human and animalistic lives. Between the dogfights and the pigs they slaughter, Edgar and Gerson have ample time to distract themselves from the monotonous slaughtering. They force their dogs Dogo Argentino and Chacal to fight each other over bets. Edgar’s Dogo Argentino is much younger than Gerson’s Chacal, and it is as if Edgar already knows that Dogo Argentino will not survive. Ironically, however, it is Gerson’s Chacal who dies a hero. As Gerson reflects after the dogfight: “Tanganica is carrying Chacal out in pieces. He takes the dog out behind the junkyard where he’ll bury it, put up a wooden cross with its name and date of birth, next to five other crosses for five other dogs. And, there’s still plenty of room for new dogs and new sacrifices” (MAIA, 2016, p. 53). The dogfight is a money-making scheme among friends and workers. Yet, the lives of these dogs are sacrificed senselessly. It is a matter of their economic situation. If they were better paid and held more prestigious jobs, they probably would not need to resort to dogfights to make more money. Maia withholds her judgment by letting readers reach their own conclusion. The helpless condition of the dogs is concerning and compelling, but they are at the mercy of their owners, who have trained them since puppies for their inevitable fate. Likewise, the two slaughterhouse workers also have their own issues. Gerson, for example, is dying of chronic kidney disease and needs money to pay for dialysis treatments. Their absurd conversations reveal that their mortality is as guaranteed as that of the pigs they are slaughtering. Gerson finally opens up to his friend, Edgar Wilson, about his imminent death: “Yes, I am. Edgar Wilson, I’m dying. I’m pissing so much blood. I ‘m anemic, I purge almost every day, I’m practically skin and bone. I can’t kill pigs right. I’m in pain all the time. ... I’m only a hog slaughterer. I don’t have a chance. I won’t die in some hospital corridor. ... We’ve enjoyed life, haven’t we?” (MAIA, 2016, p. 50). By compassionately intertwining the lives of humans with those of the animals in a setting of absolute brutality, Maia neutralizes the traditional hierarchical divisions between species (between human and non-human animals alike), reminding us of the need to be more sensitive to our cruelty

against non-humans, as well as sensitive toward the inevitable mortality of humans and other animals who co-habit our ecosystem.

Similar psychological dialogues engulf the world of the characters in *O Trabalho Sujo dos Outros*, including those dialogues between Edgar Wilson and Erasmo Wagner. One is a garbage collector, while the other is a slaughter worker. Both suffer from the indignity of their jobs as they remain marginalized and invisible. Both realize that someone must do the “dirty job” that no one wants to do: “Someone has to do the dirty job. The dirty work of others. No one wants to do this kind of work. That is why God created people like you and I” (MAIA, 2013, p. 16). As the narrator observes in *De Gados e Homens*, Edgar Wilson has grown cold and mechanical after killing hundreds of cows to make a minimum wage (he is paid only cents per head). The writer also notes that the price of a hamburger is the equivalent of at least ten cows killed. Yet, ironically, Edgar must go through the last rites of praying for each animal before cutting off their heads: “his precise strike is a rare talent that carries with it a hidden science in dealing with the nervous animals. If the blow to the forehead is too strong, the animal dies and the flesh hardens ... What Edgar Wilson does is to order the soul of each animal that he kills and put them to sleep before being beheaded” (MAIA, 2013, p. 13). The slaughter worker is thus conflicted between the natural violence of his work and his own spiritual effort at humanizing a dehumanizing process.

If Edgar Wilson has come to terms with the bizarre nature of his job, Erasmo Wagner is even more estranged and traumatized by his actions and non-actions. He basically sells the junk items he collects on his job. As a garbage collector, he is often looked down upon; he also tries to make ends meet by taking care of dairy goats from the back of his house. This side job is even more critical during a strike by the garbage collectors that paralyzes the city with accumulated trash and overwhelming squalor. Maia presents Erasmo Wagner to us as a survivalist and degenerate, especially given the hazardous nature of his job:

He’s had tetanus. He’s had tuberculosis. He’s been bitten by rats and pecked at by vultures. He knows pests, fear, and horror; that’s why he’s perfect for the job... He does not consider the wretched landfill scavengers, who could also benefit from the better trash. He just doesn’t care. Just as those above him don’t care. In the diminishing scale from starving to degenerate, he occupies a place just above the miserable. (MAIA, 2016, p. 59)

This opening description embodies the totality of human degeneration when it comes to the character of Erasmo Wagner: he is poor, miserable, surviving, and hopeless and does not expect much from life. It is no surprise then that, as the story progresses, he is arrested for murder. After serving his time, he decides to stay away from people. Maia weaves two

more characters into the complex narrative by intimating us with Alandelon, Erasmo Wagner's brother, and Edivardes, their cousin. While Alandelon works as a contractor, cutting corners with government contracts by deliberating damaging structures to create the need to repair them, Edivardes is a manual laborer who is good with his hands. He cleans grease traps, water tanks, and sewers. Erasmo Wagner has always been concerned for Edivardes, wondering when he will get his act straight by doing the right thing rather than risk being discovered and arrested by the government. The narrative ends with some reflections on the lackluster life of Erasmo Wagner, who, just like his friend Edgar Wilson, is conditioned by nothingness: "He's a man expunged, and yet he'll continue collecting the garbage of others, like a beast of burden, sterile, hybrid, unquestioning" (MAIA, 2016, p. 108). Maia maintains a strict social distance from her characters, objectively leaving readers to judge for themselves if they deserve the painful plight life has given them. Maia appeals to our sense of compassion, even if her characters are conditioned, in the naturalistic sense, to a life condemned to absolute failure. As she puts it in her preface to *Entre Rinhas de Cachorros e Porcos Abatidos*, "the texts, in a naturalist tone, portray the bitter life of men who slaughter pigs, collect garbage, unclog sewage and break asphalt ... a job that none of us wants to do" (MAIA, 2016, p. 5). She could not have summed it all up any better.

Completing the cycle in this Maia's trilogy—from Edgar Wilson, the slaughter worker, to Erasmo Wagner, the garbage collector—Maia closes with Ernesto Wesley, the firefighter protagonist of *Carvão Animal*. Unlike the other two jobs, which Maia describes through the prisms of Edgar Wilson and Erasmo Wagner, firefighting is risky and unpredictable, as Ernesto is always at risk of losing his life to save others. Society seems to value this job more than the other two, although, perhaps in ways more visible if not more dignifying. The community of Abalurdos is described as one of coal miners, a carbonized community. After fifty years of mining, the inhabitants face serious health implications: a lack of potable water, lung diseases, ageing skin, and many accidents for those who choose to go underground, where most people do not want to go. Ernesto Wesley is no stranger to gruesome fires or accidents, including in mines, as well as in clothing shops, where human lives and property are lost. Whether as a firefighter or a crematorium worker, Ernesto Wesley works very close to death. As Maia describes, referring to the crematorium in Colina dos Anjos, where Indigenous bodies are cremated to generate energy for the community: "The residents living in Abalurdos know how to make use of their dead" (MAIA, 2016, p. 149). One particular incident that is striking is when the firefighters work extra hours to combat a fire accident in a harrowing location two-hundred-meters deep, and Ernesto Wesley joins the struggle: "Ernesto Wesley

has been working for eight hours. The first team of firefighters didn't waste any time getting to the incident. However, when they arrived the high concentrations of carbonic gas from the burning oils, wood, and the coal itself, led them to fear there could be additional explosions ... This is the heaviest and riskiest trial of Ernesto Wesley's career" (MAIA, 2016, p. 155). Another incident is the death of his daughter, when his intoxicated brother, Vladimilson, crashes the car with her in the back. By the time they remove her body, she is already dead. Vladimilson is sentenced to eight years of prison, but Ernesto Wesley and his wife never recovered. The wife commits suicide by overdosing on pills, and Maia describes this tragedy in the most horrific manner: "He cremated the rest of his family the following day and buried his wife's ashes next to his daughter's at the base of a rosebush in the Colina dos Anjos reflective gardens" (MAIA, 2016, p. 161).

After losing his entire family, he rents a new house and invites his brother, Ronivon, to live with him. After few months, Ernesto Wesley finds an abandoned dog, Jocasta, at a neighboring grocer's place and adopts her. Ernesto Wesley cultivates a worm farm in his backyard and sells worms to farmers and fisherman to make ends meet. But the work at the crematorium keeps him busy, as he hopes to be promoted due to his diligence, which never happens. The narrator describes the unending business of dying and cremation in an equally gruesome manner: "In Abalurdes bodies continue to be cremated, and contrary to what they feared about raw materials being scarce for the crematorium retorts, dozens of indigents and drunks die during the cold early morning hours in surrounding neighborhoods" (MAIA, 2016, p. 170). It is as if the human fate has been sealed by imminent death. Death is such in constant supply that the narrator is sarcastic about the intertwined nature of the earth and the dead: "When the soil is contaminated and the rivers are polluted, the city lies sterile. But the inhabitants of Abalurdes draw on the dead nature of char for survival. The ovens are like fertile, birthing women. And life is the char that is also death" (MAIA, 2016, p. 179). The narrative curiously ends on a somber note after Ernesto Wesley helps to put out a fire at a textile factory about twenty kilometers from Abalurdes, after the entire city block succumbs to the fire: from homes, shops, to schools, nothing is spared. Following the devastating fire, the community experiences what the narrator describes as "fury, despair, and death" (MAIA, 2016, p. 204). Given the danger of firefighting, with Ernesto almost succumbing to death when the structure caves in under the immense pressure of the weak and burnt foundation, the narrator seizes on this opportunity of near-death experience to reflect on the ironic possibilities of death while working as a firefighter: "Ernesto Wesley is prepared to leap to his death every day; not to die but to save himself ... Ernesto Wesley grasps this in the end all

that remains are teeth. They must be preserved at every sacrifice, so one says he misjudges and fails to escape the fire he so courageously confronts, he won't become just *carbo animalis*" (MAIA, 2016, p. 204). As a precious part of human anatomy, Ernesto's teeth are what differentiates him, as a human, from non-human animals.

Most of her primary characters are men, so one wonders how feminism features into the world of Maia. In the suburbia and countryside with which Maia intimates us, Edgar Wilson, Erasmo Wagner, and Ernesto Wesley are convincing universal characters who try as much as possible to cope with the destiny that life has dealt them. They survive as much as possible, fully aware that they cannot possibly change their destinies. While their stories are tragic and painful, they also communicate in the existentialist sense that their situations cannot be otherwise. Maia wakes us up from our human slumber—by putting these strange realities directly in our face, she forces us to conclude that violence and tragedy are just a part of life. The reader becomes sensitized to the dramas of the less privileged, the common men all around us, who do the work that we would rather not do. Oftentimes, these men are not recognized for their lowly yet necessary services to humanity. As readers, we are forced to put ourselves in the positions of these characters, who seem to have nothing else to expect of life than death. Diego Lima goes as far as to call them victims of a social determinism that oppresses them as well as portrays them as “silent anti-heroes, whose configurations alert us to rustic men, rulers of underworlds, refuse men, accustomed to unhealthy lands and extremely precarious living conditions... without any capacity for social advancement” (LIMA, 2015, p. 86). One wonders what the portrayal would look like if these characters were all women. Would they be doubly or triply oppressed for being women, working in jobs that no one wants to do. In a recent interview, Maia addresses the overwhelming presence of male characters in her stories and why she is unable to create female characters, even if she wants to, because she is so empathetic to the masculine world: “I have a huge difficulty writing in the female first person, or really even sitting down to write about the female universe. These feminine particularities, for me, are complicated” (MAIA; MAGALHÃES, 2021). The dehumanization and humanization of Maia's characters are conditioned by the very nature of their fatalistic destinies without any possibility for an alternative outcome other than negative affectivity and eventual death.

Elisa Lucinda: Coping through “Existentialist-Feminist” Inspiration

Often critiqued for not directly addressing Afro-Brazilian oppression and related black consciousness issues, Elisa Lucinda has nonetheless become a household name in Brazil,

especially through her visibility on social media and in popular culture, in general (COLLIER, 2012, p. 76-96). An iconic and successful Brazilian actress, singer, poet, writer, and journalist, Elisa Lucinda was born on February 2, 1958, in Cariacica in Espírito Santo. She has been in love with poetry since her childhood, and she pursued a degree in journalism in Vitória while writing for newspapers as a freelancer. She moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1985 to pursue her dreams of becoming an actress, but she realized her poetry was better received. With her success in poetry and drama, she was invited to be part of Manchete's soap opera series, Kananga do Japão in 1989. Beyond her dozen books of poetry that address issues of love, despair, passion, hurts, frustration, life and death, she has also gradually been integrating issues of identity, race, sexism, and poverty into her repertoire. She has produced a number of remarkable works of prose, including *Contos de Vista* (2004), *Livro de Avesso: O Pensamento de Edite* (2021), and *Fernando Pessoa: O Cavaleiro de Nada* (2015). Some other cinematic or television works in which she has participated include *As Alegres Comadres* (2010), *Que será, será* (2002), *Mulheres Apaixonadas* (2003), *Páginas da Vida* (2006), *The Last Stop* (2012), and *Manhãs de Setembro* (2021). Her extensive works of poetry include *O Semelhante* (1994), *Eu Te Amo e Suas Estréias* (1999), and *Vozes Guardadas* (2016). With her success in poetry, she has also made prominent entries into plays, musicals, and soap operas. She has gotten the admiration and praise of not only Brazilian writers but also famed international writers, such as the Portuguese writer José Saramago and the Mozambican writer Mia Couto. Despite her success, she has also experienced racial discrimination and prejudice. As part of her legacy projects, she has founded a school of poetry, the Lucinda School of Live Poetry, where she teaches courses on spoken poetry. In addition to her recordings for soap operas and her poetry, chronicles, and children's literature, she has expressed a desire to produce a DVD on pop music.

While, for Lucinda, performative language can be empowering when deployed to destabilize all forms of interdictions against the Afro-Brazilian female body, the multiple layers of subverting and resisting social negations also play out in the spoken word as a weapon of defying the alienating absurdities of life. Through theater, performance, music, and pop culture, in general, Lucinda escapes social conditionings that reduce her to any singular role. As a multivalent performer of empowerment and transcendence, Lucinda combines her penchant for feminist ideology with a sensibility to the existentialist possibilities in the lives of her poetic characters, whether simply embodied, invented, or re-invented. Although she is invested in poetic language as a weapon of ambiguity to transcend life's negations, Lucinda reconciles these ambiguities by operating at the interstices of feminism and existentialism.

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (2018) postulates that the quest for freedom that interests Lucinda is a game between the oppressor and the oppressed, where one seeks to exterminate the other to attain freedom for all concerned: “in revolting, the oppressed are metamorphosed into a blind force, a brutal fatality; the evil which divides the world is carried in their own hearts ... the ill-will of the oppressor imposes upon each one the alternative of being the enemy of the oppressed if he is not that of the tyrant” (BEAUVOIR, 2018, p.104). Likewise, Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (2007) argues that, even with divine intervention, human nature is bound by their own subjective machinations of doom and excess: “But there is another humanism, the acceptance that there is only one universe, the universe of human subjectivity. Existentialism is not despair. It declares rather that even if God did exist, it would make no difference.” (SARTRE, 2007, p. 94). When these epistemological ruminations on humanism and existentialism merge into the feminist world of Lucinda, we come to terms with what I have termed Elisa Lucinda’s “existentialist feminism.” In other words, despite Lucinda’s cautious optimism, her creative *corpus* sensitively evinces aspects of frustration with the human condition, whether about sex, love, passion, death, friendship, laughter, work, or other human emotions and responsibilities that recur in her universal works. While transcending these absurdist realities, she remains aware of the limits of optimism, as she often bursts into songs of protest against all forms of oppression.

Lucinda may well be a universal writer. Her *O Semelhante* [The Similar] opens with a celebration of her teacher-mother, who gave her the space to fulfill her dreams of being an actress by offering her words of love and support. More than that, the preface, which is addressed to the “respectable audience,” celebrates her optimism that the red carpets of fame are in her future. The five parts are deep reflections about the lives of self and others, as the speaker reflects on being able to see herself when she is the mirror for others, as in “Espelho Seu” [Your Own Mirror]: “I want to be mine in order to be yours / I never want to depart again too far from me / Come. Fully alleviated, hurriedly, intuitively / I want to be yours in order to be mine” (LUCINDA, 1998, p. 24). Whether it is the “every day that brings its poem,” “the love that the waters create,” “the planet as the belly and consecration of creation,” “the discovery of multiple Brazils,” or “the face of God,” the volume celebrates the value of sameness, the joy of feeling the same as everyone, and the persistence of hope after experiencing love and pain that can be shared with others.

Despite a secure disposition about her own creative talent and genius, she still desires a future of fame and acceptance, as in “Futuro de *me* livro na mão da vizinha” [Future of *My* Book in the Hands of the Neighbor]: I wish I was pressed, leafed in your bed / published,

searched in index / known by my lyrics as if I were famous” (LUCINDA, 1998, p. 29). As the reader accompanies the poet on a journey of discovery, through her dialogues with other modernist poets like Drummond and Pessoa, one comes to terms with the poet’s consciousness of existentialism during moments of reflection on death, depression, and frustration, as in “No elevador do filho de Deus” [In the Elevator of the Child of God], where the poetic voice dies so often that regeneration is a constant event: “Today, practically, I die to what I want: at times just because it is a bad ending” (LUCINDA, 1998, p. 204). Her poems are various and provocative, often sharing eternal truths, like the mysteries of the menstruating mermaid-woman who creates and destroys the male cobra, as in “Aviso da lua que menstrua” [Notice of the Menstruating Moon]. Yet, it is “Mulata Exportação” [Exported *Mulata*] that embodies a vital political message.

In a country that blindly preaches “racial democracy,” there is no better spokesperson than a visibly iconic “mulata” celebrity like Elisa Lucinda. Yet, Lucinda is not an official propagandist. Rather, she goes against the grain to articulate the contradictions of racism within the myth. By creating a theatrical performance with a white predator, who desires the *mulata* carnally as a way to justify that he likes black people and is not racist, the speaker shatters this illusion and indicts the white man for his exploitation, oppression, and folklorization: “Come black woman, come and be my excuse / Come for here within is a place for you / Come and be my alibi, my good conduct / come, black exportation, come my Sugar Loaf! ... / Come and be my folklore, come and be my thesis on Black Malês / Come, black woman, come and surprise me, and after I take you out to dance / Imagine: I heard all this perturbed and without pain.” Despite the victim’s protest against this sexual harassment, the white intellectual is only given the punishment of a slap on the wrist, which enrages the speaker to the point of protesting the judgment: “I said: ‘My Lord, no point! Oppression, Barbarity, Genocide / nothing of this nature is resolved by sleeping with a black woman!’ / ... I still remember the slave quarters / and you remember the Big House / Let’s honestly write another history together ... / Because ceasing to be a racist my love / does not happen by eating a *mulata*!” (LUCINDA, 1998, p. 184-185). Lucinda exposes the erroneous stereotypical image of the *mulata* woman, who is said to represent the Nation while, in reality, is treated as nothing more than a sexual object. By critiquing the judge’s failure to punish the predator to the full extent of the law, Lucinda confirms her posture as a feminist existentialist. She believes that the inequality of the sexes and the “racial democracy” mythology are so engrained in Brazil’s cultural fabric that the *mulata* becomes an easy object of consumption to market this myth, as captured in the expression of “eating a *mulata*.” It is as if she were an

element to satisfy one's carnal hunger. In sum, *O Semelhante* is a homage to the childhood memory of her loving mother, as well as a catalogue of her memories of special romantic encounters and an indictment of the forms of social injustice that continue to objectify the *mulata* figure in Brazilian society. Lucinda resists this Brazilian commodification of her black female body while insisting on controlling the positive image she projects of herself as powerful and respectable.

Along the same lines of poetic (re)naissance and political poetics in *O Semelhante*, Lucinda engages her penchant for love and harmony without forgoing her larger commitment to social critique in *Eu Te Amo e Suas Estréias* [I Love You and Your Debuts]. Divided into seven parts that echo the relations between time, verb, and the conjugation of love; love and re-immersion into valorization; love and patriotism; love and nostalgia; love and poetic illumination; love under four hands; and love in the serenity of home, Lucinda celebrates the many masquerades of her love for her lover, whom she sees as a blend of the Egyptian and the Portuguese parts of her ancestry, and whom she also sees not as a permanent destination but as a passage into other contemplative journeys: "My man sleeps next to me today as he slept before within my favorite guava, inside the fruit of my life; he now dates me as he used to do inside my blackberry" (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 19). Her poems celebrate love as a poetic act, where she "always wanted a love / that fulfils my future and / alternate me as a girl and a lady," as in "Da Chegada do Amor" [On Arrival of Love] (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 25). But, she also articulates her poetic function as a form of "crying through emasculation," as in "Lágrima do Sétimo Dia" [Tears of the Seventh], as if comparing the act of poetic creation with divine creation and its resting on the seventh day (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 72). Her poetry then becomes revolutionary when, in "Estado da Revolução" [Revolution State], she compares Cuban socialism and poverty with American capitalism and economic slavery, judging which is more on the side of true freedom.

During these poetic ruminations, Lucinda always celebrates women, describing them as a "princess," a "Cinderella," and a well-decorated Christmas tree, even on non-Christmas days ("...an enchanted Eve / spreading herself on the outside / becoming a paradise"), as in "Lilith Balangadã" [Lilith Necklace]. In "Risco do Poeta" [Risks of the Poet], she recognizes the challenges of poetization. "This poetizing business / unsure if it works / unsure if it influences / but could be delirious," she writes, forces the poet to take chances with provocations, and, in doing so, the poet may end up taking many risks, like seeing "Streets full of cars / broken traffic lights / And yet crossing the streets!" (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 145). Likewise, in "Na Imagem da Semelhança" [In the Image of the Similar], which celebrates her son

Juliano to whom the poem is dedicated, Lucinda describes how she is inspired to respond to emotional stimuli by singing, writing a poem, staging a spectacle, making a gesticulation, or even dancing. It is as if she is constantly in a mode of creative essence. In “A Quatro Mãos” [With Four Hands], the poet is inspired to sing, like the “Intelligent Parrot / blue bird that lives / in the mood of a deep laughter” (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 145). She ultimately feels a sense of freedom and growth whenever she submits to love, as in “Livre” [Free], and to the compelling inspiration that produces the signature title poem, “Eu Te Amo e Suas Estréias”: “Loving you subscribes to a dynamism of days / It is about improvement of love ... / It is about a department of internal matters / ... / Our thirst, primitive as it is / is always unique / ... I love you as I never loved / You afar, my continent, my king / I love you, how often did I feel it / and only for this reason will I love you” (LUCINDA, 2000, p. 45-47). These poetic outbursts of romantic spontaneity find collateral echoes in the reflections and short stories that Lucinda also experimented with in the course of her creative trajectory.

In *Contos de Vista* and *Livro de Aveso*, two creative worlds collide. One captures the photographic moments of characters and intimacies in the private spaces, communities, and events that are begging to be remembered. Meanwhile, the other captures the reflections of an invented character, Edite, who is in constant dialogue with the narrator, or Lucinda, during her daily encounters and experiences. Lucinda often blurs the ideal social distance between herself and Edite, causing the reader to wonder if Edite and Lucinda are not one and the same person. In “Reluzia” [Sparkled], for example, the narrator narrates the affectivity between her and Raimundo, whom she calls “Luzia,” while accentuating special moments of intimacy that are super erotic: “First he was flowing along like a river. Then he used the opposite direction of the gesture in the hairs of my forearm and all the arena turned to grass as in the good wind. I was just dizzy with goosebumps in the intense body and all over. ... Impressive how Rai found my body in the middle of the night, its secrets, curves, and traps” (LUCINDA, 2004, p. 103). With all these candid expressions of love, the lover returns to whisper more passionate words of enchantment in Luzia’s ears: “Luzia, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever set my eyes on. And I have neither been loved so much nor will I ever be” (LUCINDA, 2004, p. 107). After a corresponding dream-like reflection about their passionate lovemaking, Luzia falls asleep, deciding not to take a shower and enjoying the renewing energy of the sexual act. She dreams of running away to Iraq and not returning. She contemplates how devastated Raimundo will be if he is abandoned before he can experience the joy of having a family with her and helping to raise the children. She soon returns to reality and prays to Santa Luzia (a mix of Oxum [the deity of beauty and sweet rivers] and

Iasã [the deity of thunderstorms]), whom her mother had taught her to worship to avoid blindness while she was a child. The nightmares continue to the extent that the narrator starts imagining Raimundo dead for no reason. She wakes up to a series of imaginary photographs about a happy couple in the tram, under the Christ-the-Redeemer statue, and the Sugar Loaf Hill, and she soon discovers that it was all a fantasy. As she fully wakes up into reality, her reflection in the mirror reveals that she is not the marvelous beauty that Raimundo had described, but she was not so bad as to be a reject. Content with her being, she feels renewed and closes the story: “From the sky was drizzling a new rain. It was seasonal, my season, my God!” (LUCINDA, 2004, p. 111). When psychoanalyzed, Luzia seems a little insecure and seems to expect Raimundo to validate her, as she grows used to his caring and loving words. However, after his sudden departure, like a ghostly character disappears in a soap opera, which is never explained to the reader, she comes to a full consciousness of herself. The moral is to not depend on others for validation and to be self-sufficient as an enterprising and secure Afro-Brazilian woman. She seems to have regained the sparkle that her name suggests.

In Lucinda’s unique, crafty construction of Edite as her own alter-ego, the reader follows the thoughts and reflections of the writer as a pretext to social commentary on issues as far-flung as racism, politics, gender, education, love, violence, and even culture. Prone to expressing herself freely with a daring deployment of curse words and colloquialisms (such as *putaquepariou!* or “what the fuck!” and *poxa* or “damn,” among others), direct sexual complaints, and social indictments, Lucinda mixes aphorisms, proverbs, chronicles, and short reflections. Edite, or “Afro-Dite,” translates the urgency of her sometimes volatile messages, not only on the “feminine condition,” but, by extension, on the human condition in the existentialist sense. Divided into 113 deep reflections, the writer takes the reader on a journey across Brazil (referencing Brazilian military dictatorship) and around the world (reflecting on Apartheid and the courage of Nelson Mandela in South Africa). Of these hundred plus entries, we will sample only a handful, including items 60, 68, 95, and 112, due to limited critical space. After acknowledging that she was very young during the advent of Brazilian military dictatorship, Lucinda expresses shock when she learns that Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil were imprisoned and tortured before they eventually left Brazil on exile to Europe. She laments the cost of democracy that all Brazilians enjoy today: “Damn, how expensive was the guarantee of democracy. I don’t want it to ever end. A country that lived a dictatorship is struck and marked by retardation and by ignorance produced by the lack of freedom. By God’s grace, there will never be a dictatorship in Brazil. God forbid” (LUCINDA, 2021, p.

82). Lucinda declares the necessity of the freedom of writing to an invented interlocutor, Valentin, cautioning: “Everyone fully knows that if she does not write she will become insane. For this reason, I declare to the world: Let the woman write her aversions” (LUCINDA, 2021, p. 91). During a visit to Cape Verde, she celebrates the existence of racial diversity and invites the world to learn how to co-exist with each other without the complexes of inferiority and superiority: “To be racist is an error of vision, a controversy at the time of facing the ugly reality. No ethnicity is superior or inferior to the other” (LUCINDA, 2021, p. 127) Indicting machismo, sexism, and racism, and drawing on the dialogue of Ditinha with Pedro Archanjo, the protagonist of Jorge Amado’s classical *Tenda dos Milagres* [Tent of Miracles], where issues of racism and Afro-Brazilian religiosity are contested alongside those of poverty and marginalization, Edite sets the record straight that she is in no way suffering from bipolar disorder, as some readers might think: “But it has nothing to do with being a double-faced woman, no. It is about someone with so much in her head, people think, you know Ditinha? Then I spoke: stop talking nonsense, my friend, I am equal to everyone in this place” (LUCINDA, 2021, p. 152) Through these cogent examples, Lucinda confirms that she is indeed one of Brazil’s most contemporary, intellectual, and courageous literary voices.

A crowning jewel of Lucinda’s poetic output to date, *Vozes Guardadas* is a masterpiece of the writer’s creative labyrinth. At 515 pages, it is difficult to categorize without generalizing or claiming a superficial “unity in diversity.” Each of the six sections, which are divided into two main parts, “Garden of Letters” and “Book of Desires,” is a painstaking denunciation of social reality that renders marginalized subjects as victims of violence and inequality. From the broader sectional themes of “Letter Kept in the Neckline,” “Spoken Letter,” “Shipwreck,” “Letters at Sea,” “Anonymous Letter,” “Book of Tickets,” “The Clerk,” “Black Letter,” “Letters in the Garden,” “The Wolf,” “Songs for the Little Bird,” “11 Poems of the Rain,” “Guarani Pain,” “Sound Deck,” and “Desire, The Lovers’ Muse,” to the metaphors of gardens, books, and desires, it is apparent that Lucinda has thoroughly refined this grandiose work of beauty. The challenge is not so much in enjoying each page but in selecting excerpts worthy of analysis within such a limited critical space. A few poems catch the idea, but every poem in the volume is worthy of analysis and reading pleasure: “Prólogo,” “A Ilha,” “Putaquepariu,” “O Sopro da Vida,” “Só de Sacanagem,” “Última Moda,” “Violência,” “Poema de Libertação,” “Diálogo das Águas,” “Dor de Desejo,” and “Como Ser Feliz?: A Lição.” A quick rallying example is the poet’s analogy between poetry and an island in the middle of the sea as it gives birth to a shipwreck: “A poem is for me a solid ground, / like

the Island is to the shipwreck” (LUCINDA, 2016, p. 99). Such a witty poetic rendering from a sensitive soul reminds one of Fernando Pessoa, as both transform pain into acts of protest and beauty.

From the “Prologue,” where poetry is further defined as “a news item / a piece of diary, a confession, / an emotional or sad utterance”; “Putaquepariu,” which celebrates the death of Roberto Samico, a rare Brazilian who “left tears of nostalgia on our faces”; “O Sopro da Vida,” where the poet celebrates the presence of the hunting deity, Oxóssi, in her life as the energy of regeneration (“I go to the forest of Oxóssi to breathe fresh air / It is new morning. / To live is to breathe”); “Só de Sacanagem,” where the frustrated poetic voice condemns corruption but the popular wisdom consoles her (“don’t be naïve, since Cabral era has everyone been a rogue”); “Última Moda,” where the poet shares her persistent optimism as she desires to flow “In the sweet seas and difficult waters of crude life / my happiness proceeds, continually”; “Violência,” where the poet protests the constant police brutality and violence that force youngsters to have to grow up too soon (“No, I cannot take it anymore! / Poor Black and Brazilian young / are becoming men too soon”) “Poema de Libertação,” where the poet declares that most of her poems are indeed autobiographical (“The truth is that everything is autobiographical”) “Diálogo das Águas,” where the poet send a love poem to a lover from Bahia (“I dream and write on the sea of Bahia, a love letter”); to “Dor do Desejo,” where the poet celebrates the joy of recollecting passionate and romantic moments, despite the pain (“I play my organ in your name / the flower of my wish / my wish in full bloom”), Lucinda has mastered the art of transforming pain into sublime beauty. Nevertheless, in “Como Posso Ser Feliz: A Lição,” a serenade to her mother, she leaves the reader with the secret to her happiness: “I am here, your voice in me, watering the garden / ... / Sing mother. It is your voice in me” (LUCINDA, 2016, p. 99). Despite the hardships of her life, Lucinda transcends the vicissitudes of social oppression in Brazil through transformative optimism.

In “Tabacaria” [Tobacco Shop], Lucinda leaves the comfort of Brazilian reality to embody the character of Fernando Pessoa, fictionalizing his life story in the first person and transporting readers to his contradictory world. In the voice of Pessoa, she states quite nihilistically: “I am nothing. / I will never be anything. / I cannot want to be anything. / Aside from this, / I have in me all the dreams of the world.”³ Pessoa’s existentialist bent compels

³ Fernando Pessoa, “Tabacaria/Tobacco Shop,” *Lyrics Translate*, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/tabacaria-to-bacco-shop.html-0>, accessed on September 22, 2021. For various translations, see also Darlene J. Sadlier, *An Introduction to Fernando Pessoa: Modernism and the Paradoxes of Authorship* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 113.

us to question what led Lucinda to embrace such a controversial figure as the ideal subject for a fictionalized biography, when there are many Brazilian writers or figures with similar controversies and contradictions that could have been more compelling to black consciousness, such as Machado de Assis or, even more challengingly, Zumbi dos Palmares? The answer comes from an interview on the “Absent Encounters Show,” where Lucinda affirms that: “It was the Record publishers in Rio de Janeiro, who contacted me, asking me to write an introductory biography for students and general readers on either Machado de Assis or Fernando Pessoa; after studying their lives as they connect with my own background, I chose Fernando Pessoa. Unfortunately, Brazil is not yet ready to associate our blackness with literariness.”⁴ While not answering the political question of why she might choose Fernando Pessoa over Machado de Assis, her answer nonetheless suggests that every writer should have the freedom to write about any subject without having to be constrained by racial stereotypes. Even Mia Couto, in his preface to the novel, praises Lucinda’s ability to live outside of her own identity and write about the life of Pessoa: “Resulting from this journey is a refined sewing of between the text of Lucinda and the words of that person who only existed through words” (LUCINDA, 2015, p. 7).

Like a diary, Lucinda puts together pieces of texts from Pessoa’s life, ranging from letters, scattered annotated memories written here and there, photographs, poems, and many moments referencing his childhood in *Chuva Obliqua* [Oblique Rain] and *Livro do Desassossego* [Book of Disquiet], among others. The narrative plays out the tension between Lucinda’s alter-ego, as she embodies Pessoa the narrator, and the questionable literary character of Chevalier de Pas. The most dramatic moment in the novel is the conversation between Pessoa and Chevalier de Pas, through which the narrator grapples with his sameness and otherness:

I am afraid. Who are you? An angel? No, now listen, you are a Horseman, my Horseman of nothingness! Drawing on the last reserve of tears that I had left in my life, I asked:
 — My friend, where have you been all this while?
 — Right here, Nando. I never left this place. I never left your side.
 — I am afraid, Horseman. Is this about dying?
 — It is.
 — Why am I old and you remain young? (LUCINDA, 2016, p. 388)

⁴ Grupo Editorial Record, “Fernando Pessoa—O Cavaleiro de Nada, de Elisa Lucinda,” YouTube, April 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaaMdwaYPDo>, accessed on September 22, 2021.

When connected with the opening of the novel, this passage helps to frame Pessoa's childhood as one of the happiest moments of his life. He remembers the serenity and devotion that he was given as a child: "the whole theater was my playground ... behind it was the nostalgia of my childhood ... I was happy and no one was dead ... When I came to think of life, it had lost its meaning of life ... and everything was done to make me happy" (LUCINDA, 2016, p. 26-27). The illusion of a happy childhood contrasts with the disillusionment of Pessoa in "Tabacaria," an existentialist poem in which the first lines describe the nothingness and void of life. Lucinda may have found in Pessoa the perfect character to represent the contradictions of Brazil as a country that manages to be happy despite its veiled melancholy and racial oppression.

The suggestion that Afrofuturism and black utopia somehow represent coping strategies through which black subjects deal with estranging social realities is not too far from the truth. Much of reality is a series of nauseating situations that border on race, class, and gender, especially when it comes to power relations and struggles for a better life within a hostile environment. In *A Mulher de Aleduma*, Aline França creates a futuristic Afro-Brazilian society in which blacks are kings and goddesses to counter the capitalist and exploitative society led by the colonial rapist Hermano, who is more interested in heritage tourism than real development. Ana Paula Maia conjures up alienated misfits and laborers who ironically serve an indifferent society in such hazardous jobs as garbage collectors, animal slaughterers, and firefighters. And Elisa Lucinda bravely takes on the character of Fernando Pessoa as the epitome of Brazilian contradictory essence. The three writers seek in existentialism an escape from reality, while at the same time confronting readers with a taste of the surreality that is the underbelly of reality. In other words, utopian dreams can sometime be therapeutic for the human condition.

AFROFUTURISMO E UTOPIA NEGRA NA ERA DA NÁUSEA: ALINE FRANÇA, ANA PAULA MAIA E ELISA LUCINDA

RESUMO: As realidades desencantadoras da vida negra no Brasil muitas vezes obrigam escritores como Aline França, Ana Paula Maia e Elisa Lucinda, entre outros, a optar pelo realismo mágico radical como estratégia de enfrentamento. Ancorado no poder criativo da criação de mitos culturais inovadores, cada escritor cria protagonistas que são em parte humanos, em parte bestiais e em parte divinos para evocar suas qualidades anti-heroicas como características essenciais para sua transcendência. Além disso, os protagonistas heroicos desses escritores são dotados de poderes sobrenaturais que dão credibilidade à sua proveniência ritual do labirinto do mito e da história para ensinar a moral eterna. Através das lentes convincentes desses trechos superficiais de realidades existenciais, argumento que as três escritoras afro-brasileiras analisadas neste trabalho têm um acordo comum com absurdos estranhos da condição humana, enquanto suas obras buscam transcender esse estranhamento da condição alienadora através do escapismo criativo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Afrofuturismo; Aline França; Ana Paula Maia; Elisa Lucinda.

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