

Sexualities: Taboo, transgression and subversion **in the poetry of Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge**

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Abstract: Our material experiences of our bodies and sexualities are fundamentally shaped by the ideological limits placed on them via the social hierarchisation of sexuality and the taboos that define which elements of the body and sexuality are acceptable or perverse. In this article, I compare the ways in which these limits are described and challenged in the poetry of Luiza Neto Jorge and Maria Teresa Horta. This article compares how each poet uses taboo elements of the female body to create new gender identities which would liberate the female body from the constraints placed on it under the strict political and religious social codes of twentieth-century Portugal. In particular, I will look at representations of the body and the use of language to empower the feminine in the poetry of Maria Teresa Horta, and to create a greater sense of fluidity in definitions of gender in the poetry of Luiza Neto Jorge. Using theories on sexuality from Foucault to Butler, I mean to address the question, to what extent one can claim that Maria Teresa Horta's poetry constitutes a transgression of the limits of sexuality, whilst the poetry of Luiza Neto Jorge is a subversion of these limits? I will thus demonstrate how discourse can affect material experience, and compare the different ways in which poetry and language can be used to resist oppressive discourse and either redraw or completely obliterate the limits that define our corporeal and sexual experience by highlighting the poetic works of two of the most revolutionary of Portuguese women writers.

Keywords: Maria Teresa Horta; Luiza Neto Jorge; taboo; transgression; subversion

Resumo: A nossa experiência material dos corpos e das sexualidades é fundamentalmente formada pelos limites ideológicos impostos através da hierarquização da sexualidade e dos tabus que definem que elementos são considerados aceitáveis ou perversos. Neste artigo, compara-se o modo como se desafiam estes limites nas poesias de Luiza Neto Jorge e Maria Teresa Horta. Procurar-se-á comparar o modo como cada poeta utiliza os elementos tabus do corpo feminino a fim de criar novas identidades de género que libertariam o corpo feminino das restrições severas dos códigos sociais, políticos e religiosos em Portugal. Especificamente, considerar-se-ão representações do corpo e o modo como se usa linguagem para dar poder ao feminino na poesia de Maria Teresa Horta, e para criar uma definição mais fluida de género na poesia de Luiza Neto Jorge. Empregando as teorias sobre a sexualidade de Foucault até Butler, discute-se em que medida se pode dizer que a poesia de Maria Teresa Horta constitui uma transgressão dos limites de sexualidade, e que a poesia de Luiza Neto Jorge é uma subversão. Através da poesia de duas escritoras revolucionárias, portanto, procurar-se-á demonstrar como é que o discurso afecta a experiência material, e comparar as maneiras divergentes como a poesia e a linguagem podem ser utilizadas como resistência ao discurso opressivo patriarcal, seja redefinindo os limites que definem a nossa experiência corporal e sexual, seja apagando-os.

Palavras-chave: Maria Teresa Horta; Luiza Neto Jorge; tabu; transgressão; subversão

Recently, in the context of the study of gender, sexuality and the body, scholarly attention has turned to an interrogation of the “inter-” – with studies on intersex, intergender, interrelations, intersections and interspaces (and so on and so forth) coming to the fore. Leading research in this field includes the work undertaken by the Instituto de Literatura Comparada Margarida Losa’s *Intersexualidades* research group. Their 2016 conference *Intersexualities: Crossing Bodies, Crossing Borders* highlighted the role of limits in contemporary studies of the “inter-” in all its forms, and especially of the need to challenge these limits, which are particularly problematic when it comes to the assumption of discrete bodily limits.

The title of the *Intersexualidades* conference immediately brought to mind, for me, the theme of transgression, and also reminded me of a question put to me by Ana Luísa Amaral during a conversation about the poets Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge. She asked me: Can we say that Horta’s work can be read as transgressive, and Neto Jorge’s as

subversive? At the time of our conversation I agreed that yes, we could certainly define these two poets thus. Since then, though, I couldn't help but feel that the question of subversion and transgression, though often employed interchangeably, warranted some further research to be able to pinpoint the ways in which Luiza Neto Jorge and Maria Teresa Horta's poetry conform to or diverge from contemporary definitions of transgression and subversion. This brief article, then, constitutes an exploration of these terms, so as to consider with more clarity the way in which terminology such as this can be applied to Horta and Neto Jorge and the effects that the use of these terms can have on our understanding of their poetry.

Naturally, the terms transgression and subversion are contested and complex concepts that have developed in several strains of critical and literary theory in often divergent manners. To define the difference briefly, though, transgression constitutes a breach of socially-defined limits, an example of which would be to speak, write or act a taboo: to perform something outside of that which is deemed to be a human or social norm. A subversion, however, is to reverse or replace established values: to construct a new system or discourse rather than to breach the limits of an existing system, thus creating a new world-view or form of thought with different priorities and structures. From a feminist perspective, for example, a subversive poetic could escape phallogocentric structures and language completely, prioritising a non-hetero-normative perspective or the rejection of binary notions of thought, gender and being.

The space that has been identified by many as a primary site for regulation, limits, and therefore transgression and subversion, is that of eroticism. This is most famously theorised by Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille in their respective works, the three-volumed *History of Sexuality* and *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. Bataille, in his 1957 groundbreaking study of the erotic, claimed that eroticism was the primary site for taboo and consequently for the violation of taboo, stating that "Eroticism always entails a breaking down [...] of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals." (Bataille 1986: 18) This is principally because of the transgression of limits that is inherent in the erotic act itself, calling into question the

stability of the self/other dichotomy and “destroy[ing] the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.” (*idem*: 17) Obscenity, according to Bataille, “is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with [...] the possession of a recognised and stable individuality” (*idem*: 17-18).

Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge’s use of the erotic in their poetry, therefore, demonstrates a will to upset the order of things: to challenge, transgress or subvert the systems of thought and society that place regulations and limits upon their bodily, linguistic and social experiences. In dealing with the erotic they immediately call into question the power structures of a society that has traditionally equated masculine with subject, and feminine with object. Both poets maximise on the potential for change that is epitomised in eroticism. Maria Teresa Horta uses her poetry to break the silence on the female body, elaborating poetry about the erotic female body, actively sexual feminine subjects and elements of the female body such as menstruation which are generally perceived as obscene. Luiza Neto Jorge, on the other hand, eroticises language and the poetic form itself, bringing it into the realm of the unstable, as Bataille shows us, and allowing the potential for a completely different understanding of knowledge, gender and language than is offered by traditional, hegemonic, Western systems of thought. Looking at the works of these poets more generally, in this way, one could say that it is possible to separate the two and to say that Maria Teresa Horta largely tends towards a more transgressive use of the erotic in order to invalidate taboos on the female body, and that Luiza Neto Jorge’s poetry seems to be more subversive towards social definitions of gender and knowledge.

However, upon further investigation, the terms transgression and subversion seem to be much more complex and the relationship between the poetic works of Horta and Neto Jorge and these terms is not quite as straightforward once we go beyond a kind of surface categorisation. Turning first to transgression, Georges Bataille is probably the most well-known theorist of the term, and much theory on the subject has surfaced as a response to his work, and yet when compared with Maria Teresa Horta’s poetic transgressions of sexual taboo, there are certain deviations.

When Bataille describes the relationship between taboo or prohibition and

transgression, he appears to proceed on the assumption that the taboo he describes is essentially for the good of humanity. Thus, when he claims that a transgression, once enacted, reaffirms the taboo and plays a significant role in the maintenance of a prohibition, he is assuming that the enactment of the taboo would serve as proof of the act's obscenity:

We must know, we can know that prohibitions are not imposed from without. This is clear to us in the anguish we feel when we are violating a taboo, especially at the moment when our feelings hang in the balance, when the taboo still holds good and yet we are yielding to the impulsion it forbids. If we observe the taboo, if we submit to it, we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist: that is the experience of sin. That experience leads to the completed transgression, the successful transgression which, in maintaining the prohibition, maintains it in order to benefit it. (*idem*: 38)

Turning to Maria Teresa Horta's poetry, however, the taboos are not spoken to reaffirm the prohibition, but to call the prohibition into question. The collection *Rosa Sangrenta* (1987,) for example, takes as its central theme menstruation, and is headed by Germaine Greer's infamous call for women to taste their own menstrual blood: "Se você se supõe uma mulher livre,/ imagine a hipótese de provar o seu sangue menstrual./ Se isso lhe causar nojo, é porque tem ainda/ um longo caminho a percorrer" (Horta 2009: 600.) In the poem "Uma Rosa...", for example, Horta incorporates the taboo and largely unspoken aspects of the female body into her characteristically erotic poetry, celebrating all aspects of the female body and yet avoiding the romanticisation of the female body which so often leads to the neglect of its materiality:

Uma rosa que sangra
entre as pernas
no côncavo do corpo adormecida

Uma rosa no ventre
entreaberta
em si própria rasgada, enlouquecida

Uma rosa de febre
respirada

tecida nos sucos do desdém

Orgástica – voraz
e decepada
pétala a pétala lambida e desenhada

[...]

Uma rosa de pele
uma ametista breve
um rubi sangrando entre as pálpebras

Fazendo estremecer
as espáduas
ao de leve

Uma rosa!
Uma rosa!

Uma flor calada

No limite do corpo e da raiz
indo buscar ao útero
a sua outra face
Uma rosa de púrpura
Uma rosa de saxe
Uma rosa de orgasmo e de cetim
(*idem*: 601-602)

In this poem, and the rest of the collection, Horta does not transgress a taboo which is inherently bad for humanity, such as murder or extreme sexual perversion, but rather transgresses a taboo which acts only to restrict the movement of one sector of society (women). In the menstruation taboo (and many of the other taboos on female sexuality) shame and repression, rather than the good of humanity are the ends for which taboo is the means.

Bataille's denial of the possibility for the ultimate removal of taboo, via the prohibition/ transgression dialectic, is directed primarily towards calls for the removal of all limits on sexuality, in the search for a "back-to-nature" style sexual liberation. To justify his position, Bataille relies on the anguish that he believes necessarily accompanies transgressions of sexual taboos, and the impossibility for the removal of this anguish:

The inner experience of eroticism demands from the subject a sensitiveness to the anguish at the heart of the taboo no less great than the desire which leads him to infringe it. This is religious sensibility, and it always links desire closely with terror, intense pleasure and anguish. (Bataille 1986: 38-9)

But where is the anguish in Maria Teresa Horta's poetry? Bataille contends that eroticism, the transgression of the self/ other boundary, necessarily induces pleasure and pain for the sexual subject – a pleasurable sense of continuity, along with a death, of sorts, of the discontinuous subject (*idem*: 19). In the collection *Minha Senhora de Mim*, however, the speaking subject who enjoys a dominant sexuality and speaks freely of sexual pleasure, transgressing multiple taboos, takes pride in her transgression and takes pleasure from it in a way that overtly challenges the taboo on the expression of women's sexuality. For example, in the poem "O meu desejo", the lyrical subject savours her desire, finding pleasure in the transgressive act of desiring (as a woman), and using her desire to adopt a dominant role within the sexual act:

Afaga devagar as minhas
pernas

Entreabre devagar os meus
joelhos

Morde devagar o que é
negado

Bebe devagar o meu
desejo
(Horta 2009: 344)

Reading Bataille's *Erotism*, one wonders if his perspective on the impossibility of ever truly overcoming a taboo could be linked to the fact that he does not take into account the role of power. It is, of course, the socially hegemonic which tend to be responsible for discourses within which taboos and prohibitions are created. Bataille's notion of eroticism has been heavily criticised in the past for prioritising a predominantly masculine and penetrative perspective in his work. He writes for example:

In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. (Bataille, 1986: 17)

Thus, it is the male partner who gains access to the erotic via transgression. The passive female, in Bataille's account of eroticism, has no agency and therefore does not appear to benefit from the transgression – she simply disappears as a separate being. Could we not say that for a member of the hegemonic group, the group that defines the limits of being and eroticism, there is more to gain from the reparation of the limits after a transgression as the limits are created with the interests of this group in mind? The group which has its limits defined for it, however, has more to gain from the challenge to these limits that transgression can represent.

In his homage to Georges Bataille, "A Preface to Transgression", Michel Foucault provides a description of transgression that I believe more aptly describes the nature of Maria Teresa Horta's transgressive poetry: "[T]ransgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable" (Foucault 1980: 34). Foucault's description allows for much more movement than Bataille's definition of transgression. Even though the limit is redrawn, there is a movement and a process of redrawing the line – when the line is breeched, who is to say that nothing of the limitlessness can move to within the limit before it is reformed? And when the same transgression repeatedly occurs, does the slight change made possible with each crossing

and recrossing not multiply? This definition certainly seems to allow for transgression as a political or revolutionary tactic, as is often found in feminist writing or political action.

Of course, when a transgressed taboo enters the limited space, the realm of the socially acceptable, everything else must move to accommodate it. Once aspects of women's sexuality, such as the actively sexual poetic voice of Maria Teresa Horta's poetry or open discussion of menstruation, become acceptable, the whole hierarchy of sexual activity must be reorganised to accommodate it. This complete reorganisation of sexual discourse means that one could claim that Horta's poetry in fact blurs the line between transgression and subversion.

Bearing this in mind, whilst Luiza Neto Jorge's poetry as a whole can be seen as subversive in the way in which it creates a new, alternative language and poetic form, there are certainly transgressive aspects that contribute to the ability of Neto Jorge's poetry to become subversive. Roland Barthes, for example, claimed that "[T]he transgression of values – that declared principle of eroticism – corresponds to (if it does not indeed establish) a technical transgression of the forms of language [...]" (Barthes 1992: 245-246). In Luiza Neto Jorge's poetry, the language itself is put forward as erotic. Thus, according to both Barthes and Bataille's equation of the erotic with the transgressive, Neto Jorge's application of the erotic to language deepens the transgression of values that are also present in her poetry.

Her poetry also uses a stylistically avant-garde language to exceed traditional boundaries of meaning, knowledge and representation. In many of Neto Jorge's poems the textual body and the material body become inseparable, such as in the poem "Pelo corpo":

infinita invenção
de pétala a escaldar
desprende o falo

a palavra sublinhada
que é ele a avançar-me
pelo corpo

a porta giratória
que me troca
pelo homem e, a este,

o fértil traje
que lhe cria mais seios
pelo corpo
(Jorge 2001: 207)

In this poem, language and the body are both significant themes and the transgression, the crossing of limits between gendered bodies, applies equally to acts of linguistic transgression of accepted forms of languages (“o falo”) as it does to the transgression of fixed and binary notions of sex and gender: “a porta giratória/ que me troca/ pelo homem [...]” (*ibidem*) It is the consistent transgression of language and bodies that contributes towards the creation of an alternative, non-binary system of knowledge and eventually subverts the restrictive, phallogocentric hegemony of Western and Portuguese society.

In Luiza Neto Jorge’s poetry, transgression leads to subversion; to the creation of an alternative, subversive concept of gender. Once the limits of language and the body are called into question, the definition of knowledge to which we have become accustomed in Western society is broken down allowing for an alternative epistemology to emerge. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler reminds us of the way in which the permeability of the body becomes a source of disgust and taboo. She likens heterosexual and homosexual breeches of the body’s boundaries to the necessary permeability of the body via the excremental process, and the fact that the impossibility of a completely impermeable body is generally silenced in favour of a binary discourse of a discrete ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ and a stable, discrete bodily subject. According to Butler, then, a discrete, individual body is essential to maintain a binary structure to thought, being and knowledge. Once the integrity of the single subject is breeched, the rest falls apart, leaving a clearing for a subversive model of thought, being and knowledge to emerge:

Regardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial distinctions of inner and outer, they remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired. “Inner” and “outer” make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability. [...] Hence, “inner” and “outer” constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. (Butler 2006: 182)

In the poem “O corpo insurrecto”, Neto Jorge makes explicit reference to “o sexo”, “a boca” and “o recto”(Jorge 2001: 79), the three primary sites of necessary transgression of the body’s boundaries. She uses this to immediately invalidate the traditional notion of the impermeable, discrete, corporeal subject, and to finally subvert the system of binary thought within which the boundaries of the body were conceived. Equally in the poem “Exame”, a conversation between a male doctor, a figure of authority, and a young woman is distorted and twisted until the two speaking subjects are no longer distinct from one another (*idem*: 50-53). These poems breach the boundaries which form the foundations of Western knowledge. The enormity of the transgression of these boundaries necessitates a complete reconfiguration of subjectivity, and Luiza Neto Jorge offers this new, fluid subjectivity in her poetry, but in a process that is in no way uncomplicated. A process that is often painful, where the act of breaking into a new language is often expressed through the motif of bodily pain – a pain that is unavoidable given the inextricable connection between language and the body in Neto Jorge’s poetry.

Just as we have identified both transgressive and subversive elements of Luiza Neto Jorge’s poetry, I believe that Maria Teresa Horta’s poetry can also be read as subversive. When reading Horta’s poetry, it is essential that we recognise the ultimately subversive nature of the feminist revisionist project, which has always been essential to Horta’s literature as a poet, prose-writer and as one of the “Three Marias.” The process of revisionist myth-making, such as the collection *Minha Senhora de Mim*, which revises Portuguese troubadour poetry, placing female sexual desire at the centre of the revised poetic, is part of a larger effort by feminist writers to create a new symbolic which could re-organise the social and symbolic systems of Western, patriarchal discourse. Revising

traditional perceptions of sexual roles, Maria Teresa Horta proposes an alternative field of signification within which women are perceived as active sexual partners and as desiring subjects. Whilst this project is certainly not as avant-garde as Luiza Neto Jorge's complete rejection of existing structures of language, gender and subjectivity, it cannot be ignored as a significant and effective subversive literary technique.

Thus, to answer the question put to me by Ana Luísa Amaral, yes we can, to a certain extent claim that the general direction of Maria Teresa Horta's poetic tends towards transgression, and that, broadly speaking, Luiza Neto Jorge's poetry is predominantly subversive. However, it is also important to bear in mind the historically phallogentric nature of the term "transgression", as is attested to by the persistent neglect of the feminine in Bataille's *Erotism* and the repeated application of false gender neutrals in the works of those who subsequently responded to, or paid homage to, Bataille, such as Michel Foucault. Likewise, the term "subversive" could be seen as more apt in many cases, given its particular affinity with feminist politics and literature. When we speak of feminist literature, be it linguistically avant-garde, surrealist, revisionist, erotic, or any other style, is there not always a subversion of sorts in the essential challenge that feminism entails to traditionalist or phallogentric literary canon and hegemonic discourse?

We must also consider the blurred lines between the two terms, where transgression often leads to subversion and where the two terms can overlap. Given the propensity for these terms to blend into each other, would it not be just as useful to consider the use of these words based on their political or gendered implications? Or should we, perhaps, focus less on the difference in terms, and more on the variety of effects and sensations offered by the two poets? Yes, both Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge's poetry contain transgression, but there is a stark difference between the sensation of liberation that one feels upon reading Horta's poetry, and the painful process of distorting and re-shaping language and the body in Neto Jorge's. Equally, the feminist revisionist poetic offered by Horta bears the force of feminist politics and a sense of power that is offered by a movement, and yet the subversion offered by Luiza Neto Jorge takes us away from any understanding of being and gender offered to us at the time – by patriarchal

systems of knowledge or by the feminist politics that Neto Jorge rejected. Ultimately, the closer we look at these two terms, the more problematic they become, but at the same time, this exploration of the terms has indeed helped to map the complex dynamics and movements involved in the poetry of Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge, even at the expense of somewhat complicating the original question, and ending with more questions than I began with.

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