





Yes, I Am Gay. So, What?

Alice in Wonderland



VALDECK ALMEIDA DE JESUS

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Introduction

There are many possible readings of Lewis Carroll's famous novels *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871): one might turn on the concept of a phantasmagoria lying just beyond our regular powers of perception; another might be more philosophical, involving theories of parallel or counterfactual worlds unfolding alongside ours; and a third might be more psychological, and hinge on Alice's naïveté and emotional and social development as she encounters the strange denizens — the white rabbit, the brutal Queen of Hearts, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire cat, and so on, which is to say, difference itself writ large — of Wonderland.

It is the last reading that perhaps most informs and provides a thematic and symbolic underpinning for *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland*, poet, memoirist and literary activist Valdeck Almeida de Jesus's newest book. *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland* is a rollicking, ribald, rags-to-riches account — an autofiction, as the French might call it, or a novella, as we would in the English-speaking world — of a queer, working-class, mixed-race Brazilian at the turn of the 21st century. The narrator and protagonist is a fictionalized alter ego, an "Alice" who passes through a series of hidden holes and mirrors, beginning in his rural Bahian hometown, to enter Wonderlands of a very different sort. Instead of a beckoning rabbit, it is neighbors, a prostitute, gay magazines, and public phones

that provide the portal through which the narrator of *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland* embarks upon his often painful search for love and understanding, a journey of self-knowledge and recognition often wracked by multiple heartbreaks, betrayals, dislocations, and even exile. Amid these hardships, the reader comes to see, this "Alice" unfortunately cannot shed his illusions fast enough, even at the occasional risk of his own life.

Yet *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland* is not an unrelievably grim account, but an often funny and allusive one, full of moments of joy and triumph too, in which we can see "Alice's" lost illusions transforming, however gradually, into awareness, certainty and confidence, or rather, a surer compass with which to orient himself and move through the world. This Alice lacks neither candor nor a comic sense, and provides us with more than a few opportunities to laugh as tragedies are (mostly) averted. Along the way he also gives us a peek into contemporary Brazil, and in particular queer Brazil, as someone from its social, economical and political peripheries might experience it, offering a geographic scope and cultural stew that echoes Mário de Andrade's *Macunaima* and a grittiness not out of place in the fiction of Rubem Fonseca. *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland* also illuminates for those of us primarily rooted in US and Western queer cultures some of the ways that Euro-American cultural hegemony and homonormativities circulate and function in the global south (and elsewhere).

The Alice of *Yes, I'm gay. So what? "Alice" in Wonderland* is no passive bystander, though. He is an agent in his self-creation, which will continue, we hope and imagine as we read his final lines, far beyond the frame of this narrative.

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Preface

The Severed Head by the Queen of Hearts

“**A**lice,” in gay parlance, is a slang term used to refer to homosexuals who are easily deceived. Those who, like the character of this book, do anything for love, devote themselves to their partners, try to act justly, and invariably end up victimized by their lovers. Alices, on account of their good intentions (or innocent intentions), always end up tried and sentenced by the Queens of Hearts (their lovers) and soon discover that Wonderland is not as wonderful as it seems.

The Alice in me, however, decided to try protesting against the Queen of Hearts’ established order. I do not love any less than heterosexuals. I do not suffer any less. I am no less intelligent. I am no less capable of not suffering from any disease that they also may not suffer from. But our relationships are often different, yes—in the approach, the life together, and prejudice. Gays are different. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. However, in Athens, when homosexuality was accepted, the Alices were ordinary citizens. Equal. Citizens, maybe even more so than you.

While I was writing this book, I came across an interview with Clay Shirky, a researcher who studies the economic and social effects

of the Internet on our lives. The context of Shirky's statement is different, but the analogy is perfect:

I'm just so impatient with the argument that the world should be slowed down to help people who aren't smart enough to understand what's going on. It's in part because I grew up in a generation that benefited enormously from not doing that. Right? The baby boomers, when we were young, we had zero, zero patience for the idea that people who are in their fifties in the '70s and '80s should somehow be shielded from cultural changes because somehow the stuff that we were doing was upsetting them. So, now it's our turn and we ought to just suck it up.

I'm tired of being judged. I'm tired of hypocrisy. I'm tired of sparing a society that says it's liberal but that often condemns in silence, with slanted looks, sentencing based on misunderstood realities. I'm tired of being approached by married men who insist on saying, "Let's have sex. But I'm not gay; I'm straight." You see, I have very little interest in the female anatomy, but I know that a woman also has an ass. They have it, yes, but they don't give it up. To my knowledge, only two groups of women do not give up the ass: those who can fly and those with the facade of marriage. Given the infrequency of appearance of the first, I am led to conclude that these belong to the second group.

It annoys me so much that I'm screaming now. So let my screams echo and not protect the ignorant. From now on, they will know, and I will no longer bother to be judged.

Chapter I

Alice Awakens

Father's last moan was also the starting pistol of the spermographic race in which the winner became a zygote. Already standing on the podium, I watched from first place the misfortune of my competitor-brothers, who sank to a destination far less luxurious than the uterus: the toilet in my parents' house.

The race itself was nothing new—it was once often depicted in films and books. Mama used to say that people should first pay attention to their work and only afterwards have fun, but small (microscopic) me tried to bring the two together.

Early on, I realized I was different from other boys. Soccer, for example, was not within my field of interests; it was too violent. As the preferred childhood games of the boys of that age were always linked to demonstrations of force, I preferred to be alone. Even with seven siblings, when I played with them, my tendency to lead was clear. I was the one dictating the rules of the game. Most of the time, however, I was alone in my world, and, when adolescence arrived, while my sexuality began to explode and my doubts darkened my vision like smoke from a locomotive, I turned to literature.

Meanwhile, much had already happened. In fact, my first sexual experience—I'm not talking sex itself, but rather intimate contact—occurred well before my teens. It was when I was seven years of age

and we lived in the house of a lady named Andrea. Nearby lived Maria de Fátima and Francisco. They worked from home as cooks. One evening, Mother sent me to Maria de Fatima's for bread, and, once there, Francisco led me to a plot of land where there was a building. He took off my clothes, laid me down, and was on top of me for a while. I didn't understand anything that was happening. I know that there was no penetration and I never actually saw Francisco naked, but I kept this scene as the memory of my first experience with sexuality.

The second experience, still at Andrea's house, around this same time, was watching Domingos, a worker at Andrea's house and the first man I ever saw completely naked. He had an enormous penis, and I watched him curiously while he groaned and manipulated his member. Whenever this happened, a white substance spilled from the tip of Domingos's penis and, much as it intrigued me, I never asked about it. I found out about it all alone, later, by trial and error—or rather by myself.

Perhaps because I was still very small, none of these events seemed strange or sexual to me. Clearly speaking, I had no idea what sex was. Things only began to really come clear when I was eight years old, when we moved again and went to live in the countryside, on the Tourmaline farm. It was at this time that I started to realize my growing interest in boys and girls. I fell in love with one of the girls there and found the spontaneous art of masturbation. The following story may seem to the more sensitive readers to be bizarre, disgusting, or even inconceivable. But I beg readers to dispel their preconceived notions in order to better enjoy my book and realize that this is real life for many heartland kids.

And so, while I masturbated thinking about this little girl from the farm, I realized intuitively that I felt much pleasure in the anal region. Without spending much time on the subject, I'll tell you that I would hide in an old barge and shove bananas in my ass. And so I went on, enjoying and thinking about the girl I wanted to have as a girlfriend.

Other farm boys also liked playing in the barge. The homoeroticism among those kids was as strong as their curiosity and perception of their differences. In one of the games, we would just masturbate and measure the size of our penises. Before long, these boys realized my weakness and tried to fuck me, but I wouldn't allow it. Frustrated in their advances, they were soon occupied with another game and ran out of the barge. One of them stayed on the barge with me and lay between the cocoa seeds, inviting me to have sex with him. I acted very withdrawn and declined. After that day, I would often dream that I had played and had sex with all those boys, which, unfortunately, never happened.

It was on Tourmaline that I first heard the term "queer." Zezito, an employee, always told stories of gay men and referred to women as "snakes in a skirt." I remember it felt funny to think of a snake dress, although the image did not make much sense. But as time has never seemed to settle down in my life, and soon after, we moved again.

This time we went to Jequié, the parched "sun city." We lived at the home of Mrs. Gertrude. For most gays, admitting to homosexuality is a painful process and very time-consuming. No one *turns* gay. Rather, people are *born* gay and conclude, the majority of the time, that it is big problem. As children we look up at Mom and Dad as our prime model for correction. When a bit older, we notice that Mom and Dad are nothing but a mirror of the social patterns and that those patterns are not concerned with difference, but to train them us to follow the same path. And it is around time that we begin to tread the road of the homosexuality. Then our headaches start. It was then that I had my first girlfriend.

I know this introduction sounds pessimistic, but, contrary to what it may seem, my first relationship was an innocent and very rewarding process. Jacqueline lived opposite Mrs. Gertrude's house, and we began looking at each other from a distance, each from our own window like the romantic stories of the nineteenth century. It was with Jacqueline that I experienced the taste of a first kiss. It was a captivating moment of rare tenderness that, even being very naive,

was marked forever in my heart. Nothing as intense ever happened in our courtship.

After the end of our naive little courtship, my attraction to boys began again to manifest itself even more forcefully. It was at this time, at nine years of age, that I began to feel the first blows of prejudice. On the way to school, some three kilometers away from my house, the boys would tease me, trying to humiliate me because of my delicate sensibility. Undecided about my sexuality, but very sure of my rights, I went to one of their homes and complained to his mother. Being a very fair lady, she understood me and told me I was right. After that they didn't mess with me anymore.

In high school the provocation was similar. In my studies about sexual variety, I discovered the Kinsey scale and understood that the world is not divided between black and white, but it is made up of different shades of gray. Kinsey has six degrees, ranging from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual, and it passes through bisexuality. I believe that this scale is more evident during adolescence and that those restless youths, who covered me with insults and showed me their sexual organs, meant something else entirely. In a period that nobody really understands well, to expect a teenager to understand is like hoping for a miracle.

The simple fact is that, during adolescence, I noticed a lot of closeted behavior and countless scenes like "Come here and suck my dick, little fag." Sure, they were showing me their dicks and telling stories, but in the end it was me who was the *fag*. We divided the adolescent world between fags and angels of the Lord: The fags would be quiet and shy creatures with scarce social relations; the angels of the Lord would be those with open flies and swinging dicks to draw our attention to how a real man should behave.

One of these angels from high school had always the same story about his intercourse with the maid. He said that every day he would fuck her and she would always complain about the size of his cock. Hearing this would leave me quite upset and turned on. I spent much time fantasizing about that boy's penis. Today when I see him,

I still think about this story, but now I know to interpret it more clearly: he probably dreamed about fucking the maid and that she complained about his genital size. In the end, what happened was this: While those boys invented nonexistent fucking, I spent my energy by actually fucking the prostitutes in the city. And my first time was with one of them.

I don't know if the whole thing started as an attempt to escape from my nature, but I do know my first sex per se (intercourse with a beginning, a middle, and an end) was not the most rewarding experience of my life. What happened was that I needed to have sex anyway, so I approached a prostitute out of sheer pragmatism. Her name was Luza. We went to a tiny room in the center of Jequié where there was only one chair and a bed with a dirty blanket. Luza promptly took off her clothes and threw them on the chair; she was dying of horniness. She frantically rubbed on me, and I didn't know what to do. Sweating, trembling, and, despite however much I wanted to have sex, my dick did not rise at all. Here, in the midst of such confusion, Luza got off of me, ordered me to sit on the bed, and gave me the first blow job of my life.

Despite my sense of fear of facing the unknown, all my concerns of coming or making her come ended at this moment. I enjoyed that moment as best I could, and the next day I was after Luza again, asking for more sex. I discovered, I guess, that she was not just a prostitute by trade, but by nature. She loved to fuck with me and, the same lack of inhibition that I sought out sex, also led me to lend her money and buy her groceries or gifts. However, I never thought the price was high; Luza was always worth it.

We spent some months together and, two years after we split up, I learned that Luza was pregnant and lost her son. I was very upset, not because I liked her so much, but because the baby could have been my firstborn.

After the experience with Luza, I lived for over a year with Maria das Dores, the second women with whom I had sex and my first

serious relationship. We were practically married. Maria das Dores was older than me and had an incessant fire, which meant that we spent all our time together just fucking and fucking. But there was Sueli, Maria das Dores's homophobic sister, who was what you might call an *old whore*. Very smart and full of tricks, she came right at me and got it out of me that I was gay. It was a difficult time in my life, because despite loving Mary das Dores, I felt something was missing. Moreover, Sueli's provocations were literally driving me crazy. She was always after me asking embarrassing questions about an anal fixation, so ridiculous that even Freud would be embarrassed.

I was so upset with the situation that I tried to kill myself, taking a pack of barbiturates with homemade cachaça. As you can see, since my stories are narrated in the first person, my attempt failed, and I ended up in the ICU, where I stayed for over a week. When I left, I felt so ashamed that I locked myself away at home and, in a horrible bout of trichotillomania, pulled out all my hair.

Once people knew I tried to kill myself, Maria das Dores had everyone running for the hills. I had left a farewell letter to my family, though I did not mention homosexuality as the reason for my despair. Still, Sueli continued her distrusting ways. In vain, she would try to prove her suspicions until the day I finally resolved to end it. Thereafter, fate seemed to take interest in punishing Sueli. She got pregnant and had a son. As the boy began to grow, I noticed his nature was also gay. He would wear his mother's clothes and makeup, and he spoke with a soft voice. The whole family was horrified to the point of beating the poor boy and strictly reprimanding him. But nothing worked. I hope that Sueli has seen how she hurt me with her questions and poisonous insinuations and has become a more tolerant, and thus more evolved, woman.

Time passed, the bad memories faded away, and I began to correspond with men who subscribed to *Private* magazine. The year was 1987. I lived alone in the Jequié neighborhood of Mandacaru and had a neighbor named Elaine. Though she was married to a bus driver, she was always hitting on me. So one day I grabbed the reins

and took her to bed. We ended up becoming lovers and would sleep together whenever her husband was away. From lovers we became great friends, and from friends we fell madly in love. Elaine filed for divorce and we married soon after. She had no idea of my nature until one day she found a letter I had written to a boy from *Private*. Elaine became possessed by jealousy and pressured me about it. I, on the other hand, fell into despair, because up until then no one had known my secret. I admitted everything and we talked all about it. To my surprise, she proved a wonderful woman, accepting me as I was and stayed with me.

Once, we went together to Feira de Santana to have sex with Pedro, a man whom I knew from the magazine. I consummated my first homosexual relationship. Pedro had sex with Elaine and then with me. Sadly, it felt nothing like I hoped it would. All those years of feeding my secret desires were right there in bed, being carried out with Pedro, but I could not soften the burden of social repression and not extract any pleasure from the experience. In fact, I ended up getting very depressed. I left with Elaine and wept copiously in her lap, which once again comforted me. The day was approaching when I would finally decide to live my homosexuality in all its fullness. As a decision cannot take two paths and always has its price, our marriage had to end. With Elaine, though, I have only good memories.

After the divorce I moved to João Santana Street and there began a real adventure through Embratel. At that time, there was no Internet to facilitate communication between people interested in the same subject, so I just used the weapon technology had to offer: a phone. I called the city's public phones, randomly hitting on whoever answered. One of those accidental interlocutors was Anselmo, a dark-skinned and very handsome boy of seventeen, who had moved from Rio to Bahia. We arranged to meet at a restaurant. We met and were immediately crazy about each other. We fucked in all the possible places in Jequiê: under the viaduct on João Goulart Avenue, in the vacant lot behind a gas station, and in many other corners of the city,