

Back into the Future: Feminism in Portuguese Women's Poetry since the 1970s

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Introduction: Anachronism and Feminist Politics of Location

The history of Portuguese women's writing in the twentieth century registered its most dramatic moment and, at the same time, its most prominent paradigm shift in the early 1970s, with the publication, suppression and ultimate vindication of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (1972). Critics such as Hilary Owen and Maria Alzira Seixo have written eloquently about the afterlife of *Novas Cartas*, stressing, among other factors, the sometimes overt, but usually implicit influence the book has exercised in the field of literary production by Portuguese women over the last three decades. It is possible, following Owen, to identify the main aspects of the feminist legacy of *Novas Cartas* as, on the one hand, pluralization and dialogic diversification of symbolic expression gendered in the feminine, and, on the other, as an articulation of a gynocritical perspective in Portuguese literary and cultural history. In my paper, I will follow these intimately interrelated vectors of analysis in tracing the development of feminist perspectives in Portuguese women's poetry since the 1970s.

First, however, a brief excursion into situational politics of feminist theory might be in order. In her recent forceful recasting of the objectives and frameworks of feminist criticism, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Susan Stanford Friedman questioned continuing validity of the gynocritical project, with its foregrounding of gender as "the first principle of selection in the discussion of writers" (25) and its insistence on tracing a specifically female literary tradition, on the grounds of its lack of political,

historical and conceptual congruence with more complex and comprehensive “locational discourses of identity and subjectivity in which other constituents of identity are equally important, in which interactional analysis of codependent systems of alterity replaces the focus on binary difference, in which relational and situational subjectivities move liminally from site to site, in which the always already heterogeneous belies the fixity of imagined authenticity, in which syncretist interminglings in the contact zone, middle ground, or global ethnoscape mute clear demarcations of difference” (25-26). Feminist critics of Portuguese literature working within the gynocritical paradigm have signaled their sensitivity to these and related challenges; for instance, an awareness of a need for preemptive arguments against potential charges of critical and theoretical backwardness clearly prompts the opening paragraph of Ana Paula Ferreira’s introduction to her recently published anthology of short stories by Portuguese women writers of the 1940s: “Num momento em que uma das categorias fundamentais de identidade, ser mulher ou homem, está sujeita a problematizações teóricas que colocam sob suspeita o seu valor referencial, não é fácil reerguer o bastão realista de antigos projectos feministas alarmados com a exclusão das mulheres de cânones literários estabelecidos” (*A Urgência de Contar* 13).¹ However, as Ferreira argues in another context, while presumably anachronistic, such projects must nevertheless be undertaken, since in Portuguese literary studies “there is still much need to address one of the most important items on feminist critical agendas of the late seventies and early eighties: the broadly historical and cultural project of recuperating

¹ At a time when one of the fundamental categories of identity – being a woman or a man – is subject to theoretical questionings that dispute its referential value, it is not easy to reclaim the realist charge of earlier feminist projects, spurred on by the exclusion of women from established literary canons.

forgotten women writers and read[ing] anew the Portuguese literary canon” (“‘Feminine’ Poetry for Nationalist Consumption” 3). It could be claimed, in effect, that Stanford Friedman’s advocacy of “locational feminism” leads logically, if also paradoxically, to an espousal of a relatively orthodox, seventies-style gynocritical perspective vis-à-vis the Portuguese literary and critical canon: a perspective inevitably enriched by all the benefits of theoretical hindsight it has at its disposal, but at the same time locationally and strategically attuned to the specific challenges and opportunities that arise in its field of operation.

Breaking New Ground: Maria Teresa Horta and Luiza Neto Jorge

It is such a strategy of situational theoretical anachronism—moving back into the future—that guides my genealogical reading of feminism in contemporary Portuguese women’s poetry. While I locate its symbolically central point in the early 1970s – with the publication and suppression of Maria Teresa Horta’s collection *Minha Senhora de Mim* (1971), which circumstantially triggered the writing project of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, and the appearance, in 1973, of Luiza Neto Jorge’s collected volume *Os Sítios Sitiados* – its point of departure may be sought a decade earlier, in the collective publication *Poesia 61*, to which Neto Jorge and Horta had contributed together with Fiamma Hasse País Brandão and two male poets (Gastão Cruz and Casimiro de Brito). It should be noted – especially since, to my possibly limited knowledge, none of the many critics who have commented, over the decades, on *Poesia 61* have thought it relevant to do so – that this self-consciously vanguardist collective of young poets featured an actual majority of female authors. Not only was this phenomenon unprecedented in Portuguese letters, but also, more significantly, it remains unmatched to the present day: the recent turn-of-the-century publishing boomlet produced several collective anthologies of

young poets, along with a number of critical assessments of new national poetic landscapes, which have consistently featured a small minority of female authors (when not being all-male, as has also happened on several occasions).

In their contributions to *Poesia 61*, both Horta and Neto Jorge engaged in the kind of feminist revisionism already announced in their respective poetic debuts (Horta's *Espelho Inicial* and Jorge's *Noite Vertebrada*, both from 1960) and signalled by the quote from Simone de Beauvoir that served as the epigraph for *Espelho Inicial*: "Toute ma presence est parole" (Horta I 11). Within the general framework of *Poesia 61*, with its intertwined emphasis on the materiality of text and the textuality of matter, the two poets' explorations of the "fourth dimension" of the poetic language – *Quarta Dimensão* was the title of Neto Jorge's contribution to *Poesia 61* – became symbiotically related to the feminist postulate of "re-vision" (Rich) and rewriting of male-dominated Western cultural tradition. Consistently present in their writing over the following decade – more explicitly so in Horta's, more obliquely if no less strongly in Neto Jorge's – this direction gained a broader and more elaborate scope in their publications of the early 1970s.

In *Minha Senhora de Mim*, Horta continued the project of specifically historical engagement she had embarked upon with her 1967 volume *Cronista não é Recado*; however, where the latter volume's approach to history was largely thematic, *Minha Senhora de Mim* was devoted to a complex intertextual exploration of the roots of Portuguese lyric tradition. Although the volume's impact at the time of its publication was largely attributed to its sexually explicit nature and daring vocabulary, its far more radical, as well as enduring, literary and ideological effect may be sought in its highly inventive revisitation of poetic sources of the national literary canon and its subversive reclaiming of female voices ventriloquised by male authors of the Medieval *cancioneiros*. And, in addition to the

acknowledged circumstantial link between *Minha Senhora de Mim* and *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, recognition is also due to the historicized intertextual dimension both works share, with their genealogy-building reinscriptions of problematic antecedents of nationally representative femininity, as epitomized by the anonymous *menina* or *senhora* of the Medieval song and the passionate, abandoned nun of the *Lettres portugaises*.

A similarly far-reaching and ambitious revisionist project emerged from Neto Jorge's collected volume, *Os Sítios Sitiados*, published two years after *Minha Senhora de Mim* and a year after *Novas Cartas*. While this collection gathered poems written (and for the most part previously published) in the 1960s, I would argue that it was their macrotextual presentation in *Os Sítios Sitiados* that fully realized the large-scale design of Neto Jorge's feminist project. Even dispersed throughout distinct collections, such poem cycles as "As casas" (from *Terra Imóvel* 1964) or "As revoluções da matéria" (from *O Seu a Seu Tempo* 1966) were forceful interventions in the poet's ongoing, finely plotted progress that took the physicality of language as the point of departure toward a revisionary upheaval of conceptual categories imposing orderliness and proper conduct upon the material world, including, in particular, the world of human bodies, male and female, and gendered social topographies of the home and the city. Brought together in *Os Sítios Sitiados*, they generated an exponentially richer network of textual and symbolic affinities, resulting in a wealth of discursive reflection on gendered construction of cognition and experience that rivals *Novas Cartas* in its generous scope and internal complexity. Lacking space to provide adequate illustration of this claim, I will merely point to two poem cycles – "As Casas" and "Dezanove Recantos" – that could serve as such. In the former, domestic spaces are made to converge and merge with female bodies to form intricate machinic connections that structure intimate functional alliances between

women's existential experience and various socially situated aspects of domesticity and community. The latter, a sprawling and often densely cryptic pseudo-epic sequence reinscribes the ten heroic cantos of *The Lusiads* as the nineteen lyric and autobiographic "re-cantos" that also preserve and explore, at the same time, both the collective and the mythical scope of Camões's poem.

The evolution of feminist perspectives in both poets' work over the years proceeded along increasingly divergent trajectories that can be epitomized – reductively, to be sure – by the following illustrative juxtaposition. In 1987, Horta dedicated an entire volume of poems, entitled *Rosa sangrenta*, to the articulation of a specifically and essentially feminine outlook built upon the symbolic foundation of what Susan Gubar has called "one of the primary and most resonant metaphors provided by the female body" (78): menstrual or, more amply, genital blood. This emphasis stood in direct contrast to Neto Jorge's reticent perspective on what she referred to (in the late sonnet "Minibiografia") as "o formato mulher," a perspective eloquently conveyed in another autobiographic sonnet, the playful yet exquisitely wrought "SO-NETO, Jorge Luiza": "Tenho o mênstruo escondido num reduto / onde teoricamente chega o mar" (209).² In an implicit and anticipated opposition to Horta's practice of a confidently tautological and (at this point) ahistorical immersion in the allegedly self-evident rhetoric of the body, in Neto Jorge's self-portrait the poet's own physical markers of femininity are at once foregrounded and viewed through a distancing, questioning lens that in an epigrammatic formulation evokes and takes apart an entire network of symbolic affinities.

² My menstruation's hidden in a redoubt / theoretically reached by the sea (all translations are mine.

Genealogical Re-Visions: Ana Luísa Amaral and Adília Lopes

When in 1990 Ana Luísa Amaral chose to entitle her first volume of poems *Minha Senhora de Quê*, she intentionally and explicitly inscribed herself into the emergent genealogy of Portuguese women's poetry. She also—implicitly—took sides with respect to the dichotomy of feminist perspectives I have just very sketchily represented. As noted by Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos, this “commentary on Maria Teresa Horta’s subversion of the male voice of the *cantigas de amigo* through the modern woman’s daring appropriation of her own body” made clear that what, in the early 1970s, “seemed so simple and yet so bold [...] now appear[ed] far more complex and perhaps not quite so bold, after all” (133-34). At the same time, *Minha Senhora de Quê* and, even more so, Amaral’s following volumes signalled her adherence to the principle firmly conveyed in Neto Jorge’s already cited “Minibiografia”: “Diferente me concebo e só do avesso / O formato mulher se me acomoda” (254).³ Again according to Ramalho, “[the] motif of reversal, an implicit strategy in Amaral’s first collection” is “made explicit” in her second volume *Coisas de partir* (1993) and continues to inform much of her subsequent work (134). It would be a mistake, therefore, to read Amaral’s inaugural textual gesture – the rewriting of *Minha Senhora de Mim* as *Minha Senhora de Quê* – as indicative exclusively or primarily of an attitude of postfeminist revisionism with respect to unambiguously affirmative gynocentric postulates of an earlier era. Indeed, the increasingly appreciative reception of her writing by critics such as, in addition to Ramalho, Américo António Lindeza Diogo and Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre, which has made her into something of a banner figure for the interrelated processes of feminist

³ I conceive myself differently and the format woman / fits me only when turned inside out.

poetic questioning of literary tradition and theoretical articulation of a feminist perspective in literary criticism, points to the fact that her work has successfully integrated what Julia Kristeva described as the second and third stages of feminism's ideological evolution. These stages, as articulated in Julia Kristeva's fundamental 1979 essay "Women's Time", are the foregrounding of gender difference and symbolic exploration of femininity followed by deconstructive exposure of the metaphysical nature of gender identities. In her subsequent commentary on "Women's Time", Toril Moi postulated their integration as an aporetic double imperative, which she defended as necessary to the continuing viability of feminist cultural politics.

In one of the articles he has devoted to Amaral's poetry, Silvestre chose to frame his feminist analysis by establishing an initial contrast between Amaral and another prominent Portuguese woman poet of the same generation, Adília Lopes (the two being, according to the critic, "as duas maiores revelações da poesia portuguesa na corrente década" of the 1990s).⁴ To synthesize the implications of his elaborate argument somewhat crudely, while Amaral's work offers critics such as himself or Ramalho a propitious and inspiring environment in which to root a feminist contemplation of the complex relationship between gender, poetry and modernity in the Portuguese context, Lopes's writing, although it teasingly appears to create such an environment, ultimately proves to be a barren ground for feminism. Quite interestingly for the purposes of my argument, Silvestre's verdict of Lopes's relative uselessness to feminist politics is a function of his historical positioning of her poetry. While it cannot be denied that she places gender identity and gendered discourse at the forefront of her poetic practice, she does so in a way that is, according to the

⁴ The two greatest revelations of Portuguese poetry in the current decade.

critic, excessively undignified and “cynical” (39) for its historical context, given that feminist *Weltanschauung* is a project still under construction in contemporary Portugal and thus far more in need of affirmative reinforcement than of deconstructive questioning.

One of the reasons I find Silvestre’s argument useful is that it exposes, albeit in adversarial terms, what I consider to be a key feminist strategy at work in Lopes’s poetry and an important contribution to the (re)construction of feminist perspectives in the Portuguese cultural environment: a performative exploration of anachronism as a device aimed at shaking the reader out of ahistorical complacency and reactivating awareness of gender as a factor of continuing crucial importance in the realm of social and cultural hermeneutics. In that sense, *pace* Silvestre, I do not find Lopes’s feminist perspective, nor her genealogical positioning, to be at all antithetical to Amaral’s; at the same time, I do see the issue of the two poets’ divergent reception as an interesting symptom of contemporary Portuguese culture in its own right (but that is a matter for another discussion).

Emblematic of Lopes’s deployment of anachronism is her prominent reclaiming of the presumably outdated label of “poetess”: *poetisa*, not *poeta*, is how Lopes generally refers to herself in her lyric as well as in other writings and interviews, and the word figures in the titles of two of her volumes (the 1997 *Clube de poetisa morta* and the 2001 anthology *Quem Quer Casar com a Poetisa?*). That this is a self-consciously historicist appropriation becomes demonstrated in the ironically titled poem “Patronymica Romanica,” where the poet traces the genealogy of her real name (Maria José da Silva Viana Fidalgo de Oliveira) through a matrilineal sequence that ends with her self-identification as a “freira poetisa barroca” (*Obra* 339).⁵

⁵ Baroque poetess nun.

Another gesture of literary self-invention links Lopes to the paradigmatic *poetisa* of Portuguese literature, Florbela Espanca; however, as demonstrated by the opening poem of the volume *Florbela Espanca espanca* (1999), with its profane rewriting of one of Florbela's most famous verses ("Eu quero foder foder / achadamente"), Lopes's tactics are boldly terrorist rather than quietly celebratory.⁶ As I have argued elsewhere (190-204), the poet's evocation of Florbela reenacts one of literary feminism's signature operations from an oblique, displaced perspective that emphasizes gaps and absences as it proposes to found a Portuguese women's poetic tradition on the uncertain grounds of genealogical (dis)continuity and with recourse to what Graça Abranches has termed "outras genealogias, ou tradições de escrita" (2).⁷

Lopes's ingenious use of deceptively simple language and attention-grabbing iconoclasm as an instrument of feminist critique and analysis is perhaps most visibly on display in the poem "Poetisa-fêmea, poeta-macho (cliché em papel couché)" (*A mulher-a-dias* 39-41), which intertwines first-person discourses of parodic self-definition of male and female poetic subjects. While the female poet at first appears to be as much an object of parody as the male ("Eu estou nua / eu estou viva / eu sou eu // Eu uso gravata / e, olhe, não foi barata")⁸, the poem gradually segues into a harsher and more politicized mode that broadens to encompass a critique of gendered polarization of power in the social, political and discursive sphere ("Sou um

⁶ The original version of the verse (from the sonnet "Amar!" originally published in *Charneca em Flor* [1931]) is "Eu quero amar, amar perdidamente!" ("I want to love, to love heedlessly!"). Lopes's rewriting is roughly translatable as "I want to fuck to fuck / knowingly".

⁷ Other genealogies or writing traditions.

⁸ I am naked / I am alive / I am myself // I wear a tie / and look, it wasn't cheap.

poeta-macho / tenho um gabinete / sou uma poetisa-fêmea / escrevo na retrete // Sou um poeta-macho / sou um badalo / sou uma poetisa-fêmea / calo-me // . . . // Senhora doutora, / os seus seios / são feios // O poeta-macho / assina o despacho”).⁹ The poem is illustrated with a drawing of a woman seated on a toilet (“retrete”) with a closed cover, which she is using as a writing desk; the drawing echoes visually illustrations elsewhere in the book that can be taken to depict Lopes herself. Through thus inscribing her own poetic persona into her satirical evocation, Lopes signals her solidarity, if not outright identification, with the “poetisa” performatively brought to life in the poem. While that composite creature (with Natália Correia, explicitly mentioned in the last stanza, as her other referential correlative) is not quite spared from the poem’s aggressive drive, she is also recovered and absorbed as a problematic but very much recognizable ancestress, whose travails, establishing a close parallel between gender politics of literary creation and the enactments of political power in the public sphere, are ultimately not quite a thing of the past. The brutal and apparently anachronistic polarizing split between “poeta-macho” and “poetisa-fêmea” is thus deployed by Lopes in such a way as to foreground *both* its inherent absurdity *and* its continuing pervasive relevance in the social world at large. In other words, rather than trivialize the discussion of writing and gender – as her intentionally crude terms might seem to suggest – she actually refines and complicates it, opening up the badly needed discursive space in which to interrogate the politics and poetics of gendered authorship. As such, her spectacular, aggressive and willfully anachronistic re-gendering of metapoetic discourse can be said to advance “back into the future,” activating a historically progressive perspective that reinvents the

⁹ I’m a male poet / I have an office // I’m a female poetess / I write on a toilet // I’m a male poet / I’m a ding-dong / I’m a female poetess / I shut up // ... // Lady, your breasts are ugly // The male poet signs a decree.

gynocritical feminist agenda of the 1970s for its twenty-first century time and place.

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