

## The Door Ajar: Adília Lopes and the Art of Approximation

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**Abstract.** A self-declared “pop-poetess,” Adília Lopes has gained recognition in recent years in both literary and pop-cultural spheres, publishing fifteen books since 1985, contributing constantly to Portuguese periodicals and making frequent television appearances. Lopes is not only an influential contemporary poet, but a public figure whose pseudonym holds both the weight of her written work and the attributes of the persona that she has created in the public eye. Perhaps it is due to her extreme visibility in the media, her absolute candor—whether in writing poems that address her literary influences or revealing the details of her personal life on the latest permutation of reality television—that she is so often taken at face value. Much of the critical attention afforded her is aimed at her reliance upon satirical allusion, word games and shock value, as the polemic nature of her poems often outshines their actual intentions. This paper seeks to demonstrate that Lopes should not be taken lightly, that despite the initial response that Lopes’s poems incite, a deliberate, ambitious voice emerges from the body of her work. Within the bounds of her poems, Adília Lopes lucidly defines her relationship to Portuguese and international literary continuities while presenting a meticulously formulated aesthetic in which instances of deferred resolution come to define a process of approximation that holds greater value than any anticipated conclusion.

To this faire tree, taking me by the hand,  
You did repeat the pleasures which had past,

Seeming to grieve they could no longer last.  
 And with a chaste, yet loving kisse tooke leave,  
 Of which sweet kisse I did it soone bereave:  
 Scorning a senceless creature should possesse  
 So rare a favour, so great a happinesse.  
 No other kisse is could receive from me,  
 For fear to give backe what it took of thee:  
 So I ingratefull Creature did deceive it,  
 Of that which you vouchsaft in love to leave it. (Lanyer 162-172)

As two women walk the grounds of an estate in “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Renaissance poet Aemelia Lanyer presents a material syllogism in which a kiss passes from the lips of a woman to the trunk of a tree, and subsequently to the lips of her patroness. She devises a convoluted means of connection that evades actual contact, an intricate system wherein actions are implied and approached rather than committed outright. If nature can hold the same communicative properties as mathematics, then one could argue that the women kiss indirectly, the tree between them acting as a medium and interrupting the trajectory of the intended act. In assembling this construct, Lanyer highlights the most tangible aspect of the relationship it defines, its deliberate manner of navigating space. For Adília Lopes, whose poems so often hinge upon calculated manipulations of proximity and division, the delineation of nearly any relationship requires a structural component. Though fairly unlikely that “Cooke-ham” falls within the wide range of Lopes’s literary influences, much of her work reflects Lanyer’s use of complicated paths of logic and sequence that allow her to hold a narrative in a state of suspension rather than allowing it to advance towards completion. Lopes refuses to simplify the corporal, mythical or canonical associations that she establishes within the bounds of her poems, choosing instead to forge them with schemes of carefully staged approximations; while suggesting an attempt to bridge the gap between the poet and the relations that she approaches, be they spatial, personal or historical, Lopes counters any convergence that she ventures with a palpable sense of distance, a notable absence of any anticipated conclusion.

In the poems that appear in her first published volume, *Um Jogo Bastante Perigoso* [*A Rather Dangerous Game*], Lopes’s fundamental aesthetic of approximation emerges and begins to gain definition. A poem in which her formal

sensibilities are most clearly presented is one of her earliest, “Para um Vil Criminoso” [“To a Vile Criminal”], an elegant tirade delivered to a criminal who has done her, “mil maldades / e uma maldade muito grande / que não se faz” (1-3) [“a thousand wrongs / and one great wrong / that isn’t done”]. Within the bounds of this poem, the many unnamed wrongs come to no better result than a fractional exponent that closes in on an unattainable sum; no amount of simple wrongs can measure up to the great wrong that is perpetually denied, and a thousand advancements will not bring the poem any closer to a final destination. She claims, “a maldade muito grande está feita / e não se faz” [“the great wrong is done / and it isn’t done”], petulantly repeating her insistence that such a wrong is clearly inappropriate, and at the same time asserting that the greatest wrong is not one that can be committed but an anticipated offence that fails to come to fruition, one that can only be outlined in negative space (19-20). After questioning the criminal’s regrets or lack thereof for committing these acts, or perhaps for his failure to commit them, Lopes lets the poem trail off:

acho que essa maldade muito grande  
 nos aproximou um do outro  
 em vez de nos afastar  
 mas para mim é um drôle de chemin  
 e para ti também deve ser  
 mas com um vil criminoso nunca se sabe (21-26)

[I think that this great wrong  
 brought us closer together  
 rather than parting us  
 but to me it is a drôle de chemin  
 and should be to you as well  
 but with a vile criminal one never knows]

The reader is left never knowing rather than possessing sufficient evidence to draw a logical conclusion, Lopes does not even grant the finality of punctuation. Yet while asserting the fact that the “great wrong” served only to closer approximate her to the criminal himself, she concedes that the wrong is not an event that occurs at a single point in time, but a “drôle de chemin,” a “strange path” that underlies the meticulous construct of the poem.

Delineated solely by the speaker, the criminal that she speaks for, the thousand wrongs and the great wrong that remains undone, the poem is definitively contained and deliberately self-reflexive. Only within such a structure can a poet so successfully deny the reader a conclusion, and not only the reader, but the poem itself seems to await some grand gesture or great wrong that will either secure or unravel the relentless weave of its looping chain of events. By constantly returning to an act that is both unnamed and uncommitted, Lopes is able to suspend a narrative that depends upon incompleteness by excluding all but the vaguest reminders of what lies beyond the boundaries of the poem, forcing the poem to define its own context. Only in brief allusions to acts that occur outside the poem's limits does she allow the strange path of narrative to reach beyond its circular course. She reproaches the criminal: "Acho que devo ter sido a pessoa / a quem fizeste mais maldades" ["I think I must have been the one / that you have wronged the most"], and later admits, "eu também sou uma vil criminosa / mas não para ti" (4-5; 13-14) ["I too am a vile criminal / but not to you"]. In the first instance she implies that the criminal has committed lesser wrongs against unidentified others; in the second, she claims that though the "you" she addresses is a vile criminal in reference to her own experience, she in turn is a vile criminal to someone else. The poem does not merely approach a simple deferred outcome, but vaguely insinuates a connection to an existing chain of events and eventualities from which it can only remain separate while it hangs rapt within its own perspective. These brief moments are loosed as though containing all the energy of centripetal force, lines that run tangential to the poem's circle; they both illuminate the precarious nature of her formal aesthetic and foreshadow the manner in which many of Lopes's later poems draw their complexity from the way that they create seemingly impenetrable forms and then allow those forms to crack.

Along with outlining the way she approaches questions of form in her first book, Lopes defines the manner in which she approximates the literary canon as well, using Luís De Camões as a reference point. "Le Bain Turc" begins with a verse that is taken directly from *Os Lusíadas*. The opening line, "Braços, pernas, sem dono e sem sentido" ["Arms, legs, without owner and without sensation"] evokes at first read the image that Camões intended, a gruesome pile of broken bodies, the carnal remains of a battle (III, 52). Yet Lopes takes Camões's antiquated tongue and makes the bodies her own, trading the bloodbath for a bathhouse, brawlers for bathers. However radical the adaptation, the transition between Camões's words and Lopes's is seamless,

fluid as the interweaving skins of bathing women. Whereas in the original context, “sem dono e sem sentido” refers to a pile of dismembered limbs, in Lopes’s version, the same phrase illustrates a group of bathers reclining in such close proximity that divisions between the bodies are indiscernible. Being that Lopes has remained true to Camões in failing to change “sem dono” to “sem dona,” an alteration that would have allowed the limbs to agree in gender with the women they belong to, the phrase may refer not only to the ownership of the limbs but to the very ownership of the women, or even to the words themselves. Perhaps Lopes intends to call attention to the fact that men are not permitted to enter the bathhouse; both the bathing women and the poet herself are free from any masculine challenge, whether it be the claim of ownership a man might impose upon his wife, or Camões’s ownership of his verse. Though the poem develops into little more than an artful description of the scene, Lopes firmly stakes her claim upon the rights to the canon, insisting that it is hers to mold. Rarely is Lopes content to simply allude to the work of her predecessors; rather than writing herself into an existing continuity of literature, she often chooses to align herself with her chosen influences by contextually altering or rewriting their words, directing the force of their voices through her own like light converging through a prism. Her body of work can be regarded as a canonic composite rather than a mere addition, its assertions deliberate and ambitious. By calling upon classical references such as Camões, Diderot, and Homer while focusing heavily on the work of women writers, both Portuguese and international, she proposes a literary continuity that can be bent to include a narrative of feminine Portuguese literature that has only recently begun to gain definition.

Though Lopes’s interest in feminine poetics becomes increasingly central as her career progresses, the basic philosophy that binds her aesthetically and canonically to her relentless approximations is most lucidly presented in her second volume, *O Poeta de Pondichéry* [*The Poet of Pondichéry*], a series of poems based on a minor character in Denis Diderot’s *Jacques the Fatalist*. Lopes explains in the book’s preface:

Diderot (ou quem fala por ele em *Jacques le Fateliste*) recebe um jovem que escreve versos maus e diz ao jovem que ele há-de fazer sempre maus versos. Diderot preocupa-se com a fortuna do mau poeta. Pergunta-lhe se tem pais e o que fazem. Os pais são joalheiros. Aconselha-o a partir para Pondichéry e a enriquecer lá. E a que sobretudo não publique os versos. Doze anos mais tarde o poeta volta a

encontrar-se com Diderot. Enriqueceu em Pondichéry (juntou 100 000 francos) e continua a escrever maus versos.

Porque é que o mau poeta deve ir para Pondichéry e não para outro lugar? Porque é que os seus pais são joalheiros? Porque é que juntou 100 000 francos? E porque é que passou doze anos em Pondichéry? Não sei explicar. O que me atrai é precisamente isto: Pondichéry, pais joalheiros, 100 000 francos, doze anos. (51)

[Diderot (whoever speaks for him in *Jacques the Fatalist*) receives a young man who writes bad poems and he tells the young man that he will always write bad poems. Diderot is concerned about the bad poet's fate. He asks him if he has parents and what they do. His parents are jewelers. He advises him to go to Pondichéry and to get rich there. And above all else, not to publish his poems. Twelve years later the poet returns and comes to see Diderot. He has gotten rich in Pondichéry (he saved 100,000 francs) and still writes bad poems.

Why is it that the bad poet has to go to Pondichéry and not some other place? Why are his parents jewelers? Why did he save 100,000 francs? And why did he spend twelve years in Pondichéry? I can't explain. What attracts me is just this: Pondichéry, parents who were jewelers, 100,000 francs, twelve years.]

In choosing Diderot's poet and initially reducing his character to the quantitative and circumstantial details that define his fate, she creates a context in which Diderot's determinism acts as a foil for her own formal sensibilities. Diderot came to terms with his own fatalism by conceding that although "natural law" is inalterable, composed of great chains of cause and effect that cannot be overridden, "civil law" allows for certain measures of free will. Lopes is equally aware of the givens that bind her world to its looming eventualities: the physical properties of the universe, literary predecessors, societal standards. In a practical sense, however, providing she is true to certain immutable reference points, in this case the basic facts outlined by Diderot ("Pondichéry, pais joalheiros, 100,000 francos, doze anos"), she can order the space between them as she chooses. By working within formal compositions that insist upon convoluted narrative paths, exchanging obvious solutions for calculated approximations, she is liberated rather than confined by such "fatalistic" limitations, using preexisting constructs as forms from which to deviate. Furthermore, by enforcing rather than subverting these boundaries, she is able to write poems that exist completely within their own

delineations, relegating any connection to a larger chain of events to the space beyond their limits, a practice initiated in “To a Vile Criminal.” In effect, Lopes is not commenting on the role of contextual relativity but redefining the role of the poet herself. She rejects the Shakespearian definition of a poet as one who lends, “to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name,” one who imposes order on chaos, choosing instead to impose whatever chaos she may on a strictly ordered universe (*MND*, V.i.16-17).

As if seeking to address Lopes’s initial question, “Porque é que o mau poeta deve ir para Pondichéry e não para outro lugar?” the bad poet begins the collection’s third poem with what seems a simple explanation, one that Diderot himself could have prepared: “Parti para fazer fortuna / e para escrever poemas / de que eu (e Diderot) pudéssemos gostar mais” (1-3) [“I left to make my fortune / and to write poems / that I (and Diderot) would like better”]. Lopes is true to the story’s physical parameters, but alters the priorities of Diderot’s faithful poet by giving precedence to the poet’s own evaluation of his work, reducing Diderot’s opinion to a parenthetical afterthought. The character is further complicated as Lopes highlights an essential difference between her poet and Diderot’s; while the original poet is content in the end to continue writing bad poems, Lopes’s poet bears the weight of awareness, fully conscious of his own failings. He justifies his bad poems with a disclaimer and a metaphor, assuring, “não gosto deles / de tudo o que escrevi em Pondichéry / guardo um ou dois poemas / esses poemas são a parte visível de um iceberg / de que acho a parte submersa envergonhante” (5-9) [“I don’t like them / of all I wrote in Pondichéry / I’ve kept one or two poems / those poems are the visible part of an iceberg / of which I find the submerged part shameful”]. A metaphor is, by definition, a poetic device that sets up a comparison between entities by means of equation, an overstated simile that never amounts to anything but a close approximation of its subject. Any metaphorical statement is a lie waiting to be uncovered, poised on the edge of dissolution; the poet can claim his poems are the visible part of an iceberg, they may temporarily exist as such in the imagination, but the image is destined to collapse, the kept poems falling back into their original forms. The poet continues however: “uma metáfora que dura muito tempo / leva a dizer disparates como este / uma metáfora permite aproximações mais vertiginosas / do que o bólido inter-galáctico” [“a metaphor that endures / brings out this sort of nonsense / a metaphor allows approximations more dizzying / than an intergalactic meteorite”], admitting that the frailties of a metaphor

are precisely what allows Adília Lopes her approximations (11-14). Approximations are dizzying, precarious, and though a metaphor allows the vertigo of the “nearly,” its assertions are as provisional as meteorites that disintegrate as they break the barrier of the earth’s atmosphere. So the poet is correct in consenting to the fact that the metaphor “*não deve durar muito tempo*” [“shouldn’t last too long”], because if it endures long enough to call attention to its own shortcomings, the poem’s components lose their relative values, the mechanism falls apart, the connected elements of even a poetic universe reclaim their separate definitions (15). The poet realizes that in paying such close attention to metaphor he has dedicated himself to “*um luxo que era um lixo*” [“an extravagance that was trash”], invested in a practice that will render his efforts useless (18). Perhaps Lopes means to imply that the poet’s fatal flaw is letting metaphors last too long, relying on extensions that are sure to fall short of their intentions instead of abandoning them before their failures become apparent. An image of a treasure chest supports this theory, as the poet finds inside, “*um ninho de víbora / ou cotão (que é mais desolador do que víboras)*” (20-21) [“a nest of vipers / or lint (which is even more alarming than vipers)”]. The lint is even more dangerous than a poisonous snake because it designates an absence rather than a presence, lacking the very substance that would allow for the temporary suspension of a complicated metaphor; this metaphor falls apart even before it can be conceived. If any metaphor is doomed to failure, the best way for a bad poet to compensate may be to construct metaphors that skip the approximations and point directly at their own limitations. In the final lines of the poem Lopes’s theoretical approximations are put into practice. Whereas the poet begins the poem with a lucid statement that his reason for coming to Pondichery was to write better poems both for himself and for Diderot, he seems to approach the end of the poem with far less conviction, explaining “*se escrevesse um poema sobre Diderot / escrevia os teus ossos e os teus olhos / evito escrever / e vivo como escrevo*” (22-25) [“if I wrote a poem for Diderot / I’d write your bones and your eyes / I avoid writing / and live as I write”] turning his attention to an unidentified “you.” If a conventional poet’s aim is to order his poems in a linear manner, one that allows for resolution, then perhaps the true failure of the poet, and indeed Adília Lopes’s success, is his lack of directional sensibilities, the ease with which his aims are displaced, the way in which he falls out of Diderot’s neatly outlined path and into one of Lopes’s approximations. If a poem for Diderot must be written with “your bones and your eyes,” then the bones and eyes of



a poem written for the aforementioned “you” must in turn belong to someone else, an anonymous figure that stands outside the poem. Regardless of the poem’s initial objective or direction, it is not equipped with the means to maintain its course, redirecting its energy in ways that insist upon a logical leap from the reader in order to bring it to any sort of stasis. The syllogistic conclusion that the reader must extract from the closing lines, “I avoid writing / and live as I write,” is that the poet avoids living. The very construct of such a statement illuminates the manner in which she does so, using approximations to evade any semblance of a conclusion, choosing a carefully orchestrated sense of lyricism over eventualities that she refuses to commit to.

Although the Pondichéry poems are essential as a means of understanding the workings of Lopes’s poetry, the only sustaining connection to Diderot in her later work is thematic rather than philosophical, as the myth of the exile remains a central concept. “A Ladainha Minha” [“My Litany”] is an early version of this myth. Though most closely aligned with the Homeric depiction of Penelope, famed for the twenty years she spent waiting for Odysseus while weaving and unweaving a shroud to fend off a host of suitors, this poem can be seen as an amalgamation rather than a retelling of any one mythical narrative. Figures of other women such as Emily Dickinson, Mariana Alcoforado, and even the growing myth of the woman behind “Adília Lopes” haunt not only this poem but much of the body of her work, all sharing a certain condition of circumstantial or self-imposed exile. In “A Ladainha Minha,” Lopes’s litany is a tirade launched from a locked room wherein a woman voices the discontent she shares with her sisters, claiming, “Há cem anos / que bordamos / os nossos enxovais / para nenhuma boda” (1-4) [“For a hundred years / we’ve embroidered / our trousseaus / for no wedding”]. Once again Lopes grounds her verse in the details that define the existence of the women by locking them in their rooms, allowing them to begin stitching towards their intended marriages, and even fixing the timeline to one hundred years in the past, a concrete linear measure that lets their narrative project extend indefinitely into the future. Indeed, Lopes’s women do not have to unravel their work as Penelope did; whereas Penelope’s task was a means of holding time in a state of cyclical suspension until the hero could return, Lopes’s women seem to realize that the fabric they embroider holds its own lack of eventualities. They are not waiting for a man to arrive so that the story can end appropriately, since their fiancés are in plain view, walking the grounds below in funeral attire. Despite the close proximity there will never be a wedding, the suspension that they live in

is perpetual rather than temporary. Lopes, however, builds upon her assertion that the condition of waiting is inarguably more fruitful than any possible outcome, and counters the poem's fixed points of origin with an abundance of tears and threads that seem to thrust the poem towards a final destination as the woman rants, "eu e as minhas irmãs / choramos a nossa sorte / copiosamente a fio / dia após dia / o pavio das nossas velas / esfuma-se / as nossas lágrimas / grossos como punhos / formam uma ribeira / que corre para o nosso mar / e o nosso mar?" (23-33) ["my sisters and I / weep our fates copiously / the thread / day after day / the wicks of our candles / up in smoke / our tears / thick as fists / form a river / that runs to our sea / and our sea?"]. Conjuring an image of the mythic fates in the throes of deciding their own destinies, the women are unable to cut off the flow of tears and threads; they are not equipped with the means to tie up the loose ends of the narrative. The sisters cannot commit to a conclusion, but their tears converge and form a river that runs into the sea, creating the illusion of a linear extension of the narrative and a move towards resolution. Even so, the poem ends on uncertain terms as the river "runs to our sea / and our sea?" The repetition of the final line holds the poem to an enduring penultimate moment, the phrase echoing rather than meeting the expectation of the "and," a conjunction that should imply a grammatical connection to a closing gesture, a point beyond the sea and beyond the confines imposed by the poem. Even the punctuation allows the poem to hang in question form instead of arriving at an answer, and the only point that is cemented is Lopes's continued rejection of the denouement, her insistence that the desire to marry carries more weight than any wedding vow.

Lopes addresses the Penelope myth more directly in an untitled poem that was published eight years later in "Sete Rios Entre Campos":

1.  
 Penélope  
 é uma aranha  
 que faz  
 uma teia  
 a teia é a Odisseia  
 de Penélope

2.  
 Penélope está

sempre  
sentada

3.

Ulisses é abstracto  
Penélope é concreta  
a teia é abstracta  
e concreta

4.

Penélope casa-se  
com Homero  
Ulisses fica a ver  
navios (394-395)

{1.

Penelope  
is a spider  
that spins  
a web  
the web is Penelope's  
Odyssey

2.

Penelope is  
always  
seated

3.

Odysseus is abstract  
Penelope is concrete  
the web is abstract  
and concrete

4.

Penelope marries Homer

Odysseus is left watching  
ships]

Depicted as a spider in this poem, Penelope is shadowed by another mythical woman: Arachnae was so talented a weaver that she dared compare herself to the goddess Athena, who punished such hubris by turning her into a spider, doomed to spin in silence. In claiming that the web is in fact Penelope's "Odyssey," that her work creates the fabric of her own narrative rather than existing only as a narrative device that enables the suspension of her husband's story, Lopes allows Penelope an elevation of status as seemingly audacious as the one Arachnae might have hoped for. The act of weaving becomes an assertion of authority, and the fact that Penelope is "always seated" anchors her to her central position in this version of the myth; she takes the place of Odysseus as the primary reference point while his odyssey becomes peripheral. Continuing to write against the Homeric standard Lopes states, "Odysseus is abstract / Penelope is concrete." Homer's illustration of Penelope always remained something of an abstraction, acting more as a representation of fidelity and patience than as an actual character. Not only does Lopes relegate Odysseus to a similar state of abstraction, giving him the empty task of waiting and watching ships, she calls attention to a transition that she is making from an epic sensibility, the narrative construct upon which both Homer's *Odyssey* and "A Ladainha Minha" are built upon, to a grounded yet lyrically timeless voice. The web is both "abstract / and concrete" because Penelope's version of her story contains both the concrete structure of the original myth and the lyric aspirations of its derivative, as any allusion acts as a vessel for that to which it alludes. In the end Penelope embraces Homer rather than the long-awaited hero, joining the ranks of the storytellers instead of welcoming Odysseus home. Though a marriage to Homer seems less a romantic act than a decision to couple with her art instead of her husband, this poem does grant the reader a rare moment of resolution as Penelope manages to choose a more suitable ending to her tale.

The key to understanding Lopes's work falls somewhere between the loose ends and locked doors of "A Ladainha Minha" and the steady hands of Penelope who abandons her traditional narrative for an alternative solution, between her tendency to write within systems of abstractions that allow her to approach conclusions that she never reaches and her obsession with the concrete nature of the world's most basic facts. Despite her inclination to hold her poems in flux, Lopes

exhibits a practiced awareness of the intimacy of the absolute as certain poems are stripped to their barest minimums. Even more stylistically diminished than the untitled Penelope poem is an early “autobiographical” poem:

Autobiographia sumária de Adília Lopes

Os meus gatos  
gostam de brincar  
com as minhas baratas (80)

[Summarial Autobiography of Adília Lopes

My cats  
like to play  
with my cockroaches]

If the life of Diderot’s poet could be reduced to his story’s most basic details, then the poet claims to live a life that amounts to only cats and cockroaches. There is the sense that if Lopes chose to let go of her approximations the reader would be left with a woman who lives out the myths that she alludes to, choosing an artistic existence that allows room only for her cats. As the voice behind her poems, in frequent media appearances and in a recent author’s note, expressing the anxiety that stems from “never having had a boyfriend, a husband, children” (464), Lopes presents herself as a Dickinsonian figure. Keeping in mind that “Adília Lopes” is itself a pseudonym, a deliberately fabricated myth that is perpetrated by the representations of women in her work, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the poet from the implications of her chosen subject matter. Her actual references to Dickinson may seem insubstantial, dropped casually rather than thoroughly explored, but the sustained influence of the American poet’s cloistered life is impossible to ignore. One such reference follows:

Emily Dickinson

Mesmo que pudesse  
dizer tudo  
não podia dizer tudo  
e é bom assim (383)

[Emily Dickinson

Even if I could  
say everything  
I couldn't say everything  
and it's better that way]<sup>1</sup>

Even if Lopes were capable of saying everything, of reaching the conclusions that logic demands, she would still withhold certain aspects from the reader. If the poem had thirty lines instead of three, ample space and time to disclose “everything,” she would likely find a way to write around the ends that she did not care to reach. Judging from the ending that she eventually allows Penelope, it seems that what she strives most to evade is not the finality of resolution but the bleak eventualities that await women who allow themselves to come to the standard conclusions, adhering to the world's common expectations. This is a concern borrowed directly from Dickinson, who writes in poem 640,

I cannot live with You—  
It would be Life—  
And Life is over there—  
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to—  
Putting up  
Our Life—His Porcelain—  
Like a Cup— (1-8)

Dickinson is not rejecting life in terms of her own existence but a “Life” of domestic regularity, ordered and conventional as porcelain displayed on the mantelpiece. She goes on to list a whole host of other reasons for rejecting a life with one she loves, culminating with her fear of separation in the afterlife, but the prevailing truth of the poem, the one that Lopes carries into her own poems, is that it is much easier to live beneath the weight of one's desires than to relent to the life that remains after those desires have been fulfilled. That is not to say that either poet wants to close the door completely to the idea of marriage; Lopes's women remain in a state of perpetual engagement and the last stanza of Dickinson's poem contains a veiled invitation,

explaining, “So We must meet apart— / You there—I—here— / With just the Door ajar / That Oceans are....” Separated by a spatial measure that seems like oceans, by an excess of dashes between “you” and “I,” the two may still “meet apart,” the division implied by “apart” not completely eliminating the prospect of a meeting (45-48). The door is not shut but left ajar and the possibility of union overrides the poem’s initial refusal.

Lopes borrows a similar preoccupation from Sylvia Plath, using a line from her “The Babysitters” as a preface to an untitled poem in her thirteenth book, *Florbela Espanca Espanca* [*Florbela Espanca Spanks*]. She reasserts her rejection of domestic resolution, writing:

“But I didn’t know how to cook, and babies depressed me.”  
Sylvia Plath, “The Babysitters”

É preciso pensar  
Em tudo  
Dos preservativos  
Às panelas  
E há mesmo quem  
Nos preservativos  
Veja já as panelas  
Pensa-se de mais  
E não se pensa  
De facto (416)

[It is necessary to think  
Of everything  
From prophylactics  
To pots and pans  
But one who seeing prophylactics  
Sees pots and pans as well  
Thinks too much  
And doesn’t think  
In fact]

The ability to “think of everything” allows the author to separate her erotic desires from an obligation to maintain a conventional lifestyle with her

lover. Lopes insinuates that seeing prophylactics, here an implication of the sexual act, should not intuitively lead the mind to pots and pans, the details of the domestic realm. Prophylactics are meant to prevent conception, and Lopes uses them to draw attention to the tangible and theoretical division between sex and marriage. The Plath poem draws similar conclusions, chronicling the decision of two sisters who escape their child-rearing duties by rowing out to a deserted island that is “Stopped and awful as a photograph of someone laughing, / But ten years dead” (175). Even the horrible suspension of a dead island where time has ceased to advance is a preferable alternative to the drudgeries of cooking and babies. Lacking even the ambiguity of a door left ajar, Plath’s women are bound irrevocably by their self-inflicted exiles, asking, “What keyhole have we slipped through, what door has shut?”

Plath’s words are echoed yet again in a poem from Lopes’s recent book, *O Regresso de Chamilly* [*The Return of Chamilly*], a collection in which the myth of Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado is extended to include the return of her lover, the Marquis of Chamilly, who was the supposed recipient of the famous letters that Guilleragues penned in her name.<sup>2</sup> In this poem Alcoforado addresses the man whose return she once awaited:

Não quero  
 Ter filhos  
 Gosto muito  
 De foder  
 Contigo  
 E com outros  
 Mas de bebés  
 Não gosto  
 Uma vez  
 Por outra  
 Tem graça  
 Mas sempre  
 Não  
 Os bebés deprimem-me (459)

[I don't want  
 To have children  
 I like fucking



You  
 A lot  
 And fucking others  
 But babies  
 I don't like  
 Once  
 In a while  
 They're all right  
 But forever  
 No  
 Babies depress me]

The Alcoforado that Lopes has recreated bears so little resemblance to the voice of the original letters that she seems to be someone else entirely, a woman who has as little interest in childbirth and marital fidelity as Plath's sisters, telling Chamilly that her only remaining use for him is sexual. Lopes's enduring interest in her may have less to do with her monastic existence than with the way that Alcoforado was able to have love without the "Life" that Dickinson so readily rejected, despite the pain she suffered in abandonment. The path that could have led her past desire and into marriage disappeared with her lover and she was thus spared a standard domestic resolution. Alcoforado continues her address, proposing an alternative arrangement that better suits her needs:

Ficas no  
 castelo de Beja  
 e eu aqui  
 no convento  
 com vento  
 (as janelas  
 fecham mal  
 estão empenadas)  
 há uma passagem  
 subterrânea  
 como nos romances  
 que liga  
 castelo e convento  
 podemos fechá-la (31-44)

[You stay  
 at the castle of Beja  
 and I here  
 in the convent  
 with the wind  
 (the windows  
 close badly  
 they are warped)  
 there is a subterranean  
 passage  
 as in novels  
 that connects  
 castle and convent  
 we can close it]

Perhaps the reckless intensity with which Alcoforado addressed Chamilly in her letters was made possible by the fact that a life with him was never a tenable possibility, by the luxury of living with a myth instead of a man. Lopes would like to believe that if she had ever been faced with the thing she most desired, the return of her lover, Alcoforado most likely would have rejected a conventional life with him. She would have chosen instead to have separate homes, a passageway that she could open and close at her will and loose-fitting windows that held all the insinuated possibilities of Dickinson's "door ajar."

Even prior to this drastic modification of character Lopes found much to admire in Guilleragues's work. Though her sexual desires have already been fulfilled, her unanswered letters hold her life in the state of suspension that so much of Lopes's aspires to. Alcoforado writes in her second letter to Chamilly,

I see very plainly the remedy for all my ills, and I should soon be delivered from them if I no longer loved you. But alas! What a remedy! No, I would rather suffer still more than forget you. (59)

It seems that Alcoforado is more in love with her own suffering than with the man she suffers for, or as Nietzsche wrote, "In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired" (93). The desire to sustain a sensation rather

than allowing it to pass is a sensibility that Alcoforado explains in her fifth letter as she contemplates the return of all the portraits and bracelets that Chamilly has given her, writing, “I shall enjoy all the pain of parting from them and cause you at least some chagrin” (119). Lopes complicates this moment in a poem from the first collection that the *Lettres Portugaises* [*Portuguese Letters*] inspired, *O Marquês de Chamilly (Kabale und Liebe)* [*The Marquis of Chamilly (Kabale and Liebe)*], explaining how Alcoforado,

Tira do braço o bracelete  
 Que o marquês lhe deu  
 Para poder voltar a enfiar  
 No braço o bracelete (93)

[Takes from her arm the bracelet  
 That the Marquis gave her  
 So that she may slip the bracelet  
 Back on her arm]

Whereas Alcoforado merely expressed a desire to enjoy the return of the bracelets, Lopes allows her to enjoy their receipt and return in a cyclical fashion, and the image of a bracelet that is taken on and off perpetually is a physical manifestation of the suspension that Alcoforado claims to desire.

Protected from her desires by barred windows and unanswered letters, however, Alcoforado was able to commit herself to the greatest excesses of expression, exclaiming, “amo-te perdidamente.”<sup>3</sup> The contextual translation of this utterance is “I love you desperately,” but the most literal translation of “perdidamente” is “in a manner pertaining to loss,” and the implication of its use is that love is bound irrevocably to loss, whether it be the loss of the self or the loss of the loved one. Florbela Espanca paraphrases Alcoforado’s words in the first stanza of her sonnet “Amar”:

Eu quero amar, amar perdidamente  
 Amar só por amar: Aqui... além...  
 Mais Este e Aquele, o Outro e a toda a gente  
 Amar! Amar! E não amar ninguém! (134)

[I want to love, to love and lose everything  
 Love only to love: Here... there...  
 And This and That, the Other and everyone  
 To love! To love! And not love anyone]

Espanca capitalizes the abstract recipients of love, “This,” “That,” and the “Other,” while refusing to love anyone or anything specific; love becomes its own ends and need not narrow its scope by focusing upon any one object. In reference to Alcoforado’s predicament, the loss of a lover is inconsequential because one’s love should not be measured against the response it draws; it is not subject to relativity. For Adília Lopes, however, everything is defined according to its reference points because nothing holds any objective value. In writing a poem that responds to Espanca’s “Amar,” Lopes systematically defines the references and relations that shape the body of her work. Justifying the title of the collection that it commences, *Floribela Espanca Espanca*, Lopes’s untitled poem is a reversal of the desperate love that Espanca borrowed from Guilleragues. Rather than altering content contextually as she did when she used the verse of Camões, Lopes rewrites Espanca word by word, keeping only her diction intact. Exchanging the sonnet for free verse, love for sex and loss for discovery, Lopes writes, “Quero foder foder / achadamente” [“I want to fuck to fuck / and find everything”]. If Espanca and Alcoforado saw love as a vehicle for loss, including the loss of one’s connection to the object of that love, then Lopes defines “foder” as the very opposite of such a love, as a means of defining one’s self in relation to the specific connections one makes with one’s own work and with others. The body of Lopes’s work, based primarily upon the velocity of intention, is written against the idea of love for its own sake, an arrow released without a target. This poem reiterates her insistence upon the fact that one’s life and art exist relatively, defined by material proximities, interpersonal relationships, historical reference and canonical allusion. Lopes sets up the parameters of the revolution that this poem seeks to define by addressing all the other revolutions that might come to mind, continuing,

se esta revolução  
 não me deixa  
 foder até morrer  
 é porque

não é revolução  
 nenhuma  
 a revolução não se faz  
 nas praças  
 nem nos palácios  
 (essa é a revolução  
 dos fariseus) (3-14)

[if this revolution  
 doesn't let me  
 fuck until I die  
 it's because  
 it isn't a revolution  
 at all  
 the revolution  
 doesn't happen  
 in the plazas  
 or in the palaces  
 (that's the revolution  
 of the Pharisees)]

Lopes uses the word “revolution” four times before she reaches a definition that suits her. She insists that the revolution let her “fuck until [she dies],” implying a sexual revolution that the poem does not directly address. She then explains that the revolution does not take place in plazas or palaces, eliminating its political connotations by alluding to the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974, and parenthetically negates the concept of a biblical revolution by referencing the Pharisees. Instead of drawing connections, this section of the poem seeks to undo connections by introducing a concept, deciding upon the response she wants to elicit from her reader, and erasing alternatives through a system of announcement and dismissal. After cataloging these rejected associations she is able to address her own revolution:

A revolução  
 Faz-se na casa de banho  
 Da casa  
 Da escola

Do trabalho  
 A relação entre  
 As pessoas  
 Deve ser uma troca  
 Hoje é um relação de poder  
 (mesmo no foder) (15-25)  
 [The revolution  
 happens in the bathroom  
 of the house  
 at school  
 at work  
 relations between  
 people  
 should be an exchange  
 today it's a relation  
 of power  
 (even fucking)]

This is a revolution that is personal rather than political, having more to do with one's individual relationships to people and to society than with one's alignment with any group of revolutionaries, regardless of cause or context. Situating the revolution in the domestic realm of the bathroom and then claiming that relations between people, sexual relations included, have become power struggles, the implied conclusion is that this revolution will deal with the issues that exist between the sexes. But apt as always to work against her readers' expectations, Lopes has moved far beyond gender issues; the remainder of the poem focuses primarily on the interactions between women:

a ceifeira ceifa  
 contente  
 ceifa nos tempos livres  
 (semana de 24 x 7 horas já!)  
 a gestora avalia  
 a empresa  
 pela casa de banho  
 e canta

contente  
 porque há alegria  
 no trabalho  
 o choro da bebé  
 não impede a mãe  
 de se vir  
 a galinha brinca  
 com a raposa  
 eu tenho o direito  
 de estar triste (26-43)

[the reaper reaps  
 happy  
 she reaps in her free time  
 (24 hours a day and 7 days a week now!)  
 the manager evaluates  
 the company  
 by the state of the bathroom  
 and sings  
 happy  
 because there is joy  
 in her work  
 the child's cry  
 doesn't stop the mother  
 from coming  
 the hen plays  
 with the vixen  
 I have a right  
 to be sad]

This reaper is taken from the Fernando Pessoa poem that begins:

Ela canta, pobre ceifeira  
 Julgando-se feliz talvez (86)

She sings, poor reaper  
 Believing, perhaps, that she is happy

As the poem continues, Pessoa grants his reaper the dubious contentment that a lack of awareness facilitates but the true measure of her happiness is an inconsequential unknown. Lopes argues that the reaper's happiness is not merely illusory, that a woman's relationship with her work is reason enough to be content. In the context of the Lopes poem, the reaper is so engaged by her work that the boundaries between work and leisure disappear; she chooses to work in her free time and reaps of her own volition rather than out of obligation. Lopes' assertion of her free will undermines Pessoa's assumption that the reaper may only be happy because she lacks the capacity to realize that she is not. By conceiving of a reaper that seeks to reform Pessoa's image, Lopes initiates a relationship with the poet that can nearly be construed as the type of power struggle that she earlier rejects. But Lopes' reaper issues no complaint; the reference to Pessoa is delivered without contempt and makes its point without effectively presenting a challenge. Furthermore, the lines that follow present women that are sufficiently content in the roles they play and the relationships they maintain; the manager inspects the bathrooms, the mother is unperturbed by the cries of her child, even the hen and the vixen are able to peacefully coexist despite their natural roles as predator and prey. Illustrating a wide variety of women, all happy in their various relationships, and then claiming that she has "a right to be sad," Lopes presents yet another incomplete syllogism. If happiness stems from the success of one's relationships, then the sadness to which Lopes feels entitled exposes her recognition of the fact that the connections she ventures fail to take hold.

Whether by conjuring the voices of her influences, alluding to mythical figures or by relying on formal and contextual devices to keep her narratives from reaching their conclusions, Lopes establishes a system of approximation that permeates her work. Yet any approximation is by definition a failure, doomed as an extended metaphor because it always falls just short of its intentions. However successful Lopes's poems are in aesthetic terms, the relationships that they define are flawed by her refusal to allow any situation its resolution. The closest she comes to marriage is engagement, to certainty, insinuation; even the allusive efforts to connect with such writers as Dickinson, Espanca, and Pessoa, though effective in establishing her position in the continuity of world literature, are intrinsically unsatisfying; any attempted dialogue with the dead is essentially a monologue, a litany to use



Lopes's own terminology. Even more indicative than her pursuit of an art that reveals its weaknesses by approximating its subjects is the requisite tension that such a pursuit creates, the rift between proposal and actualization that has become the most definitive aspect of Lopes's work.

In the Author's Note that follows "O Regresso de Chamilly," Lopes argues,

Acho que era a Sylvia Plath que estava convencida, por volta de 1950, que para escrever romances era preciso ter amantes e fazer viagens. É um mito, isso dos amantes e das viagens. Pode-se ser feliz e escrever romances sem ter amantes e sem fazer viagens. Mais importante que amantes e viagens é ter um espaço próprio, um domínio, um território, uma casa, pelo menos um quarto com privacidade, como muito bem viu Virginia Woolf. (463)

[I think it was Sylvia Plath that was convinced, from 1950 on, that to write novels it was necessary to have lovers and to travel. It's a myth, that about lovers and travel. One can be happy and write novels without having lovers or traveling. More important than lovers and travel is having one's own space, a dominion, a territory, a house, at the very least a room of one's own, as Virginia Woolf knew well.]

The juxtaposition of Woolf and Plath is a measure of extremes: Lopes weighs solitude against wanderlust, the word against the flesh, the art that precludes life against the life lived in pursuit of one's art. Considering the women that populate her poems, her alignment with Woolf seems an obvious stance. In rhetorical terms, however, Lopes does not judge Plath's opinion on the basis of its merits; she rejects it because the idea of needing lovers and travel in order to write "is a myth." Quick to dismiss Plath's claim, Lopes counters it with an even more established myth, the myth of the self-appointed exile, a myth that has become the foundation for so much of her work. For Lopes, to be a poet is to write within the space between the locked door and the door swung open, to situate one's art within the boundaries that these two myths designate. In the end it makes little difference which polarity holds the greater value, which myth is worth perpetrating. The choice for Lopes is no longer whether or not to approximate a myth; she has only to decide which myth to approximate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Though the poem has been translated here in the first person, English grammar does not allow for the aspect of ambiguity that is implicit in the Portuguese version. The poem could just as easily be translated in the third person, and furthermore, does not contain any indication of gender. The poem “Emily Dickinson” is in fact one half of a diptych; the other half is a poem entitled “São João da Cruz” [“Saint John of the Cross”], and is identical to “Emily Dickinson” in all aspects save the title. While I have chosen to focus here upon the allusion to Dickinson, it must be noted that Lopes is clearly addressing issues of similitude and difference, contrasting the first person with the third, the masculine with the feminine, and the sacred with the profane.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres Portugaises* was originally published in 1668. Mariana Alcoforado, a young woman who was indeed a nun at the convent in Beja, was once supposed the author of these letters. Alcoforado maintains a mythical presence in Portuguese literary and cultural history, but the letters have been attributed to Guilleragues. The English quotations have been taken from the first translation of the original French, an edition that was wrongly attributed to Alcoforado herself.

<sup>3</sup> The original French text is, “Je vous aime éperdument” (156). The English translation reads “I love you to distraction,” while the above quoted “amo-te perdidamente” is found commonly in unattributed translations from French to Portuguese.

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