

An example worth following: Anglofilia in *A casa verde* by Júlia Lopes de Almeida

Júlia Lopes de Almeida (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1863-1934) was a writer who was only been rediscovered since the 1980¹ by feminist literary scholars who started republishing her works through the publisher Editorial de Mulheres. However, at the peak of her fame, she was a highly respected novelist and essayist, who, according to her husband, the Portuguese poet Felinto de Almeida, was not included into the Brazilian Academy of Letters because of her gender. In this talk I will focus on *A casa verde* (1932) a novel written with her husband, that had first appeared in the newspaper *Jornal do Comércio* in 1898 and 1899 under the pseudonym A. Julinto. Although by no means indicative of the quality of her best work –the novel is a disorganised potboiler with an impossible plot- I hope to illustrate through my reading the peculiar blend of racial and feminist ideas that are typical of late nineteenth elite feminists in Latin America.

Mary Louise Pratt² has argued that discourses by the late nineteenth century female public intellectuals should be read through the theoretical prism of Latin American racial positivist ideologies, in which female subordination was justified because of women's supposedly biological and intellectual inferiority. Although, as Pratt argues, various lettered women were widely read and respected in their own time, they always had to speak as women, never directly defying male privileges.

¹ About the change in Júlia Lopes de Almeida's literary reputation, see Peggy Sharpe, "O caminho crítico d'A viúva Simões"; Nadilza M. de B. Moreira's "Júlia Lopes de Almeida: a mulher, a escritora, a escrita" in *A condição feminina revisitada: Júlia Lopes de Almeida e Kate Chopin*. João Pessoa: Ed. Universitária, 2003.

² Mary Louise Pratt. "No me interrumpas": las mujeres y el ensayo latinoamericano. (trad: Gabriela Cano) en *Debate feminista, fragmentos y proposiciones* 11:21 (2000) 70-90.

Herself a daughter of Portuguese immigrants, throughout her career, Júlia Lopes de Almeida was constantly looking for new paths that women could follow in order to help Brazil become a “modern “and “civilized” country. Rejecting deterministic theories on the inferiority of women, Lopes de Almeida throughout her works always insists in the correlation between the ills of society and the crisis of gender roles. Almeida was a genius in combining the image of the bourgeois dutiful housewife with that of a professional writer who was much better known and respected than her husband. She cleverly never addressed “male” issues, but preferred to speak to a supposedly female audience, whether in her conduct manuals or essays or novels. In “Um lar de artistas” [an artists’ home] journalist João do Rio describes in great detail the atmosphere of a happy bourgeois family home, living in “um *cottage* admirável, construído entre as árvores seculares da estrada de Santa Teresa”. Although the journalist is full of admiration for her work, she presents herself, first and foremost, a dutiful wife and mother: “Mas não há meio de esquecer a casa. Ora entra uma criada a fazer perguntas, ora é uma das crianças que chora. Às vezes não posso absolutamente sentar-me cinco minutos...”

In the same interview, she mentions her favourite novel is *A Casa Verde* “porque foi escrito de colaboração com meu marido. *A Casa Verde* lembra-me uma porção de momentos felizes...” Few critics would agree with this assessment. Compared to her best works, such as *Memórias de Marta* [*Marta’s Memories*, 1889 reprinted 2008] about a young girl growing up in a cortiço in Rio de Janeiro, *A intrusa* [*The Intruder*, 1908, reprinted 1994] about a much maligned governess, *A falência* [*The Bankruptcy*, 1901

reprinted 1978], about the bankruptcy and suicide of a wealthy businessman and the impact on his family, *A família Medeiros* [*The Medeiros Family*, 1892], an abolitionist novel, and *A viúva Simões* [*The Widow Simões* 1897, reprinted 1997], the story of a love affair of a young widow who did not love her deceased husband, all of which are excellent works that deserve a much wider readership and translations, *A casa verde* is clearly a minor work, apparently often written in great haste and apparently intended to earn some money for the quickly diminishing finances of the family.

A casa verde was published in 1932, although she had written it in weekly installments with her husband under the pseudonym A. Julinto for the newspaper *Jornal do Comércio* in 1898 and 1899. By 1932, however, literary tastes had changed and Francisco Alves, her previous publisher, was no longer interested in her work. The family had fallen on economically hard times and Almeida published it herself, unsuccessfully trying to turn the tide and earn some money³. In many ways, *A casa verde* seems to be all that Almeida despised, a “*romance de folhetim*” with spectacular plot twists, a female protagonist that disobeys her father, exotic gypsies and an outrageous villain. Almeida’s pecuniary difficulties and the collaboration with her husband, who was a poet and not a novelist, probably explain the lack of literary quality of the work as well as her betrayal of her literary convictions. However, I hope to show that a closer reading reveals that the clashing discourses and the sloppy, “unfinished” plot highlight contradictions in racial and gender assumptions of the period she wrote in.

³ Oral communication by Nadilza Moreira made at the BRASA conference at Tulane University, March 29, 2008. Moreira is currently examining the family archive in Rio de Janeiro owned by Almeida’s grandson Carlos de Almeida and is preparing a biography of Almeida.

A constant theme in all of Almeida's writings is the poor education women receive within a patriarchal family, thus resulting in the inability of Brazilian women to be a proper wife and mother of a healthy family (Sharpe, 20). Almeida wanted to transform these frivolous and useless women into domestic partners that would be able to help their husbands in time of need, or indeed, be able to work for a living if required. Writing against the stereotype of the indolent, ignorant and extremely sentimental bourgeois woman, such as exemplified by Estela in *O cortiço*, Almeida argues that the Estelas of this world could improve if they were given the chance to receive a proper education and given serious, morally uplifting things to read instead of silly French novels.

As in most of Almeida's novels, *A casa verde* deals with a family, a house and a process of finding a suitable partner. Jeffrey Needell has made the clear connection between neocolonialism and this idealization of French and British cultures (126). *A casa verde* deals with the story of the Lane family: Mr. Lane, an English businessman and widower, his daughter Mary, the French governess Mademoiselle Girard and the Brazilian nurse Rita. Through the protagonist and heroine, Mary Lane, a mix of tropical Bahia and "Englishness", Almeida describes a utopian project in which national identity could be harmonized with national progress.

The title of the novel is also the name of a house, called Casa verde, a ruin in Niterói, back then still a small rural community north of Rio de Janeiro, that Mr. Lane bought and renovated and where he decided to live. By naming the novel after the house the domestic character of the work is highlighted, but for Almeida house and nation are

closely connected. According to Mr. Lane himself, who calls the house Green House in spite of his excellent command of Portuguese, family life is far more important than society: “[A] sociedade estraga os homens e avilta as mulheres. Só em casa, no aconchego da família, nos gozos simples, em que entram mais os exercícios materiais do que as preocupações fúteis que a vaidade sugere, se ampliam e aprofundam sentimentos nobres e que dão à consciência grande soma de benefícios” (139). If we look at the domestic house as a laboratory for possible change⁴, it becomes apparent that Almeida is commenting on Brazil in a period when rapid economic and social changes led to feelings of insecurity. By focusing on the moral rectitude of Mr. Lane, she often suggests England is an example worthy to be imitated, however, as I will show, it is only through the biracial daughter that this potential can be fully realized.

In her study on the British in Brazil, Louise Guenther mentions initially there was merely a male presence of merchants and traders who were said to often have “highly irregular” personal lives. Later on, however, they were allowed to bring spouses and Anglican churches, thus initiating the development of a recognizably British community. The community’s child-raising practices were similar to those of British expatriate communities elsewhere, in that those who could afford to send their children to boarding schools in Britain often did so. Nevertheless, several of these children returned as adults to live in Bahia. Daughters, in particular, may have preferred to live in Bahia rather than return permanently to Britain since young English ladies often enjoyed more social

⁴ Sônia Roncador correctly observes that , “o lar ... é um laboratório de formação do caráter nobre dos futuros homens e mulheres de bem da nação” See “O demônio familiar: lavadeiras, amas-de-leite e criadas na narrativa de Júlia Lopes de Almeida.” 94.

prestige within the expatriate community, compared to what they might expect in the home country.⁵

A certain doctor, Robert Dundas believed that the British body could not healthily sustain a residence of more than five to seven years in Bahia, and noted that the problem was especially severe for females. According to Dundas, British women became physically ill in Bahia at a higher rate than British men. He found this noticeable enough to treat it a separate section of his book, which he entitled “European Females in Tropical Climates:” This unexpected result must, I apprehend, be accounted for by the more indolent habits and mode of life of the former, favoured, if not altogether induced, by the languour inseparable from high temperature, sanctioned by the prevailing customs in most tropical climates, where household occupations are not attended to as in Europe, where fashion or custom precludes the enjoyment of active exercise abroad, and where even mental exertion is to some extent laborious...⁶ If Almeida did not actually read this book, she was definitely familiar with similar ideas and they caused her to regard Great Britain⁷, more than France, as a healthy example for Brazil to follow. The lives of actual British women in Brazil seem to have been seriously idealized by Almeida; according to Guenther, however, in many ways British women had fewer liberties than elite Brazilian women. While the latter were required to stay at home almost all of the time, they were at least able to wear light, loose clothing; this the British women could not do; Guenther

⁵ Louise Guenther: “The British Community of 19th Century Bahia: Public and Private Lives.”

⁶ Robert Dundas, *Sketches of Brazil, Including New Views on Tropical and European Fever with Remarks on a Premature Decay of the System Incident to Europeans on Their Return from Hot Climates*. London: John Churchill, 1852. Quoted in Guenther, 20.

⁷ In *A viúva Simões*, Sara, the daughter/rival of her mother is partly German, in *A família Medeiros* the heroine, Eva, is educated in German. The results for Almeida are the same; healthy athletic women who are not afraid of hard work and are capable of combining physical beauty with intelligence.

mentions how Maria Graham's⁸ comments on the indecency of Brazilian women's house clothes illustrate this restriction. Wearing tight clothes all day long, and unable to pursue the physical, mental and social activities which presumably would have kept them at least as healthy as the men, it is no wonder that British women, unlike Mary Lane, frequently fell ill. In essence, they were paying in their bodies the price of keeping up the behavioral demands of both British and Brazilian society.

In *A casa verde*, Mary Lane is without doubt the heroine, but in spite of her physical beauty, not as attractive as might be expected. Mary is, in a sense, created by her father, without any female input. “[Mr. Lane] não era homem de sentimentalidades e procurara por isso mesmo dar à filha uma educação libérrima, fazendo-a praticar a ginastica, natação, exercicios a pé e a cavalo a par dos estudos de musica, de desenho, historia natural e de linguas, que eram a seu ver, esteios magnificos para lhe ampararem a imaginação latina... (23) However, for uneducated Brazilians, Mary often seems unsympathetic, even rude: “A originalidade do seu tipo e o seu modo aparentemente frio e concentrado faziam-na parecer antipatica às pessoas vulgares ... Como o seu tipo, a sua alma era modelada pela influencia de duas raças fundidas. Impeto e reflexão; obstinação e piedade; independencia e meiguice” (8-9)

⁸ Maria Graham, née Dundas, afterwards Lady Calcott. *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil, and Residence There during Part of the Years 1821, 1822, 1823*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824. Maria Graham was the 36 year old wife of a British naval officer, who was assigned to patrol the ports of Brazil during the independence battles of Brazil. She has been described by Gilberto Freyre as one of the most perspicacious of social observers, and was also politically astute and interested in women's issues. *Journal* 135-142, Quoted in Guenther, 21.

The education her father gives her, inspired by hygienic beliefs, is apparently in conflict with this Latin imagination, which for the widower is a mere “rede vulgar de preconceitos, superstições, fanatismos e vaidades” (23). Lane wants his daughter to be strong and independent, not vulgar, vain and superstitious. That is why he makes her do sports, “ [para]fortificar o corpo, torna-lo agil, independente, activo e belo (...) Assim como o seu corpo, ele sabia, ou julgava saber, que era o espirito da filha um espírito forte e perfeito” (140).

However, Mary is not British, but *mestiça*; Anglosaxon and Latina at the same time. Caught in between two cultures she is subjected to constant misreadings by others, her father as well as the community in Niterói, but seems to be a very clear reader herself. Her Brazilian heritage, although barely mentioned through the figure of Mr. Lanes anonymous wife, will show itself in other ways and enable her to better comprehend her surroundings than her father ever will.

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong suggest that the mother's surveillance within the family exerts a form of social control; to reframe this in Foucauldian terms, the mother plays the role of panopticon within the family. Thus the mother's imposition of convention and quietude within the narrative opposes the need of the narrative for deviance and instability. Mary's mother is dead and indeed, is not even named. Without her mother's absence, Mary would have had to face conflicts of loyalty between her parents and been forced to make a choice. Now, motherless, she will have to learn how to interpret her *mestiça* reality and clarify the multiple meanings of Casa verde/Green House before she will be able to start her own family. In other words: had

Mary had a strong mother to protect her from the villainous Guilherme Boston, or to dissuade her from her erroneous decision to keep up with the façade of her father's vision of Brazil, there would have been no story to tell.

It is made clear from the beginning that the Casa-verde/Green house means different things to different people – the inhabitants of Niterói remember it as the scene of a brutal murder of an innocent woman hung by her insane husband; for a group of gypsies it means easy access to financial gain, as they plan to rob it; for Mr. Lane it is a charming country home. Thus the house itself becomes a space in-between cultures and cannot simply be seen as the civilizing element in the Brazilian landscape, like Mr. Lane believes. Casa verde/Green House is the point where all paths cross and it is the main goal of the villain. Thus, the house, called both green house and casa verde, is not just the mark of the colonizers, a nucleus of civilization and culture in a largely “backward” but rather a palimpsest where alternate realities compete. It is clear from the start that Mary is the only one who is able to read all the different meanings the house. She happily exchanges her grandparents' home in Salvador for her father's one in Niterói and is the only one that understands the elegant and tasteful renovations, however, she also hears the comments of her rather frivolous French governess, who prefers to see the “romantic” aspect of the dwelling and the comments of Rita, her maid from Bahia, who dislikes anything that is not from Bahia. Mary Lane is the one who invites the nun Pompéia, and eventually Guilherme Boston, who was using the gypsies to try to get inside.

Mary discovers that her father's reading of the house as a safe haven is naive and incorrect when she accidentally shoots a gypsy boy who was hidden in the large fig tree

in the garden waiting for an opportunity to break into the house. The sexual symbolism is evident: she innocently shoots with a bow into a fig tree to kill an owl that was bothering her father and all of a sudden a boy comes falling out. Mary decides she will keep him in her “quarto de virgem” and thus initiates her own reading of her space, a reading that is haunted by an unwanted sexual knowledge and too weak and illegal to be allowed to become public . As Daniel Serravalle de Sá puts it, from this point of view, the gothic constitutes a response to a disquietude; a reaction that takes place when we are pushed beyond familiar cultural limits. Order might immediately be called in again, Mary gets home to her fathers house and pretends nothing has ever happened, but the gothic will remain as a seed of uncertainty lodged in the foundation of Reason.

Her father’s sense of security is not to be violated, Mary decides, but she becomes increasingly aware of the conservative inhabitants of Niteroi and their gossip about the Lane’s protestantism. Her own father misreads her when he mistakes her anxiety for homesickness and wants to send her to Rio de Janeiro. Only three people will know Mary’s true story: the French governess and Rita, the maid from Bahia, neither of them strong readers. It is the only the third character, the handsome doctor Eduardo Abrantes, who will need have access to her room in order to take care of the gypsy, who learns to “read” her correctly and help her solve the mystery of Luis Ulka, the gypsy boy.

The union between the *mestiça* and the doctor is an obvious one, yet the father, unable to read the local context, has set his mind on the villain of the novel, the Irish-Brazilian Guilherme Boston, as his son-in-law. Mary, a much more intelligent reader,

immediately feels that she cannot trust him and the reader soon discovers, through the dramatic tale of the innocent Laurinda, that under his apparent domesticity, Boston is a wicked villain seducing and abandoning innocent and defenseless girls.

The traditional equation between the body and the social corpus was linked to social Darwinism, eugenics, sexology, all parts of the metaphoric discourse in which the physical body symbolized the social body, and physical and social disorder stood for social discord and danger. This ascribes a certain virility to doctors, who will be suitable spouses because they understand the female body. Thus, the physician's scrutiny and the lover's gaze become one. With such high stakes for masculinity the profession is transformed into spousal covenant when the physician becomes an expert on love. Doctors are established as the norm against which any deviance is measured. The final marriage between Mary and the doctor is celebrated as the fusion and mutual invigoration of two different cultures.