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Ana Margarida Dias Martins
University of Cambridge

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Novas Cartas Portuguesas: The Making of a Reputation

Ana Margarida Dias Martins, University of Cambridge

Abstract: *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters*), co-authored by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa, was banned in 1972 in Portugal for exploring sensitive issues such as women's oppression under the Catholic patriarchy. Given that police action against the authors soon became the focus of an international feminist protest in 1972-73, existing discussions of the book's reception often focus almost exclusively on what may be called its political life. I propose to approach the book from a new angle, with the purpose of uncovering its theoretical dimension as a literary-critical text that may have played an important role in helping to shape feminist intellectual directions of the 1970s. Specifically, I analyze how a general insistence on the political life of *Novas Cartas* contributed to marginalizing the work on a theoretical level, transforming it into a "strange" (Ahmed) textual body out of place. In a manner similar to what would later happen to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector as a result of Hélène Cixous's feminist sponsorship of her work, this marginalization helped define the boundaries of "international feminism" as opposed to "Portuguese anti-fascism," according to a conception of the Lusophone cultural sphere as an anachronistic feminine space for political action, entirely disconnected from the centers where feminist theory is made.

Keywords: *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, Barreno (Maria Isabel), Horta (Maria Teresa), Velho da Costa (Maria), Three Marias, second-wave feminism, international feminism, Lispector (Clarice), Cixous (Hélène)

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No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself.
—bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance"

De nós se utiliza quem a nós nos quer e a quem parecendo consentir utilizamos.
(We use those who want us by seemingly allowing them to use us.)
—Barreno, Horta, and Velho da Costa, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*

Introduction: On Silence and Falling Rain

The aim of this paper is to lay the groundwork for an investigation of the historical, cultural, and theoretical legacies of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters*), co-authored by Portuguese writers Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa.¹ When the "Three Marias," as they came to be known, published this book in 1972, they were prosecuted by the Portuguese police for daring to write outside of the prescribed morality. When the international solidarity campaigners took up the authors' cause, they assigned the three women to the political realm of feminist solidarity politics for daring to write outside of (mainstream) theory. The story of *Novas Cartas* is one of impending arrests and great bailouts, followed by silence and falling rain—the kind of silence and rain that fall on segregated edges of the world often "liberated" by someone else's theory. Indeed, one of the grim consequences of this book's astounding

international success was that, although it remained important in the political context of international feminist solidarity, it failed to enter the feminist canon of theory texts in Europe and the US. The theoretical richness of *Novas Cartas*, convincingly defended by critical voices (Amaral; Kauffman; Klobucka 2000; Owen 1992, 1995, 1999, and 2000; Owen and Pazos Alonso), reflected the familiarity of the authors with various feminist discourses of the time. However, it was sidestepped by the privileged discourse of others—from Portugal and beyond—who spoke *for* the Three Marias. This tendency confirms the extent to which the exceptional political support enjoyed by the authors came at the expense of another kind of recognition (theoretical). It is fair to say today, with forty years' hindsight, that the renowned international scholars who publicly defended *Novas Cartas*, the Three Marias, and their publisher during the international solidarity campaign (between 1972 and 1974) never explicitly incorporated this text into their own theoretical and critical work.² This article sets out to address the reasons why this was so. What was it that prevented international legitimization of *Novas Cartas* as a feminist theoretical work of reference?

In attempting to answer this question, I shall take as a point of comparison another famous Portuguese literary voice, that of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, whose international rise to stardom was also due to international feminist sponsorship, namely through the involvement of the champion of *écriture féminine*, Hélène Cixous, in the diffusion of Lispector's texts. The manner in which Lispector's writing was perceived, after 1978, as *illustrating* the theoretical insights of Cixous bears resemblance to the way in which, some years earlier, the Three Marias' case had been seen as creating "the spontaneous combustion that *energised* the Women's Movement" (Gillespie 23; my emphasis). The appropriation of *Novas Cartas* as a symbol for sisterhood in the 1970s set a precedent of Lusophone theoretical assimilation via international feminist sponsorship, which was later reproduced when the work of Lispector started to be seen as providing the vessel for Cixous's theoretical voice. As pointed out by Morag Schiach, Cixous "is not talking about the real Clarice Lispector, a Brazilian left-wing modernist writer who died in 1977, but rather exploring the power of Lispector as a symbol" (161).

Cixous's imperative of faithfulness toward the "other" text of Lispector, incisively deconstructed by Anna Klobucka in "Hélène Cixous and the Hour of Clarice Lispector," was dependent on "the Brazilian writer's becoming assimilated by the models created by the very 'metropolitan' voice which finds in her a source of its own renewal" (51). To Klobucka, Lispector's otherness was not respected by Cixous and other commentators who misread her complexity in the name of a feminine writing that turned out to be more of an "écriture-miroir" (writing as a mirror) than an "écriture-fenêtre" (writing as a window). Lispector had to be reinvented as French in order to truly become mother for Cixous (Klobucka 1994, 47). A similar process was at work in the appropriation of the Three Marias by international feminism, since they also had to be reinvented as one universal woman in order to truly become sisters for second-wave feminists.

In bringing together these two cases of transnational monologue disguised as intertextual dialogue, I am aware that there were important differences in the processes of legitimization and assimilation of the textual otherness of Lispector and the Three Marias by international feminists. For example, *Novas Cartas* became very popular internationally well before it was translated from the Portuguese, whereas in the case of Lispector it was the translation and interpretation of her texts by one individual that triggered the mass popularity of the author and her fiction beyond the Brazilian and Latin American borders. Also, Lispector's case seems to be exceptional in terms of the intensity of the institutional support her work received from Cixous. In the case of *Novas Cartas*, their astounding international following, which cannot be limited to any one feminist theoretical trend, was mostly articulated in political, rather than theoretical, terms. If there ever was, outside Portugal, careful understanding and theoretical engagement with *Novas Cartas*

by second-wave feminists, such engagement has been significantly obscured, largely at the expense of the Three Marias' autonomous theoretical standing.

The above-mentioned differences were no doubt influential in setting out two distinct ways of attending to Lispector's and the Three Marias' literary and theoretical transgressions. The collective writing activity in which the Three Marias engaged challenged the assumptions of authorship that were, and still are, central to literary criticism. By not signing their letters, for instance, the Three Marias radically challenged the conventions of a text's maternity well before "Gilbert-and-Gubar" became shorthand for one kind of feminist scholarship.³ This may explain why, in their case, the premise of absolute reciprocity was quickly (from 1974 onwards) substituted by anachronism as the official metaphor signifying the otherness of their collectively authored book, whereas the textual relationship between Cixous and Lispector continues to offer insights to feminist criticism.⁴

The metaphor of anachronism used by Anglo-American critics to describe *Novas Cartas* was responsible for resignifying the text as a kind of border between a supposedly static European margin and a forward-looking center. For example, in February 1975, the *Washington Post* published a review of *New Portuguese Letters* titled "Alien Porn" by William McPherson, who observed: "That women have been oppressed, and may be especially oppressed in macho Latin cultures, is no longer news sufficient to justify a book" (139).⁵ Hence the appearance of published translations of this book could be seen as modifying what was being appropriated: if, until 1974, second-wave feminists fetishized the book as a symbol of unity, cutting it off from its historical, political, and literary Portuguese context, afterwards it was the text as a "strange" body out of place that was objectified and distanced from theoretical developments of mainstream feminisms in Europe and the US. Also implicated in this story was the emergence of a Portuguese non-feminist discourse on the text, exemplified by the Three Marias' public split in May 1974, and, among other examples, by Helder Macedo's review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which represented a reaction to the book's appropriation by international feminist solidarity politics. As I shall argue, this discourse, which highlighted *Novas Cartas* as strictly Portuguese, played an important role in molding international perceptions of the book's supposed (temporal and geopolitical) out-of-placeness.

Using the example of intertextual "dialogue" with Lispector as a comparative case, this article aims to map the role of international and Portuguese readerships in the process of resignification of *Novas Cartas*, which may be best described as a movement between an inside, when it was taken as a symbol of reciprocal exchange, and an outside, when it became synonymous with temporal and geopolitical out-of-placeness. The reason why my task here is a complicated one is that, until now, most readers of *Novas Cartas* have comfortably kept both eyes either on the book's appropriation by international feminism or on its specifically Portuguese roots and anti-fascist tone. By attempting to approach the book's international reception from a new angle, I wish to deal with the difficulties inherent in challenging the authority of established ways of reading the value of this work of literature and theory, whilst simultaneously discussing its importance without making use of the very much established canonical standards whose theoretical contours have been defined by the mapping of *Novas Cartas* as an "uninhabitable" book. With this essay, therefore, I am not asking, on behalf of the Three Marias, for "a piece of the pie" (Spivak 46) of canonical feminist discourse. Instead, I aim to describe some of the mechanisms of discrimination at work in the readings of *Novas Cartas* that have been responsible for the articulation of the asymmetrical relation between the political and the theoretical.

My use of the word "strange" in reference to *Novas Cartas* is informed by the work of Sarah Ahmed on "strangers" and "strangeness." Thinking through feminism, the critic conceptualizes these notions

by analyzing the fetishization of the stranger in the contemporary Western world. In her “Embodying Strangers,” Ahmed defines strange bodies as “bodies that are unliveable in so far as they are already recognisable as bodies out of place” (94). It is informative to quote her definition at length here:

Strange bodies are precisely those bodies that are temporarily assimilated as the unassimilable within the encounter: they function as the border that defines both the space into which the familiar body ... cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself at home. Hence the strange body is constructed through a process of expulsion—a movement between inside and outside which renders that the stranger’s body has already touched the surface of the skin which appears to contain the body-at-home. (95)

Drawing on Ahmed’s work, I will attempt, in the following sections, to describe and unsettle two established ways of reading *Novas Cartas* as a strange textual body out of place. The first section will address acts of non-reading or fragmentary reading as the common way in which the international audience first got in touch with the book. So far, and apart from a few notable exceptions, the international impact of *Novas Cartas* has been measured in Portugal by focusing on the supposedly negative implications of this type of reading, which arguably led to the fetishization of the book by second-wave feminists as a symbol of “sisterhood” in the 1970s. But what if the form of *Novas Cartas*—its insistence on fragmentation and on female multiple voice, its self-conscious use of non-linear narrative—lent itself to forms of reading that go beyond its narrower sense (reading a book cover to cover)? If this is the case, then surely the way in which mainstream feminists listened to the book’s multiple and fragmentary female voice in 1972-73 was also, in a sense, a consequence of the Three Marias’ theoretical endeavors, as much as it was the result of the authors’ desire to write not so much *for* but *with* non-Portuguese-speaking international feminist audiences. Instead of altogether dismissing essentialized international readings of the book, I shall argue here that there may be something to be learned about the theoretical power of *Novas Cartas* from thinking through the manner in which second-wave feminists attended to the book’s transgressions.

The second part will address the moment, from 1974 onwards, when anachronism substituted absolute reciprocity as the official metaphor signifying the supposed strangeness of the book. Here, I will turn to the not-so-minor role that a specifically Portuguese way of reading it as authentically Portuguese and anti-fascist may have played in the resignification of *Novas Cartas* abroad as a strange textual body out of place by international feminists. I will refer to this type of reading as reading “à la portugaise,” after the celebrated writing code by the same name.⁶ To read “à la portugaise” is the result of what I consider to be the sterile opposition between “Portuguese anti-fascism” and “international feminism,” which corresponds to one established Portuguese formula for writing about *Novas Cartas*. I argue that this paradigm is overly simplistic for at least three reasons. First, it disregards the Three Marias’ exposure to international feminist thought, namely Simone de Beauvoir’s, before the publication of their book. Second, it ignores the role that may have been played by the Portuguese exile community in the appropriation of *Novas Cartas* by international feminist politics. Third, it overlooks the role of the book itself in its own consumption at home and abroad.

I conclude by arguing that neither the universalist (international feminist) nor the nationalist (Portuguese non-feminist, anti-fascist) types of reading provide wholly adequate tools for dealing with *Novas Cartas*, for they have equally contributed to marginalizing it on a theoretical level. This situation has reinforced a perception of Portugal, and in the case of Lispector also of Brazil, as Lusophone spaces where the possibility of responding to theoretically informed international political action simply does not exist.

What Can They Do for Us? Judging a Book by Its Cover

The international solidarity campaign that developed in 1972-73 around the banning of *Novas Cartas* provides a spectacular example of massive international consumption of a text that was mostly not read at all, at least during the heated years of the protest. Soon after its publication in 1972, the censors of the Portuguese right-wing regime banned the book. Its authors faced jail terms of up to two years for “outrage to public decency” and “abuse of the freedom of the press.” The forty-six-year-old environment of intimidation and repression in Portugal stifled the domestic campaign of solidarity in support of the authors.⁷ Had they relied entirely on national support, instead of taking an active role in disseminating their book among prominent members of the French feminist movement, the Three Marias would most likely end up in jail. Wishing to denounce the injustices they were experiencing, the authors smuggled their book to France, addressing it to the editors of three feminists whose work they were acquainted with and admired: Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, and Christiane Rochefort. Maria Isabel Barreno describes in an interview the encounter of the latter with *Novas Cartas*:

No momento em que a nossa carta chegou, a Christiane Rochefort estava em viagem, pelo que foi uma vizinha peruana chamada Carmen, encarregue de regar as plantas e dar comida aos gatos, que viu a carta com o livro e o abriu. Como ela era de língua espanhola, entendeu o suficiente para achar aquilo muito interessante. Escreveu a Christiane e, já com a autorização dela, abriu a carta anexa ao livro. Esta Carmen estava ligada ao MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) francês que, por sua vez, tinha anexo um grupo de mulheres latino-americanas, a quem leu o texto. (Barreno 67)

When our letter arrived, Christiane Rochefort was away on a trip, which is why the first person to see the letter and the accompanying book was her Peruvian neighbor named Carmen, who was responsible for watering the plants and feeding the cats. Because she spoke Spanish, she understood enough to find the book very interesting. She wrote to Christiane and, with her authorization, opened the letter and read it. This Carmen was linked to the French Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (Women’s Liberation Movement), which was connected with a group of Latin American women, to whom Carmen read the text. (my translation)

Barreno’s recollection, in which the book *almost* reaches Rochefort, is noteworthy. It is through the hands, eyes, and mouth of an “other” woman, the Peruvian neighbor Carmen, that the book reaches the MLF, or rather, its Latin American members. Carmen is touched by the content of *Novas Cartas* due to her knowledge of Spanish. Her capacity to understand Portuguese distances her from Rochefort, who, we suspect, could not have been immediately impressed by a book almost entirely written in Portuguese, but only by the explanatory letter in French that accompanied it. Whilst the circumstances of this event are the product of coincidence, the act of recalling it in this particular way is not. Barreno’s emphasis on Rochefort’s non-reading is symptomatic of the terms in which the discursive space around the international success of *Novas Cartas* would be construed.

In fact, the international crowds supporting the book and the Three Marias were at best fragmentary readers and, at worst, non-readers of the book’s transgressions. This was because in the first two years of its notoriety no published translations from the original Portuguese were available. In France, the book was translated in 1974 and published by Éditions du Seuil. The English translation appeared in 1975, with Gollancz in London and Doubleday in New York. In Germany, the translation came out in 1976 (Tranvia-Verlag Walter Frey), and the Italian translation appeared only in 1977 (Rizzole Editore). This may explain why *Novas Cartas* was somehow voided of its own contextual meaning by international feminist politics, instead of being historically and politically contextualized and absorbed by academic feminist theory.

During the wave of international solidarity, only fragments of the book circulated in translation. Parts of it were adapted for the theatre by Brazilian playwright Gilda Grillo and staged in Paris and New York. One of Grillo's dramatizations was presented on Broadway in January 1974, just months before the Portuguese revolution. Radical feminist Robin Morgan introduced the event, explaining the content of the book to the audience in the following terms:

Their collective book explores themes such as the loneliness and isolation of women, the exploitation of *our* sexuality and the denial of *our* own fulfillment as whole human beings. It speaks of the suffering caused by rape, prison, sadistic abortions, it explores *our* political and economic condition, it talks of religion and the cloister, of adultery and madness and suicide. It is not a timid work—it is a strong and womanly book. (Morgan 203; my emphases)

This synopsis, which tellingly switches from “their” to “our,” illustrates the pattern underlying the consumption of the Three Marias’ book outside Portugal. Morgan’s summary of *Novas Cartas* is followed by a footnote: “When the book was published in the United States, the English translation seemed to me somewhat less inspiring than the selections [for that evening’s performance] done by Gilda Grillo and Louise Bernikow” (203). The insistence on the fragmented version—in the presence of a full translation of the text—reveals the extent to which the myth of absolute reciprocity between the Three Marias and their international “sisters” was, in fact, aided by a particular reading practice, which privileged extracts published in the media and adapted to the stage, newspaper commentaries, reviews, and word of mouth over the full text. Morgan’s choice of the term “inspiring” emphasises the supposed authenticity of the fragment over the entire book. It is as if fragmentary translations diminished the risk of betrayal—betrayal of second-wave concerns, not those of the Three Marias.

The perils and delights of translation are also a prominent theme in Cixous’s reading of Lispector. But that does not prevent the French feminist from erasing the cultural and individual otherness of Lispector’s texts, which, according to Klobucka, “disappears without a trace, leaving behind only such a pale reflection of itself as can, in effect, be labeled ‘Cixousian’” (1994, 46). When discussing the subtle reversal of intertextual relationship at work in Cixous’s discourse towards her “loved object,” Klobucka exposes the fit between the myth of amorous “dialogue” and the actual lack of respect for Lispector’s irreducible otherness. The terms in which Cixous’s reinvention of the foreign subject’s text includes through exclusion (Ahmed) may also be found in the preface to the 1975 edition of the English translation of *Novas Cartas (The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters)*. Here, translator Helen R. Lane assures the American audience that, although the authors were not all in agreement as to how to define feminism, theirs is the story of “a precarious but real sisterhood,” because “what they say applies equally to contemporary Portuguese women in a society far more tradition-bound than ours in America, and to women *everywhere*” (11). To Lane, the relations between Mariana and her French chevalier “become the symbol of the deep ambivalence underlying the relations between man and woman *in all times and places*,” and all the “Marias and Marianas and Maria Anas of the book thus become a sort of a *universal name for woman*” (10; all emphases mine).

So far, and apart from a few notable exceptions (as noted in my introduction and conclusion), the international impact of *Novas Cartas* has been assessed by focusing on the negative implications of this type of reading. In this scenario, the book becomes the unwitting victim of a process of fetishization wholly orchestrated by strident second-wave feminists abroad. But what is the role of *Novas Cartas* in setting the tone of how to listen to its own transgressions?

Reading practices and readerships are at the heart of *Novas Cartas*. Hilary Owen argues that the Three Marias’ indivisible voice as authors shifts “one’s authoritarian certainties and one’s critical assumptions

predicated on a single, unified author/narrator figure [and is] part of learning a new reading practice and [of] conditioning one's own reading public" (1995, 183). To the critic, the central theme of *Novas Cartas*, which corresponds to the construction of the female writing subject, is inseparable from "the construction of woman as reader" (185). By speaking of a book that aims at educating a reading public with whom the authors share images, Owen echoes Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo's perception of the book as "apelo a uma escuta para além da imediata leitura" (a call for a mode of listening beyond immediate reading) (Pintasilgo xxxvi; my translation).

In *The Question of How: Women Writers and New Portuguese Literature*, Darlene Sadlier points out that *Novas Cartas* is difficult to describe with standard critical terminology: "Even the authors themselves refer to their book as a 'thing,' which suggests their inability, or perhaps better, their reluctance to categorize it" (7). Relying considerably on the fragmentation of the female voice and on the interplay between subject and object positions, the Three Marias wove their "thing" around many different kinds of material. The book includes letters written by a host of fictitious Anas, Marias, Marianas, and Marias Anas of today, historical documents, poems exchanged between the three authors, prose essays on the condition of women throughout history, reflections on the role of men in shaping the condition of women, and invented letters, spanning a period of three centuries, to and from a long line of Mariana's female descendants and their lovers. Fragmentation in *Novas Cartas* expresses the authors' mistrust in the language they were using to make their case. They lacked faith in the power of language and theory to represent the political realities they were concerned with. As argued by Owen, this lack of faith in language may explain the way in which "the love letters and self-referential word play of *Novas Cartas* are periodically interrupted as the Marias express a fear of mysticising language for its own sake to the exclusion of the problems of reality" (1995, 76).

As suggested by Owen and Pintasilgo, a better understanding of the reception of *Novas Cartas* implies a reconceptualization of what is meant by "reading," since the form of the book invites its readers to listen beyond/across/in between what is written. Building on this argument, I would add that a reconceptualization of what is meant by reading must account here also for forms of reception and mass consumption other than "cover-to-cover" readings. There are at least two reasons as to why fragmentary readings would have been preferred by the Three Marias. First, this type of reading would expand the authors' possibilities of survival in a Portuguese context of routine censorship and repression, where the kind of themes they addressed were considered offensive to public morals and family values sustaining the regime. The Portuguese censors were in fact the first to perform and, as a result, encourage fragmentary readings of *Novas Cartas*, since to the Portuguese authorities only certain passages constituted an outrage to public morals and good customs. Second, fragmentary readings of the book would create the conditions necessary for the text to reach beyond the political borders of Portugal. Because each Maria had her own views on feminism, the authors used the many legacies at their disposal in order to educate feminist readerships in Portugal and to hold the attention of feminist audiences abroad, whilst simultaneously uncovering the limitations of these legacies.

Thus, while the fragmentary form of *Novas Cartas* allowed for its message to effect theoretical critique, the partial, distorted readings that ensued also created the conditions necessary for its authors to survive prosecution and for the text to reach beyond the Portuguese borders. This implies that the manner in which the reception of *Novas Cartas* unfolded was no accident. Fragmentary readings were, in part, strategically orchestrated by the Three Marias as a tool of mediation between the political and the theoretical. Such form of mass consumption was a consequence not only of the Three Marias' political imperative to secure an audience abroad, but also of their theoretical imperative to construct the Portuguese woman as a

feminist reader in dialogue with other feminists beyond Portugal. To simply dismiss, or to blame others for, the way in which *Novas Cartas* was (not) read, or misread, or read fragmentarily, or distorted by its international supporters, is to neglect the Three Marias' role, however minor, in dictating the terms of their book's reception abroad. In order to both address and go beyond the physical and political frontiers of the Portuguese reality, the Three Marias had to devise a book that was able to elude the Portuguese censors and educate its Portuguese readers to read and write *with* (as well as *against*) distinct transnational readerships. However, as we shall see in the following section, this is not the way in which the story of the international reception of *Novas Cartas* has been told.

What about Us? Reading *Novas Cartas* “à la portugaise”

As a way of countering reductive liberal feminist readings of *Novas Cartas*, such as the one outlined above, a Portuguese non-feminist discourse emerged, highlighting what was specifically Portuguese and anti-fascist (i.e., non-feminist) about the book. Shortly after the Three Marias' acquittal, which took place two weeks after the Carnation Revolution, on May 7, 1974, a bitter polemic erupted following Maria Velho da Costa's publication of an open letter titled “Portuguese Letter and Mine Alone to the People Still United” in the literary supplement *Artes e Letras* of the Portuguese newspaper *A Capital* (May 16, 1974). As noted by Loretta Porto Slover, in this letter Velho da Costa publicly dissociated herself from any involvement in Women's Liberation groups. Denouncing feminist ideology, she wrote: “I don't like what was done with that book. I don't like what was done with me about it. When it was written, it was a book. Now, they say, it's a feminist book” (qtd. in Slover 107). Velho da Costa's anti-feminist stance was immediately countered by Maria Isabel Barreno, who on May 27, 1974 published an open letter titled “Letter Neither Particularly New Nor Particularly Portuguese to the People Who Are No Longer Unprepared” (qtd. in Slover 107). Here, Barreno articulated her feminist position against the Marxist stance espoused by Velho da Costa, to whom class struggle now preempted feminist engagement.

This epistolary polemic continued when on June 18 a reply from Monique Wittig (the French translator of *Novas Cartas*) appeared in *A Capital*. Wittig's letter was entitled “First Letter of a French Feminist—Which Could as Well Have Been Written by an International Brazilian Feminist—to Maria Velho da Costa.” As pointed out by Slover, Wittig refused the suggestion, made in Velho da Costa's letter, that French feminists involved themselves in supporting the authors of *Novas Cartas* because they were primarily interested in the benefits the book might bring them: “We made a great effort to help you because you were up against male and fascist repression, not because of your book. Because we couldn't even read it” (qtd. in Slover 111).

In her description of this polemic, Slover arguably takes sides with Wittig and Barreno, as she makes clear by referring to Velho da Costa's final letter to Wittig as “a mocking personal attack” that was “sarcastic and insulting” (111-12). Her stance is also visible in her comments on the quality of the arguments put forward during the epistolary battle between two of the Marias (Maria Teresa Horta stayed out of the polemic): “To Velho da Costa's facile characterizations of the Women's Movement, Barreno opposes serious issues” (109). To Slover, then, “the issue revealing the depth of disagreement between them is the legitimacy of feminism as a political cause” (109). To my mind, however, the question at the heart of the dispute between the two Marias and Wittig is not the legitimacy of feminism as a political cause, but the burning issue of the international feminist appropriation of *Novas Cartas* (as represented by Wittig's letter) versus the Portuguese anti-fascist claim to it (as staked in Velho da Costa's letter). Slover's 1970s internationalist feminist bias arguably prevented her from reading *Novas Cartas* as a text that, to paraphrase the title of Barreno's letter, is neither particularly Portuguese nor particularly feminist, but both. To some extent, what

her 1977 study reveals about Portuguese feminist history from the outside is the view of a country proudly rejecting foreign (feminist) meddling in the Portuguese (Marxist) revolution. As I wish to suggest, this is problematic, particularly if we consider that Slover's unpublished dissertation is, at present, the only existing study that directly deals with the issue of *Novas Cartas*' internationalization.

This view of Portugal was reinforced when on June 1, 1974 *Index on Censorship* published an article by António de Figueiredo, in which the author inscribed *Novas Cartas* in "the history of repression in Portugal since the advent of the corporate state in 1926" (19). A year later, Velho da Costa's reaction to the promotion of the book abroad as feminist was reproduced in a text penned by London-based Portuguese writer and literary critic Helder Macedo, who strategically reappropriated the Three Marias through their less known first names by titling his review "Teresa and Fátima and Isabel." Macedo's important article must be read in the context of the wave of negative reviews of the English translation of *Novas Cartas*, which hit the US and UK press in 1975.⁸ In his text, which takes issue mainly with the commodifiable expression "Three Marias," Macedo argues for politically and historically situated readings of the book by describing the events preceding its publication, such as the dismantling of the Society of Portuguese Writers and the banning of an anthology of erotic poetry, as two examples of Portuguese political and sexual repression against which *Novas Cartas* "took a brave stand" (1484). To the critic, the book eventually came to be marketed as a feminist manifesto because it was disconnected from its political background, when it should have been read in the context of the Portuguese fascist struggle and of the Portuguese literary feminine (feminist?) tradition alone. As a way of countering reductive liberal feminist readings interested in "mothering" *Novas Cartas*, Macedo goes on to name the real father of Teresa, Fátima, and Isabel. The reference in the article to a story in *Novas Cartas* in which a father rapes his daughter and sends her away from home ("The Father") affords the key to Macedo's claim that "the book's feminism is deeply rooted in the old tradition of Portuguese feminist literature." His attempt to establish a genealogy by comparing *Novas Cartas* to Bernardim Ribeiro's sixteenth-century masterpiece *Menina e Moça* is complicated by his reference to a broader *sui generis* Portuguese literary tradition in which male authors stage their abdication of the voice of authority by writing female-voiced texts. This tradition of literary transvestism in itself signals the historical ambivalence surrounding issues of gendered authorship in Portugal. The attempt to accentuate what was specifically and authentically Portuguese about *Novas Cartas* is meant to root the Three Marias in a Portuguese "feminism" without women.

Furthermore, Macedo condemns the commodified use of the collective name "Maria," as performed abroad by international feminism, implicitly describing it as a false name, as opposed to the "real names of Teresa (Maria Teresa Horta), Fátima (Maria Velho da Costa) and Isabel (Maria Isabel Barreno)" (1484). The critic's choice of the word "real" is significant, for it reveals his anxiety about the Three Marias' Portuguese authenticity in a manner that echoes Helen R. Lane's anxiety about their sisterhood as "precarious but real" (11). Structuring the review around the opposition between an authentic feminine Portuguese "I" (rooted in a literary past without women) and a false feminist "them," Macedo distances the authors from the present of international feminisms made up of real women.

Despite its undeniable political importance, the reading put forward in Macedo's review leads to a dead end, since it does not provide wholly adequate tools to address the dialogues enacted between the Three Marias and their various feminist audiences, national and international alike, as well as among their several writing selves. I will name this type of reading as reading "à la portugaise," after the writing manner "à la portugaise," which became famous as a result of the multiple translations and editions of *Lettres portugaises*, the seventeenth-century text that supplied the starting point of *Novas Cartas*.

First published in 1669 by Claude Barbin in Paris, *Lettres portugaises* is a collection of five letters written in French from the perspective of a Portuguese nun called Mariana Alcoforado and addressed to Chevalier de Chamilly, her French lover. Set at the time of Portugal's struggle for independence against Spain, the letters were supposedly translated from the Portuguese original, which was never found. It is now accepted that these letters, which speak of the nun's suffering after being abandoned by her lover, were originally penned by a French male writer, Gabriel Joseph de Lavergne de Guilleragues, and not by a real Portuguese nun. Nevertheless, this collection linked Portugal and the name of Mariana Alcoforado to an extremely interesting case of literary success in Europe. As pointed out by Claire Goldstein, the book provoked commentary not only because of its "mysterious" origin or authorship but also because of its content and style:

As a text which engaged readers in a representation of female desire as well as in the question of authentic or fictional female style, the *Lettres portugaises* presented a locus for a discussion of women's writing, a space for critics to articulate their conceptions of feminine sensibility and writing style. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the feminine coding of the epistolary and the formulation of a certain image of a female suffering voice crystallize in the critical discussion of the *Lettres portugaises*. (575)

If to write "à la portugaise" became in the seventeenth century "a veritable code for a certain style—written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress" (Kauffman 95), to read "à la portugaise" could be defined as a code for reading that similarly plays on various readerships' expectations of authenticity regarding Portugal's order (or disorder) in relation to the central orders of the world; a reading practice that is less interested in denouncing gendered national myths of authenticity than in reaffirming the deep-rooted "Portugueseness" of the Three Marias, and that draws a temporal line between the feminine roots of their work and the feminist fervor of their audience.

This type of reading shares similarities with that performed in Slover's dissertation, since it arguably does very little to destabilize external views of Portugal as a supposedly primordial, authentic space, incapable of producing international theoretical alliances of its own. Such readings "à la portugaise" neglect an entire history of mediations, alliances, and conflicts between Portuguese and international feminist, Marxist, and other anti-fascist resistance movements in the 1970s. A more historically located view is needed here, one that goes beyond existing Portuguese attempts to rescue *Novas Cartas* from the international campaign and restore it to a Portuguese lineage of feminist thought.

The first step towards achieving this view is to acknowledge the familiarity of the Three Marias with international feminist discourses of their time. Acquainted with some major second-wave concerns of universalist liberal feminism, they appropriated, for instance, Afghan Muslim examples of women's oppression in order to express their own experiences:

A mulher adúltera é ainda apedrejada de morte no Afeganistão e na Arábia Saudita.... Em Portugal ... não é necessário ser-se adúltera para se ser "apedrejada," aniquilada... Basta que ela surja e fale como "um homem." (247-48)

A woman taken in adultery is still stoned to death today in Afghanistan and in Saudi Arabia.... In Portugal ... it is not necessary for a woman to commit adultery for her to be "stoned to death," to be destroyed... She need only appear in the public eye and talk "like a man." (259)

The authors cite the work of prominent feminists, namely the American author Ti-Grace Atkinson: "Ti-Grace Atkinson, teórica feminista de 29 anos, afirma: 'O amor é a armadilha, a vedação de arame farpado, o eixo de opressão das mulheres num mundo gozador. Que é o amor senão a necessidade e o medo?'" (249)

(Ti-Grace Atkinson, a theoretician of the feminist movement, who is twenty-nine years old, writes: “Love is the trap, the barbed wire fence, the focal point of repression of women in a sexist world. What is love but need or fear?” [261]). On the one hand, they problematize the legacies of Marxist feminism, criticizing it for placing too much emphasis upon class relations in the economic sphere and for not paying enough attention to female experiences outside the labor market: “Entendo, pois, que não basta pensar em relações de produção, sendo socialmente a mulher produtora de filhos e vendendo sua força de trabalho ao homem-patrão” (80) (I realize, therefore, that it is not enough merely to consider the relations of production from the point of view of the fact that socially woman is a producer of children and a seller of her labor to man-the-boss [88]). On the other hand, they tackle the sexual liberation of the 1960s, condemning it as an illusion: “Eis-nos pois, irmãs, em plena era da libertação da mulher portuguesa ... e o homem exulta, irmãs, e ajuda a mulher nesta falsa e vergonhosa ‘libertação’” (221). (So here we are, sisters, in the midst of the era of the liberation of the Portuguese women ... and the man rejoices, sisters, and aids and abets the woman in this farce, in this delusion, in this false and shameful “liberation” [235]). The book calls for the deconstruction not only of male and female sexual identities, but also of the traditional roles associated with them: “é preciso curar o homem, dizer-lhe que nem o seu corpo é estéril e nem só o falo é criador” (301) (it is necessary to cure the man, to tell him both that his body is not sterile and that it is not only his phallus that is creative [300]). As pointed out by one Maria, “Ao que deveras buscamos, qualquer lei, mesmo natural, é escandalosa” (273). (From the point of view of what we are really seeking, any law, even a natural law, is scandalous [286]).

The de-homogenizing reading method emblemized by Macedo’s title, “Teresa and Fátima and Isabel” (as opposed to “the Three Marias”), does not entirely take into account the familiarity of the authors with French and other feminist discourses of their time. Maria Teresa Horta explains in an interview how her life and her writing have been influenced by a number of women:

A Simone de Beauvoir mudou a minha existência, a Marguerite Duras a minha escrita. E as duas acabariam por ficar ligadas ao processo das *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a partir da altura em que eu, a Maria Isabel Barreno e a Maria Velho da Costa lhes enviámos o livro. (Horta 61)

Simone de Beauvoir changed my existence, Marguerite Duras my writing. And the two of them would end up being linked to *New Portuguese Letters* when I, Maria Isabel Barreno, and Maria Velho da Costa sent them the book. (my translation)

In Macedo’s review, however, the contours of a Portuguese “margin” are naturalized by means of the homogenization of a mainstream “core,” as attested to by the reference to the “Anglo-Saxon media” (1484), against which Portugal has to struggle as a marginal periphery. Macedo’s main concern is to emphasize “the Three Marias’ proper and central place in society.” But their place as authors of *Novas Cartas* can neither be named in the singular nor in relation to one center. As a result, the review fails to account for the kind of margin and center Portugal becomes in relation to multiple shifting feminist and linguistic (Portuguese and French) cores and peripheries, the latter including, for example, Portugal’s African colonies.

As a three-headed, fragmented “thing,” *Novas Cartas* holds the power to destabilize fixed reference points that anchor feminist legacies and collective political identities, even as it unmasks its own complicity with the mainstream. It is therefore no surprise that, once it was translated and made available to a global audience, *Novas Cartas* failed to materialize in the constructed familiar form feminists had ascribed to it. As pointed out by Linda Kauffman in *Discourses of Desire*, many of the post-1974 international responses to the book were mixed. It did not enter the American or European canons of feminist theory and remained

an important text outside Portugal mainly for feminist solidarity politics. What the negative international responses to the book demonstrate, according to Kauffman (writing in 1986), was the lack, in 1972, of a vocabulary that could encompass the anti-canonical, theoretically transgressive, avant-garde strategies of this particular text (307). In this context, what was the role of readings “à la portugaise” in the resignification of the book abroad as a strange textual object out of place?

The consequences of Macedo’s insistence on a male tradition of Portuguese “feminine” literature share common ground with the consequences of the fragmentary and essentializing readings of *Novas Cartas* by international feminists: in both cases, there is an emphasis on someone else’s identity, which corresponds to the identity of the privileged subject, be it a male Portuguese writer or a first-world mainstream feminist. As a result, it is possible that the process of relegation of the Three Marias to the margins of theory making by more central, canonical feminist voices may have been aided by readings “à la portugaise.”

Take, for example, Kauffman’s *Discourses of Desire*, which provides, for the first time since the publication of *Novas Cartas*, a theoretically informed context for a critical consideration of the book. Kauffman notes that the Three Marias were familiar with Lacanian psychoanalysis and the theories of French women. She points out that they attempt to overcome the repression of the feminine in language by acting it out, by making the hidden or oppressed visible. The Three Marias “allude specifically to Freud, Lévi-Strauss, the Imaginary, deciphering signs and texts, to linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, Marxism, semiology, and to a range of feminist theorists, from Shulamith Firestone to Simone de Beauvoir” (309).

Kauffman’s most intriguing insight is that the Three Marias’ text arrived too early. She goes as far as to emphasize that the authors’ feeling of admiration for French feminists and familiarity with their theories were reciprocal. As clarified in one footnote, these comparisons serve to demonstrate “the relevance of recent French, feminist, and psychoanalytical theories to the Three Marias within the context of amorous epistolary discourse” (287). Nevertheless, the footnote significantly omits the fact that most of the theories Kauffman refers to could not have been applied by the Three Marias to their text, precisely because many of them postdate *Novas Cartas*, as noted by Hilary Owen in “New Cartographies of the Body” (47). Instead of addressing the urgent question, raised by Owen’s observation, of the extent to which *Novas Cartas* actually influenced mainstream feminisms of the 1970s, Kauffman goes on to reproduce “the more essentialist, universalizing movements of the Three Marias’ text” (Owen 50). As pointed out by Owen, the centrality of the “woman-as-land” metaphor in Kauffman’s reading creates a tendency for her to see in the Portuguese case of the Three Marias an elucidation of “women’s perpetual colonization historically, from Louis XIV to Angola” (qtd. in Owen 50). Here, Kauffman’s reading reinforces, to a large extent, some of the universalizing claims criticized by Macedo. Interestingly, this does not prevent her from strategically praising in her text Macedo’s own nationalist and anti-feminist mapping of *Novas Cartas*. As Kauffman writes,

There was no tradition like the one I am tracing that could provide a context for critical consideration [of *Novas Cartas*]: the sole example of an attempt—and the most intelligent review—places the Three Marias in a long tradition of Portuguese feminism, showing its similarities to the cycles of stories in which an older woman has a dialogue with a younger woman about love. (307)

The critic’s reference to Macedo’s review is telling, for it shows how the reviewer’s attempt to reinforce the Portuguese authenticity of the book—through his reading “à la portugaise”—is easily co-opted by Kauffman’s useful but at times essentialist and universalizing analysis. This situation illustrates the way in which the Three Marias’ book has been relegated to the margins of theory making.

Conclusion: The Women inside the Paper Horse

Only rarely has criticism prevented such “proper” binocular vision of the book as that I’ve attempted to diagnose here. Despite the existence of a Portuguese non-feminist discourse on *Novas Cartas*, the book has been occasionally read in Portugal as both “Portuguese” and “feminist,” as attested by the work of Graça Abranches, Maria Alzira Seixo, and Ana Luísa Amaral. In “Desconstruindo Identidades: Ler *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* à Luz da Teoria Queer,” Amaral discusses the role of excess in *Novas Cartas* by emphasizing the book’s textual and theoretical hybridism as well as its emphasis on sexual/identitarian otherness, both of which are issues privileged by queer theory. To the critic, queer theory helps recognize that the language of *Novas Cartas* is “o espaço do excesso do nosso discurso, sempre ameaçado pelo hegemónico, seja ele cultural, universal ou nacional. ‘Je t’aime, je t’aime, como é que se pode em português dizer tal coisa?’” (89) (the space of excess in our discourse, which is always threatened by hegemony, whether cultural, universal, or national. “Je t’aime, je t’aime, how can you say such a thing in Portuguese?”) (my translation).

Outside Portugal, Hilary Owen in particular has viewed *Novas Cartas* as a work of theory in the context of international and Portuguese feminist and women’s writing traditions. She has also argued productively in favor of the book’s originality by outlining what could be seen as the Three Marias’ theoretical “trademark” or signature (Bourdieu 262), which consists of the crafting of a multiple female voice. More recently, Margaretta Jolly has published an important monograph, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (2008), which includes a discussion of *Novas Cartas* in the context of women’s private and public correspondence from the 1970s to the 1990s. Jolly acknowledges the role of the Three Marias’ book in the construction of a transnational feminist imagined community that shaped second-wave feminism in the seventies:

The Three Marias’ “passionately nourishing” letters, Wittig’s “écrivante féminine,” Walker’s “dear sister,” Hanscombe and Namjoshi’s “fleshly paper,” and, just as much, the silly, loving, angry, jokey, pretentious, and nervous letters actually sent and received by the kinds of women who read this literature in different ways personify the discovery of an erotic and spiritual identity among women.... (48)

By emphasising, however, the extent to which *Novas Cartas* “as the record of a romance with the idea of *political* identity itself ... form[s] an important element in the ‘corporeal soul’ of feminism” (48; my emphasis), Jolly does not further develop the theoretical life of the book. In fact, the critic effectively links *Novas Cartas* to the building of an international feminist community by giving priority to the public split of the authors (letters published in *A Capital*) over the various internal cracks and splits inscribed in *Novas Cartas* itself, which repeatedly undermine not only the book’s own literary project but also the several international feminist projects it alludes to. As Jolly notes, “If the Three Marias’ 1973 collective-love-letter novel to one another symbolised women’s reclaiming their sexuality from men, their bitter falling out in May 1974 ... foreshadowed what was to happen under the sign of women’s identity” (61). This bitter breakup was a rather sterile event, which did not cancel the fruitful polyphony of voices articulated in the book. Nevertheless, it is the former and not the latter that is perceived by Jolly as belonging to the public (international feminist) sphere: “This classic socialist-radical split of 1970s feminism, followed by many more political divisions of strategy and identity throughout the 80s, gradually revised feminist uses of the epistolary motif” (61). The emphasis on the public split, here defined as “classic,” or in place, becomes a way of containing the untamed and excessive out-of-place body of *Novas Cartas*, which cannot be explained by means of the question “What happens when feminists disagree?” (Jolly 92). Similarly to what occurs in

Cixous's reading of Lispector, the window is once again transformed into a mirror, as the three-tongued literary voice of the Three Marias is tucked away behind the ordered, clean split between two of the Marias.

In sum, all the studies mentioned here confirm the exceptionality of readings of *Novas Cartas* that are able to move beyond the nationalist-versus-feminist debate. More research is needed in order to throw light on the largely overlooked relationship between Portugal and the dominant French and Anglo-American theory centers of feminist thought, so that the possibilities opened up by the alleged "strangeness" of *Novas Cartas* may be fully addressed.

As argued by Ahmed, strange bodies have the capacity to confound the identities of privileged subjects: "We still need to question how some bodies come to be the impossible object that both establishes and confounds the border [which defines the privileged subject]" (93). When the Three Marias decided to send their "impossible object" to the three French feminists, they were in fact sending a Trojan horse whose form and content, wrapped in paper, had the potential to question existing feminist theoretical forms and conventions. As we have seen, feminists in France accepted the gift but kept the horse at arm's length—not without some help from Portugal—thus disallowing the movement of this text across boundaries on a theoretical level. Contrary to the reading practices discussed here, this paper horse requires us to read otherwise, against the fantasies of wholeness that have pinned it down to the Portuguese or international political realm. What this new reading practice will reveal about feminism and theory making in Europe and the US is yet to be addressed. Meanwhile, the paper horse awaits its hour, as "quelque chose qui reste et qui attend" (as something that remains, waiting) (Barreno, Horta, and Velho da Costa 2004; my translation).

Notes

1. Throughout this article, I will quote from Ana Luísa Amaral's new annotated Portuguese edition of *Novas Cartas* (Barreno, Horta, and Velho da Costa 2010). Except when stated otherwise, all translations into English are Helen R. Lane's (Barreno, Horta, and Velho da Costa 1975). I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their helpful criticism and advice.

2. Since the 1980s, however, this situation has changed. Three important books have been published that make extensive references to *Novas Cartas* in the Anglo-American context: Linda Kauffman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre and Epistolary Fictions* (1986), Darlene Sadlier's *The Question of How: Women Writers and New Portuguese Literature* (1989), and, more recently, Margaretta Jolly's *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (2008).

3. In comparing the Three Marias to the hyphenated authorial entity of "Gilbert-and-Gubar," co-authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, I am not suggesting that the Portuguese text is as seamlessly unitary as that produced by the North American feminist critics. Contrary to the text of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Novas Cartas* enacts very complex internal dialogues that deliberately dramatize differences among the Three Marias. My intention here is merely to acknowledge the historical precedence of the Three Marias' decision to create a unified-in-difference authorial entity, which they also strategically used during the court proceedings against them, in relation to Gilbert and Gubar's collaborative feminist scholarship, which, as pointed out by Marlene Tromp, many feminist critics have since chosen to imitate (50).

4. See, for example, Jean-Claude Lucien Miroir's master's thesis, "Clarice Lispector via Hélène Cixous: uma leitura-escritura em vis-à-vis" (2009).

5. I would like to thank Anna Klobucka for bringing this review to my attention.

6. The expression “to write *à la portugaise*” was coined in reference to the style of *Lettres portugaises* (1669), the collection of letters allegedly penned by a Portuguese nun to her French lover, which supplied the inspiration for *Novas Cartas*. It designates a kind of writing to the moment, apparently unmediated by artifice, in which a woman speaks her heart in a supposedly authentic, because passionate, manner. I will offer a fuller account of this writing code further on in this article.

7. The few Portuguese intellectuals who publicly defended the three women were Natália Correia, Urbano Tavares Rodrigues, Maria Lamas, Augusto Abelaira, Natália Nunes, Vasco Vieira de Almeida, Carlos Jorge Correia Gago, and José Tengarrinha (Tavares 180-81).

8. The review by Jane Kramer in *The New York Times Book Review* exemplifies this wave of negative criticism.

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