



‘DE TÃO LONGE, NÃO SE PODE FAZER IDEIA PERFEITA’:
TRANSLATING JÚLIA LOPES DE ALMEIDA’S *A FAMÍLIA MEDEIROS*

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Júlia Lopes de Almeida was born to Portuguese parents in Rio de Janeiro in 1862 and had a literary career that spanned several decades and several genres, from novels and short stories to theatre and journalism. Despite being the best-known female writer of her time, she was barred from entering and becoming one of the founding members of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, which maintained an exclusively male membership until 1977.¹ In recent years, her novels have been republished in several number editions, following a resurgence of academic interest in her work. Translations are now following these reeditions in the original Portuguese.

The early twentieth century saw a handful of translations of her short works into Spanish and French. In recent years, *A Intrusa* and *A Família Medeiros* have been translated into Spanish.² However, it was only in 2023 that one of Almeida’s novels was published in

¹ Michele Asmar Fanini. Júlia Lopes De Almeida: Entre o Salão Literário e a Antessala da Academia Brasileira de Letras. *Estudos de Sociologia*, Araraquara, v.14, n.27, p.317-338, 2009.

² Júlia Lopes de Almeida. *La Intrusa*. Translated by Noemí Jiménez Furquet. Madrid: Libros de Seda, 2022. Júlia Lopes de Almeida. *La Família Medeiros*, Translated by Noelia Rodríguez Otero. Madrid: Libros de Seda, 2023.

English for the first time, with Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry's translation of her major work of 1901, *A Falência*.³ This translation, published with UCL Press, is representative of a renewed wave of critical academic and public interest in the work of the author who was sidelined for most of the twentieth century but is now being reevaluated as a key figure of Realist and Naturalist writing at the turn of the twentieth century in Brazil, and who wrote extensively on gender and labor relations in a rapidly changing society. It also comes amid a flurry of new translations of both classic and lesser-known works of Brazilian literature from the long nineteenth century. In 2020, two new translations of Machado de Assis' *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* were published, translated respectively by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux and the duo of Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson. In 2022, Maria Firmina dos Reis' abolitionist novel of 1859, *Úrsula*, was translated into English for the first time Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey.⁴ Since then, Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson have, together, published new translations of *Dom Casmurro* and *Quincas Borba*, in 2023 and 2024 respectively.⁵ A translation of *Família Medeiros* would represent only the second ever nineteenth-century novel written by a Brazilian woman to be published in English.

A Família Medeiros was the first novel that Júlia Lopes de Almeida wrote, although the second to be published. It originally appeared in *folhetim* format, in installments of the *Gazeta de Notícias* of Rio de Janeiro, between October and December 1891. Due to its successful reception with readers, the novel was published in book format the following year. It is described by many critics as a work of abolitionist literature, and although it was written in large part in the years leading up to the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888, the last country in the Americas to achieve abolition, its publication three years after the fact

³ Júlia Lopes de Almeida. *The Bankruptcy*. Translated by Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry. London: UCL Press, 2023.

⁴ Machado de Assis. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

Machado de Assis. *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas: A Novel*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson. Liveright Publishing Corporation: 2020.

Maria Firmina dos Reis. *Úrsula*. Translated by Cristina Ferreira Pinto-Bailey. Tagus Press, 2022.

⁵ Machado de Assis. *Dom Casmurro: A Novel*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2023.

Machado de Assis. *Quincas Borba: A Novel*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2024.

complicates the classification of the novel as a work of abolitionist fiction.⁶ One reason given for the delay in the novel's conclusion and publication, in the introduction to the 1919 edition, was Almeida's travels between 1886 and 1888, which supposedly interrupted the writing process. The author spent two years in Lisbon, during which time she married, had her first child, continued her journalistic work and published her first collection of short stories. It is not as though she stopped working. Wilson Martins suggests that the passing of abolition itself in 1888 seemed, momentarily, to have taken away the novel's interest but that the its focus on changing labor relations, 'new forms of slavery,' and the reorganization of the workforce gave it renewed relevance in the early years of the Republic.⁷

This was a time of great political upheaval in Brazil, with, as well as the abolition of slavery in 1888, the declaration of the Republic and abolition of the monarchy in 1889, and these political debates are woven into the plot of the novel. *The Family Medeiros*, my translation of the title, depicts societal and familial upheaval following the return of Octavio Medeiros, the son of a wealthy, slaveholding, coffee plantation owner, from his education in Europe, where he adopted abolitionist and republican views, to the family residence in the rural west of the province of São Paulo, near the city of Campinas, where Almeida spent most of her youth. Octavio's orphaned cousin, Eva, who is living with the family at the plantation, following the death of her father, expresses her abolitionist views openly and forthrightly and, because of this, she is despised by the family's patriarch, Comendador Medeiros, and her name is linked to the organization of an uprising of the enslaved people at the plantation. An air of intrigue, conspiracy and danger permeates the novel as the paranoid planters fear the flight of the enslaved and the imminent coming of abolition, blaming the 'aboliconistas da capital, que espalham agentes por toda a parte.'⁸ São Paulo was becoming the richest province in the country. Its slave-owning planters, particularly in Campinas, were some of the most bitter opponents to abolition, In the late 1880's, new

⁶ Lígia Cristina Machado. *As diversas formas de trabalho no folhetim "A família Medeiros" de Júlia Lopes de Almeida*. (Master's dissertation) - UNICAMP, 2016.

⁷ Júlia Lopes de Almeida, *A Família Medeiros* [1892] (Rio de Janeiro, 1919).

⁸ Júlia Lopes de Almeida, *A Família Medeiros*, p.27.

and more radical tactics were being employed by abolitionists, including the *caifazes* who disorganized enslaved labor and led mass flights.⁹

In her novel, Almeida depicts the mass flight of enslaved people to the *quilombo* of Jabaquara, via the Serra de Cubatão, the intentional burning of a forest where other enslaved individuals had fled, the lynching of a judge involved in the manumission of enslaved people, the complicity of the police with..., the lavish wealth of the elite class of coffee planters, the introduction of paid labour, European immigration and the modernization of agricultural practices, with Eva's own idealized farm presented as a model of modern agriculture and labour relations. The novel centers, however, around the internal dynamics of the Medeiros family: Otávio's love for his cousin Eva, the resistance of his sister to a marriage of convenience, and the tension that debates around abolition bring into the household, with the patriarchal order being challenged on all fronts. Its translation would facilitate a comparative study of abolitionist writing in the Americas and contribute to a reevaluation of Almeida's position within the Brazilian literary scene of the late nineteenth century.¹⁰

Below are translations of the first and thirteenth chapters. In the first, the reader is introduced to Octavio upon his return to Brazil and his reinsertion into plantation society following transformative educational years in Europe. The thirteenth, selected for being a pivotal moment before the drama really begins to unfold and for its intriguing descriptive passages, comes about a third of the way into the novel. It describes the family's journey into town for the wedding of Octavio's younger sister Nicota. On their way, they pass a scorched forest, which was intentionally set ablaze the night before by a planter seeking to root out a *quilombola* community who had sought refuge there.¹¹ After describing the lavish preparations for the wedding party, where the natural world is recreated for human consumption, fears of an uprising at the plantation during the family's absence, which has

⁹ Suely Robles Reis de Queiroz. "A abolição da escravidão". In: Nilo Odalia, João Ricardo de Castro Caldeira (Orgs.) *História do Estado de São Paulo / A Formação da Unidade Paulista*. v.1: Colônia e Império.

¹⁰ One thinks, for example, of the work done with Cuban feminist and abolitionist writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's novel *Sab*, which, although written in 1841, was not published until 1914, with Cuba achieving formal abolition just two years before Brazil, in 1886.

¹¹ The description of this forest inferno seems somewhat inspired by the description that opens the Visconde de Taunay's novel of 1872, *Innocência*.

been linked to Eva, Octavio's abolitionist cousin, by an anonymous penman, lead to tension between the patriarch and his son and the latter's hurried return, a turning point in the novel.

The first question a translator faces upon approaching a novel is which text to use. A recent Carambaia edition of *A Família Medeiros* uses the original 1891 text with updated orthography for the 130th anniversary of its publication. The 2009 Editora Mulheres edition, however, uses the text from the 1919 'nova edição refundida,' which Almeida published within her lifetime, and in which she makes a series of edits and changes in certain passages of the book, for example inserting in the names of well-known abolitionists Luiz Gama, Antônio Bento and José do Patrocínio into some of excerpts. Given that the changes made in the 1919 edition are the author's own, it felt most appropriate to use that version of the text for my translation.

Many challenges presented themselves, upon approaching this translation, relating to Almeida's writing style. The style, which is representative of a rather exaggerated realism in parts sees the author use extremely long sentences with commas and semi-colons extending them sometimes to almost half a page of text. It is tempting to break these paragraphs up for the sake of readability but generally I have sought to maintain the original organization of these sentences so as to convey the rhythm and style of the text. Beyond the idiomatic expressions, and obscure references, the vocabulary, which can be very temporally and geographically specific also presents challenges with many words that do not appear in modern dictionaries. These fall into various categories, with one that comes into play in Chapter Thirteen being culinary vocabulary. The buffet table at Nicota's wedding banquet is laden with a whole range of delicacies and extravagant confections, which boggle the mind and necessitated a dive into not only nineteenth-century dictionaries, such as Caldas Aulete's *Diccionario Contemporaneo da Lingua Portuguesa* from 1881, but also cookbooks and culinary compendia from the time.¹² The *Diccionario do doceiro brasileiro* was the most comprehensive and useful of these, helping me to

¹² Francisco Júlio de Caldas Aulete. *Diccionario contemporaneo da lingua portuguesa*. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1881.

envision what ‘pirâmides de fios d’ovos’ might have looked like.¹³ In other cases, more imagination and speculation was required, as I could find no references anywhere, not in dictionaries, cookbooks, newspapers or literature, to certain of the concoctions that Almeida describes; the ‘cachos de caraguatá de ovos também’ are one such example. I imagine that the author is describing some kind of sweet treat made using eggs and formed to look like bunches of *caraguatá* fruit. This sort of culinary recreation led me to suspect that the ‘insectos e reptis de massa pintalgada’ which also adorn the table were perhaps not made of modelling clay, as Noelia Rodríguez Otero’s recent Spanish translation suggests, but of dough and thus the fauna too is rendered edible for human consumption. An imagined version of the natural world which the practices of this wealthy class of planters, through enslaved labour, are in the process of destroying, as seen with the fire which opens the chapter, is recreated for the aesthetic pleasure of the guests. These representations of flora and fauna, are meant not only to be looked at but to be consumed, devoured, a metaphor for man’s supposed dominion over nature and ravenous appetite for destruction. A huge quantity of flowers and milk is also ordered for the wedding, and the extractivist nature of the lavish lifestyle of São Paulo’s slave-owning elite is emphasized when Almeida writes that ‘o casamento de Nicota despovoava os jardins e secava a garganta dos novinhos.’ Such focus on the word ‘massa’ may seem unfounded but it was only upon engaging in the translation and reading Rodríguez Otero’s choice of ‘pasta de modelar’ that I began to reflect on what it might mean for Almeida’s menagerie to be read as edible in the context of the novel.

In her dissertation, which recounts the process of translating *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, Flora Thomson-DeVeaux presents “a reflective practice of translation informed by a comparative reading of previous translations of the same text”. She highlights that “the translation process can shed new light on our readings of the original”.¹⁴ While there currently only exists one translation of *A Família Medeiros* into Spanish, and none into English, unlike Machado’s novel, which has been translated several times and

¹³ Antonio Jose de Souza Rego. *Diccionario do doceiro brasileiro*. Rio de Janeiro: J.G. de Azevedo, 1892.

¹⁴ Flora Thomson-DeVeaux. *Toward a New Translation of Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. Brown University, 2019, p.58.

into many languages, I have on occasion found it useful to look at the Spanish for a different perspective on a particular point. More enlightening, however, has been looking into how various English language translators, over the past century, have tackled specific challenges presented by a range of nineteenth-century Brazilian novels, such as titles and forms of address, as well as the use of language concerning race and slavery.

Almeida's work has been described as an important document of the period and social context, but it is important to remember that her text represents a well-off, white abolitionist's view of the society of the time. The novel is filled with racial descriptors that are used to refer to characters of colour and which carry different weight and meaning depending on context and speaker and whose translation must be negotiated without imposing a foreign understanding of racial categories. It is important to note that the same word often can and should be translated differently in different contexts. Flora Thompson DeVeaux, in her translation of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, insists on foregrounding the enslaved status of characters in the novel through her choices of the various words used to refer to enslaved people. She consistently translates 'moleque' as 'slave boy,' for example; 'mucama' becomes 'slave,' while 'pajem' is translated variously as 'servant,' 'servant boy' and 'slave.'¹⁵ *The Family Medeiros* is populated by a huge number of named and unnamed enslaved characters whose condition might be lost in translation, especially given the presence of a range of free migrant workers employed equally in the field and within the household. At the start of Chapter 13, 'os pajens e as mucamas' are described travelling into town for the wedding in advance of the family. I decided, in this instance on 'house slaves' rather than an alternative such as valets and housemaids, which might render invisible their condition of enslavement. This also serves to highlight the fact that although, in this chapter, they are not with the majority of those enslaved by the Medeiros family, who are preparing their uprising during the family's absence, they, too live in bondage. This choice of translation is a compromise and forfeits the gender distinction made in the original in favor of stressing of the condition of enslavement. However, the designation "mucamas" and "pajens" appear frequently throughout the text

¹⁵ Machado de Assis. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. Translated by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux. New York: Penguin Books, 2020.

in different contexts and can be translated differentially to subtly give a fuller sense of their meaning over the course of the novel. For example, Thomson-DeVeaux fills out the meaning of ‘pajem’ by translating it separately as ‘slave’ and ‘servant boy,’ conveying better, thus, the gender, enslaved condition, and role of such a character within the plot.

Words relating to characters’ functions, occupations, and rank presented various types of challenge. This includes the roles of people at the plantation, such as the *feitor*, translated variously as *overseer* and *slavedriver*. The title of *Comendador*, used by Octavio’s father and the patriarch of the Medeiros family, proved a little trickier, however. In nineteenth-century Brazil, the title was an honorific designation bestowed upon members of certain chivalric or ‘merit’-based orders, such as the *Imperial Ordem de Cristo* or the *Imperial Ordem Militar de São Bento de Avis*. The title was awarded to businessmen, politicians, military men, and slaveholding plantation owners for service to the Empire or for financing public works and was a marker of social prestige in a society that cared much about hierarchy. In the recent translation of *A Falência*, the title is translated as ‘Commander,’ as it is in a 2000 translation of *O Cortiço*.¹⁶ Although one might refer to a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in a similar way, I feel that, on its own, the word has a specific military or naval feeling in English. In her translation of *Úrsula*, Pinto-Bailey opts for ‘Colonel’ to translate the same word; again, I feel this has more military connotations in English. Other translators have opted to leave the word in the original. This seems to be the best option, although as there is not an easy way for English readers to find a good definition of the word, I decided to insert an explanatory footnote upon its first appearance. Maintaining the Portuguese causes a level of defamiliarization with the reader of the translation; it is a reminder that they are, in fact, reading a work in translation and offers an opportunity for a greater understanding of a cultural specificity, which would otherwise be lost. For this same reason, I have chosen to leave certain forms of address, such as ‘Dona’ and ‘Senhor,’ in the original Portuguese. Dr. Morton, who is introduced in the opening chapter, is an American living in Brazil. He is Octavio’s former

¹⁶ Júlia Lopes de Almeida. *The Bankruptcy*. Translated by Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry. London: UCL Press, 2023.

Aluísio Azevedo. *The Slum*. Translated by David H. Rosenthal. Oxford University Press: 2000.

tutor and, when the plot begins, teaches a couple of classes at the local college. Noticing that the character becomes ‘Señor’ Morton in the Spanish translation, I realized that there might be confusion over his profession if he was rendered Doctor Morton in English. However, not wanting to lose the reverence conveyed in the ‘Dr.’ form of address, which refers to his higher education and not any kind of medical practice, I reached the compromise of maintaining ‘Dr.’ when it is used in conjunction with his name in the form of address but shifting to ‘professor’ to translate ‘doutor’ when it is used in standalone reference to the character.

One word which appears throughout the text, and has fallen out of use, but which the author does not feel the need to gloss, is *trole*. The word does not appear in dictionaries from the nineteenth century, and, within literature, I have only found it once elsewhere, in Aluísio de Azevedo’s *A Coruja*. The Editora Mulheres edition of *A Família Medeiros* glosses the word as a ‘carro baixo de tração animal usado nas fazendas, cidadezinhas e vilarejos, antes do advento do automóvel, transporte rústico.’¹⁷ Hunting through newspaper archives, I found advertisements for *trolls*, described as having been adopted by most planters because of their light and flexible construction and ability to take on bumpy roads. To differentiate it from *carruagem*, or carriage, with which it is often accompanied, I have translated the word as buggy, a light, four-wheeled carriage, which looks quite similar to the illustrations of *trolls* in the newspaper advertisements that I consulted.

The author often engages in long, detailed descriptions of the fauna and flora of the region, frequently using words that have no translation in English other than the scientific Latin name for the species. In order to avoid making the text read overly scientific, I have opted on occasion, where there is no colloquial English equivalent for employing what some translators have referred to as stealth glossing, translating *a araponga* as ‘the araponga bird,’ thus saving the need for an excessively long endnotes section.

In the very first chapter, Octavio himself notes the difficulties of translation, recounting his experience of following the Brazilian abolitionist movement in newspapers while away in Europe: ‘de tão longe, não se pode fazer ideia perfeita das coisas que os jornais

¹⁷ Júlia Lopes de Almeida. *A Família Medeiros*. Florianópolis, SC: Editora Mulheres, 2009.

exageram e as traduções alteram.’ There are myriad strategies for approaching translation and it seems to me that focusing on the text’s functions and impacts both in its original context and with the target audience is a more effective approach than being tied to any idea of authorial intent or a strict allegiance to a sense of the ‘original’ especially when multiple versions of the text appeared in the author’s lifetime. I present in the section Literatura/Literature of this *Brasil/Brazil’s* issue my translation of the 1st and 13th chapters of Júlia Lopes de Almeida’s novel.

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