

# Bertina Lopes: a militant with a brush

## *Bertina Lopes: munida com uma trincha*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to reclaim visual artist Bertina Lopes (Maputo, 11 July 1924 — Rome, 10 February 2012) and her muted presence and indirect participation in the nationalist fraternity of Mozambique of the 1950s and 1960s. On examining certain alliances, particularly her co-authorship as illustrator of the first edition of Luís Bernardo Honwana's *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso* (We Killed the Mangy Dog), 1964, I consider and seek to redress Lopes's tacit experience of colonial racism, which arguably drove her unflinching anti-colonial militancy with a brush. In this, I posit that Lopes be considered a founding figure in a women's genealogy of African modernist achievement. Bertina Lopes | Luís Bernardo Honwana | anti-colonial and independence modernisms | mozambican art

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### Keywords

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### Resumo

Este ensaio procura recuperar a memória da artista Bertina Lopes (Maputo, 11 Julho 1924-Roma, 10 Fevereiro 2012) e a sua presença e participação, embora indirecta, na fraternidade nacionalista de Moçambique dos anos 50 e 60. Ao salientar certas alianças, nomeadamente a sua colaboração, na qualidade de ilustradora dialogante, na primeira edição do livro *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso*

(1964), de Luís Bernardo Honwana, procuro analisar a sua experiência tácita do colonialismo racial português, experiência essa que a levou a munir-se contra o império com uma trincha. Deste modo, proponho que a artista seja considerada como uma das figuras fundadoras de uma genealogia modernista africana.

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**Palavras-chave**

Bertina Lopes | Luís Bernardo Honwana | modernismos anti-coloniais e independentistas | arte moçambicana

I begin not with the memory of Bertina Lopes, but her peer, the late Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who had grown up walking tall in her home, whose parents had taught her she was Black and that she must be proud of her blackness (Msimang 2018, 16).<sup>1</sup>



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Image 1  
Winnie Mandela on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1964, waiting to see her husband being taken to prison. On this day, Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> Photograph published under fair use policy

<sup>1</sup> Madikizela-Mandela's exact words, as extracted from her memoir *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* were "... I had grown up walking tall in my home. I had been taught by my mother and my father that I must walk tall. I am me; I am black; I must be proud of my blackness ... I am going to be who my father taught me to be. I am going to walk tall" (Msimang 2018, 16).

<sup>2</sup> Sourced from <https://africa.cgtn.com/2017/09/04/faces-of-africa-09032017-winnie-mandela-black-saint-or-sinner-part-1/>

On June 12, 1964, as Nelson Mandela and his co-accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, Madikizela-Mandela was to become the subject of scrutiny — to use the parlance of the time, a “subject of interest” — to South Africa’s Security Branch and “enemy number one of the racist apartheid regime” (Msimang 2018, 5). Having spoken eloquently and magnetically in her husband’s defence, the police were quick to begin their campaign of harassment and destabilization. At this moment of loss and departure, in the “midst of the singing and the tears and the noise” (Msimang 2018, 37) (Image 1), coupled with the overwhelming idea that she might never see her husband again, a Security Branch infiltrate grabbed her by the arm and coldly hissed “Remember your permit! You must be back in Johannesburg by 12 o’clock” (Msimang 2018, 37). And thus began the history of torment, vigilance, banning, loss of employment and successive bouts of separation from those most dear to her: first her husband, then her children.<sup>3</sup>

This was South Africa, but in neighbouring Mozambique, a mere seven-hour drive from the bustling Highveld metropolis, similar things were happening as the anti-colonial insurgence started to take form, with covert acts of surveillance, arrests, intimidation and coercion, exacted on victims by the Portuguese security police. If in neighbouring South Africa, the threats were uttered in Afrikaans or English, in Mozambique, the idiom of oppression was Portuguese, hidden beneath the benevolent cloak of lusotropicalism.<sup>4</sup> For Bertina, 1964 would be the year she would go into exile, choosing Rome as her preferred place of shelter and assembly.<sup>5</sup>

### Historical prelude

Whilst colonization was condemned in the international arena in the 1960s,<sup>6</sup> Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique were still under Portuguese colonial rule, and were not even close to decolonisation. In fact, as Sayaka Funada-Classen

<sup>3</sup> Lopes and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela’s paths would eventually cross in 1998 on the occasion of her one-woman show in Cape Verde.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of Lusotropicalism originates from *The Masters and the Slaves*, a 1933 book by Brazilian Gilberto Freyre, which suggested that the Portuguese had a special way of living in the tropics, characterized by racial mixing; Brazil being the example of this lusotropical ideal. The term was employed later by the Portuguese dictatorial regime as a tool to feed and defend a myth of “sweet colonization” (Cabecinhas 2014, 495) and justify Portugal’s permanence in African and Asian territories.

<sup>5</sup> In a text republished after her death, Paola Rolletta (2012) recalls how Lopes’s home, with its view over Rome’s arches, domes and the Basilica became a “parallel embassy.” I have been told time and again that it was the place to visit, a “passagem obrigatória” (compulsory passage). Many illustrious visitors left their signatures on her walls. On the occasion of the signing of the General Peace Agreement between RENAMO and FRELIMO, in 1992, delegates visited her home, sealing its place in history, and Lopes as an unofficial diplomat. It was also from here that Lopes would send boxes of medicine that would line the corridors of her home (information disclosed by Arlete Silva in a short interview in 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Since the late 1950s, the proverbial winds of change had been blowing over Africa. On 14 December 1960, at the fifteenth UN General Assembly, “self-determination”, which had been previously understood as a principle in the United Nations Charter, was proclaimed a right. Furthermore, it was decided that colonialism should be brought to an end. Jointly proposed by 43 Asian and African countries, the resolution was adopted with 89 nations voting in favour. At the same assembly, a harsh resolution was passed against the Portuguese government, declaring that what Portugal claimed were “overseas territories” were in fact colonies. As Funada Classen (2012, 209) notes, by this time, “decolonisation had become mainstream in world politics.”

notes,<sup>7</sup> oppression was even harsher than ever. Cultural organisations had been banned in 1955. After the 1958 presidential election in Portugal, even the vaguest remark that could be construed as anti-establishment or anti-colonial warranted detention. Following the Mueda riot of June 1960,<sup>8</sup> where between 9 and 36 people died, early nationalists concluded that in order to be free from colonial rule, and its attendant exploitation, violence and oppression—brought about by practices such as slave trading, hut taxes, military expeditions, the provision of cheap labour to neighbouring South African mines and forced labour in the cotton fields—they would have to resort to armed resistance against the Portuguese.<sup>9</sup> To this effect, on 2 October 1960, the United Democratic Union of Mozambique (UDENAMO) formed in Bulawayo, and in Nyasaland, migrant workers from the Tete District formed the African National Union for Mozambican Independence (UNAMI). Together with MANU (formed by the Makonde from northern Mozambique in Tanzania and later Kenya), they comprised Mozambique’s proto-nationalist movement and the basis of FRELIMO, created in then Tanganyika in June of 1962 as a “united movement” for the liberation of Mozambique. In its first congress, held on 23 September 1962, the aims of FRELIMO were defined: to promote the efficient organization of the struggle. FRELIMO or Frente de Libertação de Moçambique launched its first attack in 1964, waging a guerrilla “People’s War” to destabilize the Portuguese colonial government and unite Mozambicans in the move towards independence. According to the World Peace Foundation (2015), to stamp out the rebellion, the Salazar-Caetano regime directed Portuguese Armed Forces (PAF) to pursue a “brutal counter guerrilla campaign” (World Peace Foundation 2015), which entailed mass atrocities against civilians, the routine detainment and torture of civilians to extract information about FRELIMO (acts included whippings and electric shocks), arbitrary killings by individual soldiers, the forced relocation of peoples into controlled villages known as *aldeamentos*. According to this same website, PAF commanded civilians to

<sup>7</sup> At the time of publication of *The Origins of War in Mozambique*, which I draw on in this section, Funada-Claasen was Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. She was a representative of the Japanese NGO Mozambique Support Network, established in 2000 after the Mozambique Great Flood. Her book is the result of research that was conducted over a fifteen-year period, since 1996. In addition to primary sources and archival research in five countries, she interviewed more than 350 people to produce this study.

<sup>8</sup> This public meeting or *banja* was held 16 June 1960 to negotiate the return to Mozambique of the Maconde workers that had emigrated to then Tanganyika. According to Funada-Claassen, the colonial administrator divided the attendants into two groups: the Catholic priest, Asians and local chiefs were moved to the veranda of the administration office and others were left outside. When the district governor arrived, the administrator ordered the crowd to salute the Portuguese flag. The crowd refused and intervened when two people were tied up and driven away. In response, the administrator ordered the police or *sipaios* to shoot. According to Michael Cahen (1999, 31), there were between 9 and 36 deaths. This is a simplified account of a complex event. For context and a detailed narrative, I suggest the reader start with Cahen.

<sup>9</sup> In her book, first published in 1991, and currently in its fourth edition, Ana Barradas includes several testimonies of the treatment that was meted out on workers in Mozambique. A farmhand from Nampula described the forced labour in Netia in 1953 as follows: “On the *picada* we worked from five in the morning until five in the evening, first in our cotton field and then in the food fields. We worked under the constant supervision of our headman and *regulos*, of the cotton agents and their foremen, of the *sipaios* and police from the administrative post in Netia. They didn’t let us rest, watching us always to keep us from leaving the *picada*.” I have drawn the translated account from Bridget O’Laughlin (2001, 23).

abandon their homes and possessions within 5-15 days of notification. “Those that refused were commonly labelled terrorists and killed” (World Peace Foundation 2015). Between 750 000 to one million people were relocated over the course of the war to poorly planned camps without adequate sanitation and farming plots. The total number of civilian deaths during the War of Independence is placed somewhere between 30 000 and 40 000.

### The making of a “militant”

Like Winnie Madikizela-Mandela,<sup>10</sup> Lopes too fell in love with and married a man of the resistance, Virgílio de Lemos, the initiator of a Mozambican poetic modernity (Secco 2015, 15). Lemos too was arrested, tried and jailed for the desecration of the Portuguese flag.<sup>11</sup> Together, husband and wife embraced multiplicity and diversity as integral to identity. In his oeuvre, Lemos somewhat romantically muses on his own identity as melange of eastern and north African traditions, recalling his own birth and delivery on the Island of Ibo, part of the Quirimbas archipelago, by local midwives, and his ancestors, Portuguese seafarers who toured the Lisbon-Rio-Goa triangle (Secco 2015, 15). In 1952, Lemos helped found *Msafo*,<sup>12</sup> the short-lived literary journal that sought to forge a Mozambican literature by figuratively plunging into the islands and simultaneously escaping their insularity; a double proposal that embraced Mozambique and its islands’ diversity, affirming its plurality, whilst acknowledging their profound geographic isolation. Lemos did not see his roots lying in the ground, but as airborne rhizomes. These “raízes aéreas” neither sank or set, but spread out into the world, in search of cultures writ large (Moraes 2011, 58). In this, he arguably anticipates Glissant’s archipelagic thinking.<sup>13</sup> Between 1954 and 1961, whilst Lemos and Lopes were married, he participated in the Mozambican resistance, collaborating with the journals *O Brado Africano*, *Tribuna*, *Notícias* and *A Voz de Moçambique*, a left-wing newspaper at the time.

<sup>10</sup> The parallel stops short when one considers the disparate duration of the harassment endured by Madikizela-Mandela and Lopes. The latter abandoned Mozambique definitively in 1964, making Rome her home in exile. I establish the comparison to evoke and recall, with license, how women were submitted to constant surveillance and harassment, and eventually separated from their loved ones. To better understand this state, see Ndebele 2003.

<sup>11</sup> I mention Lemos here to suggest how the couple communed in an ideal of hybridity and multiplicity. In no way do I wish to perpetuate or subject Bertina Lopes to the subordinating and exasperating trope of “the-wife-of” which I am sure she would have rejected.

<sup>12</sup> Named after the orchestral competitions of the Tsopi (Alpers 1983, 168).

<sup>13</sup> In his 1997 book, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant argues that the entire world is becoming an archipelago (Bongie 1999, 89) and insists that we distance ourselves from insular and continental ways of thinking to understand that it is through contact with others that we change, and that this does not necessarily imply a loss of the self.

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Image 2

Undated portrait of Bertina Lopes in a red beret, taken by her collector and close friend, Manuel de Brito. Image reproduced with the permission of Arlete Silva.



The daughter of Adelino Lopes, identified in the literature as a white Portuguese settler, and Cândida Mauwasi Vicente do Rosário, her indigenous Ronga mother,<sup>14</sup> Bertina Lopes (Image 2) was a cosmopolitan bi-racial modern woman. Under António Oliveira Salazar's patriarchy, she was arguably a cultural transgressor and anti-colonial legionnaire, defying a conservative, prescriptive and normative society with her anti-colonial allegiance and alliances. Hers is a border narrative at work, a story of transgression and self-imagining, but also of selfless work to see her people uplifted.

Born in 1924, Lopes formed part of a group of middle class multiracial Africans who worked in the 1950s and 1960s, writing, painting and teaching towards an imagined liberated future; a group of intellectuals that included Mozambican luminaries Noémia de Sousa, José Craveirinha and Luís Bernardo Honwana, with whom she collaborated on the book *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso* (We Killed the Mangy Dog, 1964) with a series of drawings in Indian ink. Lopes was an example of the self-styled, educated, modern

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<sup>14</sup> In his memoir *Pretos por Fora e por Dentro*, Eugénio Adelino de Lemos, her only living son, narrates an episode of blatant racism, recalling how his grandmother, Cândida or Indida, was refused entry to the Scala Cinema in then Lourenço Marques. He writes: “Só sei que à entrada, a mãe e a tia, que eram mulatas, se viram confrontadas com a nega do porteiro, que a senhora minha avó não podia entrar porque era negra” (1995, 16). Author's translation: “What I know is that at the entrance, my grandmother was denied entry because she was Black.”

Mozambican woman Lilly Havstad (2019) writes about in her thesis.<sup>15</sup> Like the writers Vera da Costa and Noémia de Sousa, whom she is likely to have encountered at the “Associação Africana” (African Association, formerly known as the *Grémio Africano*)<sup>16</sup> Lopes, following Sousa’s stead, came to embrace her own Blackness and what it meant to be Mozambican: a *mélange* of African, European, Indian and other Asian influences. Like Vera da Costa and Noémia de Sousa, she too challenged the colonialist assimilationist ideology<sup>17</sup> which had long denigrated her people, dreaming of an anticolonial future and an egalitarian Mozambique whilst portraying colonial discontent.

According to the racialized system of the time, 1950s Mozambican society was divided into categories of *indígena* (indigenous), *não-indígena* (non-indigenous) and

<sup>15</sup> After World War II, the “modern girl” became an important yet controversial figure in Lourenço Marques, especially with the emergence of women’s pages in local newspapers. Until then, Salazar had successfully promoted a nuclear family ideal that was rooted in Catholic ideology of women’s subservience to men as wives and mothers, limiting women’s activities in public life. But with the emergence of *O Brado Africano*, things began to change. Writers like Vera da Costa and Noémia de Sousa began to define the modern woman, much to the chagrin of men, as educated wives, mothers, workers and citizens; respectable and socially-minded contributors to society. For do Vale, “the modern girl lived ‘integrated in her time’ which meant that she ‘understood the problems and needs of her time,’ and sought to address them with an eye for the future” (Havstad 2019, 127). She maintained that mothers and wives remained central, but also heralded them as comrades and workers (128). “Do Vale believed that to become modern meant creating a *new* social order in which women would no longer ‘behave at pleasure of man’ and instead, serve alongside men in working towards the advancement, or ‘progress’ of modern society” (129). Noémia de Sousa, who took up the reigns of the *Página para a Mulher* (Women’s Page) in 1949, continued do Vale’s vision, encouraging her readers to “recognize and embrace their African heritage, and to stop suppressing it” (134). These figures together “challenged the strictures of women’s lives in colonial Lourenço Marques in areas of education, citizenship, and work “outside and inside the home” (141).

<sup>16</sup> The Grémio Africano of Lourenço Marques was established in 1908 by a multiracial elite that pivoted around the idea of education for all. In 1938, the Grémio became the Associação Africana. It was a pressure group where from a young group of intellectuals emerged, the “Acção Cultural,” and possibly the draft plan for a Nativist Party. The newspapers *O Africano* and *O Brado Africano* served as mouthpieces and disseminators in the fight against discriminatory and racist laws of exception (the assimilation laws) in the 1920s. For more, see Neves 2009.

<sup>17</sup> “Assimilation enabled the *indígena* African subject to become a Portuguese citizen if she assimilated to a European way of life. It was seen, as Havstad notes, as a way of accessing a “better life” (Havstad 2019, 52). This meant being able to provide for their families, better education opportunities, being promoted to a better salaried job. Havstad notes how the status came with a certificate of ‘exemption,’ called the *alvará de isenção* which identified the assimilated Africans as exempt from hut tax and from the *indigenato* forced labour system, otherwise known as *chibalo*, which paid little to nothing in mostly agricultural work and state (and sometimes private) industries. The *alvará* also functioned as an identity card (the equivalent of a South African *dompas* or passbook) in urban spaces of Lourenço Marques. For more on how these passbooks affected the lives of South African labourers, I suggest Miriam Tlali’s brilliant 1987 novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*.

*assimilado* (assimilated).<sup>18</sup> In the eyes of colonial society, Lopes was born into a system that officially classified her as *não-indígena*, given that she was under the tutelage of a white parent. But this does not mean that she was not seen as an *assimilada* outside the protective and nurturing walls of her family home. One might argue that in the eyes of the colonial authorities, her racial status might have been tenuous, weak and susceptible to review should she find herself on the wrong side of the law.

As a *não-indígena*, Lopes was one of the few Mozambican children to benefit from a Portuguese education. Aged 12 (Sá Nogueira 1985, 32), she left Mozambique to study at boarding school in Lisbon (Lopes 1981), and later art at Lisbon's Applied Arts School (later named Escola Artística António Arroio in honour of its benefactor).<sup>19</sup> She is likely to have been one of, if not the only Black student on campus, which made her extremely visible on the one hand, and terribly lonely on the other. Lopes would have been aware of her fortune, acknowledging in an interview in 1981 (Lopes 1981) how she would have otherwise been precluded from tertiary education. At the time, the rare Mozambican student who matriculated had one of two choices: white Mozambicans, and bi-racial or multiracial Mozambicans, could study in Portugal (provided they had relatives there).

<sup>18</sup> For clarity, the assimilated were at the top of the racial hierarchy, immediately below whites. This artificial pyramid was implemented by the Portuguese to promote “cultural whitening”. “Theoretically, any [Black] African or *mestiço* could apply to become an *assimilado* or *civilizado*” writes Allen Isaacman, adding the recollections of Raul Honwana, Luís Bernardo's father, to this: “Africans who wanted to be considered “civilized” had to pass an examination by answering certain questions and by allowing the committee to go to their homes to see how they lived and if they knew how to eat at a table as Whites did, if they wore shoes, and if they only had one wife. When Africans passed these examinations, they were given a document called the “certificate of assimilation” for which they paid half a pound sterling or its equivalent” (1988, 70).

With a certificate of assimilation, holders could legally register their children's births and have access to courts. As previously mentioned, holders were also freed from obligatory hut tax and conscription into the forced labour system. *Assimilados* also had access to higher paying jobs and travel without permission.

To gain a certificate, the Black community had to undergo a “degrading scrutiny of their lifestyle” (Isaacman 1988, 70), in addition to patience and perseverance in the face of mounting Portuguese colonial bureaucracy. After acquiring assimilation, the status could be revoked at any given time. To this effect, Isaacman recounts how in 1948, the Central Office of Native Affairs “undertook a systematic investigation to weed out those *assimilados* who were ‘back-sliding’ or who did not meet new, more stringent requirements” (1998, 71).

In 1950, approximately 5 000 out of an estimated population of 5 650 000 were regarded as *assimilados* (Isaacman 1988, 68). Another important distinction, besides the miniscule population of *assimilados*—the proverbial one percent—that Isaacman emphatically points to is how this ideal, together with the “twin myths” of multi-racialism and the Portuguese “civilizing mission” combined to promote a colonial capitalist regime. “These concepts were intended to weaken non-white solidarity, co-opt potential insurgents, and legitimate the exploitation of cheap non-*assimilado* African labor. The presence of black and brown Portuguese citizens also enabled Lisbon to proclaim that its commitment to a multi-racial society was unique among all the European colonial powers” (Isaacman 1988, 71). What Isaacman refers to as the “twin myths” still holds and begs debunking in contemporary Portuguese society today.

<sup>19</sup> This important school was founded in 1919 as an applied arts school. Lopes completed her course in Lithographic Drawing in 1931, at a time when the school was transitioning from an applied arts model to an industrial model (Santos 2016). Little is known about the demographic of this school, which is in itself rather telling and constitutes a rich research avenue, which I would encourage scholars to pursue.

“Indigenes” could study in neighbouring South Africa.<sup>20</sup> After António Arroio, where she studied under Lino António and Celestino Alves, Lopes enrolled in Lisbon’s Fine Arts Academy. Here she mingled with peers Manuel Cargaleiro, Jorge Botelho, Marcelino Vespeira, Júlio Resende and Nuno Sampaio (Sá Nogueira 1985). Vespeira was a well-known surrealist and critic of the *Estado Novo* regime, hoisting a banner with the words “a arte fascista faz mal à vista” (fascist art damages the eyes) at an event in 1974. This period is likely to have been one of political awakening for Lopes. Although I have found no evidence in the literature, she may have frequented the Casa dos Estudantes do Império (House for the Students of the Empire), created in 1944/5 to receive students from the colonies. Here, African students mingled, had meals, practiced sports and studied together. They also “discussed [and defied] socio-political issues such as living conditions in Portuguese society, the manifestations of racism they encountered and the subaltern status assigned to their own motherlands” (Passos 2020, 148).

After completing her schooling in fine arts, Lopes returned to Mozambique to lecture drawing at the Escola Comercial. According to Mozambican art historian Alda Costa (2012, 7), the veils had been lifted from her eyes. For the first time, she noticed the inequities that characterized colonial Mozambique and the discrepancy between the living conditions of those on the outskirts in horizontal slums and the vertical colonial centre. She began to slowly question and push back against the colonial paradigm, producing works like *Se as Crianças* (If the children) (1963) and *Olhos Brancos de Farinha de Milho* (White Mealie Meal Eyes) (1961),<sup>21</sup> populated with emaciated groups of unaccompanied children, with nothing to wear and nothing to eat but mealie meal or *xima*; the intensity of the whites of their wide eyes punctuating the canvas with a piercing despondency. Between 1953 and 1962, she taught at the Escola Técnica General Machado. According to her students, her classroom was marked by originality and the departure from colonial biases. In their words, she was a libertarian (Angius 2012).

It seems rather unsurprising then that Pancho Guedes, a settler architect and patron of the arts, would have teamed her up with Luís Bernardo Honwana, punctuating the latter’s *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso*, with fragments of drawings that express the bitter life and curiosity of impoverished urban dwellers. A mother herself, of twin boys Virgílio Bruno and Eugénio Adelino, aged nine then, Lopes was drawn to the plight of

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**20** A case in point is Eduardo Mondlane who on completing his primary education found he could not attend secondary school under Portuguese regulatory restrictions. Through the American Methodist Episcopal Mission in Khambane, he was able to attend the Douglas Laing Smit Secondary School in Lemana, South Africa. After graduating, he went on to study at the Jan Hofmeyer School of Social Work. After matriculating, Mondlane enrolled in the faculty of Social Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand, one of the few universities open to Black students. At Wits, he was elected by fellow students (mostly white) to represent them on the Student Representative Council and the National Student Conference. After the general election in 1948, and the subsequent implementation of Malan’s apartheid policies, Mondlane’s permit was withdrawn. In spite of appeals and protests, he was expelled from the country. “The desire to fight the white man and liberate my people was intensified after I was expelled from South Africa in 1949,” he said (Shore 1992, 41).

**21** These works are reproduced side by side on page 23 of the book *Bertina Lopes: Homenagem*, published in Maputo in 2012.

the city's minors. To my mind, the experience of working with Honwana on this suite of drawings is indicative on the one hand of the “constellational modernism” (Saggerman, 2019)<sup>22</sup> that characterizes her oeuvre, and on the other, the cause that led her to a work she took great pride in, *Olhos Brancos de Farinha de Milho* of 1965<sup>23</sup> but also her difficult departure from Mozambique, having fallen, due to her association with Honwana, under PIDE's radar.

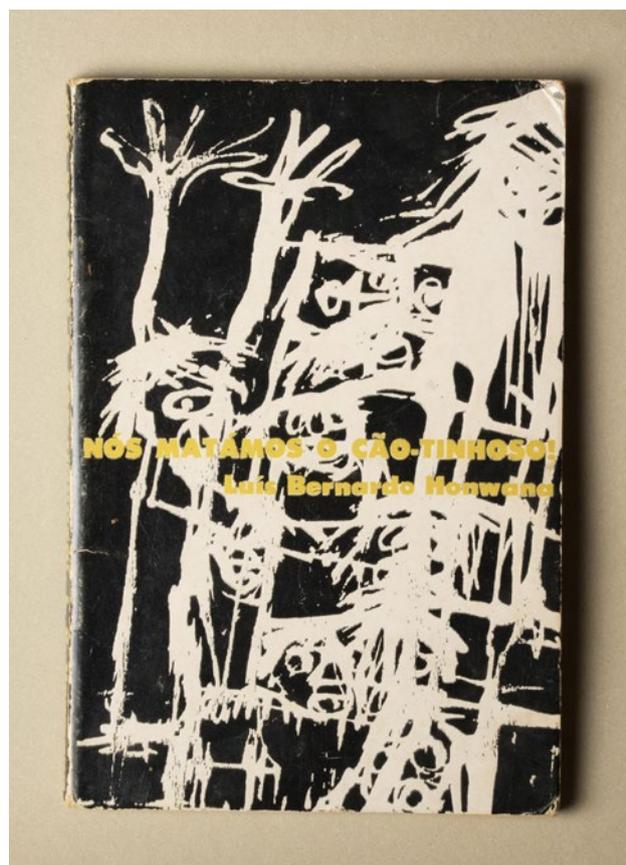
Image 3

Cover art by Bertina

Lopes. Indian ink on paper.

Photography:

Carlos Marzia Studio.



First published in Portuguese in 1964, the black and white embossed cover to *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso* (Image 3) gave tactility and life to the group of mangled figures;

<sup>22</sup> As I understand it, constellational modernism, coined by art historian Alex Dika Saggerman, refers to the blending of styles that the viewer is asked to decode when viewing a modernist work of art. I have stretched Saggerman's concept to include poets and writers that inflect how we read and appreciate an artist's production.

<sup>23</sup> This later work is a significant departure from the earlier oil on canvas, dated 1961. Whereas the early piece is a textured painting, dominated by the figure of an expectant mother who occupies the right upper half of the canvas with her growing bosom, and is surrounded to her left by her four hungry children who cascade around her exhausted life-giving body, the 1965 piece is a continuation of the stark work Lopes produced for the Honwana book. The four figures portrayed on this canvas, like their kin included in the book, raise their hands to the sky. One of the boys notably holds a bird, an evolving symbol in the artist's body of work.

their scruffy hair, all-seeing eyes and spindly arms. The arrangement was decided by Guedes, who acted on the book as the graphic designer.<sup>24</sup>

The first drawing to appear inside the book was juxtaposed by Guedes with Honwana's opening short story, *Nós Matamos o Cão-Tinhoso*. The image presents the outline of two starkly embraced and indissociably entwined, emasculated figures on a pitch-black background. The shorter figure embraces the taller, possibly male figure. These brut-inspired works are a departure from the artist's earlier realist and visibly academic repertoire. Immediate and impulsive, almost free of form, the artist's quick hand conveys urgency, raw emotion and a connectedness to reality, communicating her subjects' downcast eyes, and the joylessness and unrelenting pang of their harsh lives. Honwana's narrative begins precisely with an anthropomorphising and haunting description of the eyes of the mangy dog, eyes which Lopes adopted, translated and versioned in her extensive and expansive oeuvre in painting and sculpture: "Mangy-dog had blue eyes with no shine in them at all, but they were enormous, and always filled with tears that trickled down his muzzle. They frightened me, those eyes, so big, and looking at me like someone asking for something without wanting to say it."<sup>25</sup>

Briefly, as a *Bildungsroman*, the auto diegetic narrator in the story assumes the point of view of a child. The boy undergoes a violent transformation from innocence to young adulthood. The traumatic event—the group killing of the distemper and leishmaniosis ridden dog—brings the young narrator to see the world for what it is, and what needs to happen (Topa 2018, 322). For Lovemore Ranga Mutaire (2014), the dog represents a "sick and decadent colonial system that must be destroyed in order to make way for a new reality of existence, free of discrimination and racism."

The second of Lopes's drawings appears alongside another of Honwana's short stories, "Dina". The image presents a cluster of five children, huddled together in the lower half of the page. Their round eyes peer at us, piercing the lines that seem to hold their heads. One imagines the group on the tips of their toes, peering, trying to make out what is happening above the line, or perhaps to keep above the line. *Dina* is a story of oppression on many levels. It is the harrowing tale of Madala, an old man who manually extracts weeds from the cornfields whilst the white colonial overseer rapes his daughter.<sup>26</sup> His inability to respond, his dissociation from what is happening, has been pinned to hysterical

<sup>24</sup> Subsequent editions, including the English translation, were rearranged and no longer include Lopes's drawings and Guedes's sensitive arrangement. A number of these drawings exist in the Dori and Amâncio Guedes Collection and have been reproduced in the 2010 book *As Áfricas de Pancho Guedes* (The Africas of Pancho Guedes), on pages 236 and 237 respectively. I assume that the vertical drawings would all have the same dimensions (65 x 52 cm) and the horizontal drawings 52 x 65 cm. The drawing in the aforementioned book are dated 1963 and are identified as Indian ink on paper. Several attempts were made on my part to contact the collection's manager, but these proved unsuccessful. Compounded by the constraints posed by COVID, I was unable to view these drawings and ascertain whether the Guedes archive holds further material that could potentially shed further light on this collaboration.

<sup>25</sup> This is Dorothea Guedes, Pacho Guedes's wife's translation from 1969.

<sup>26</sup> Madala meaning old man in isiZulu and isiXhosa. This is arguably a nickname used to enforce anonymity and the prevalence of rape, trauma and exploitation.

amnesia (Marques 2008), a condition Honwana seems to posit as affecting the colonial oppressed. In the third painting, the children huddle together. They appear amplified, further abstracted alongside the story “A Velhota” (The Old Woman). In the fourth drawing, which appears alongside “Papá, Cobra e Eu” (Papa, Snake & I), a crowd of faces and curious eyes appears through a gridded fence. The figures are abstracted again, but one is able to discern multiple gaping mouths, round eyes and unkempt hair. Rather than providing a drawing for the story “A Mão dos Pretos” (The Hands of the Blacks) Honwana, Guedes and Lopes pointedly, and poignantly, included a Xerox of the palm of Lopes’s hand (Image 4). I was immediately compelled to place my hand over hers, responding to her call, as I see it, for connection and solidarity. If ever there was a moment Lopes identified as Black to express clear anti-colonial solidarity, it was here, with this indexical mark.

Critically, the inclusion of Lopes’s handprint can also be taken as an allusion to the relationship between visual technologies (photography, anthropometry and fingerprinting), colonial governance and the violence and subjugation enacted upon colonized peoples in degrading acts of measuring. These tools of administrative practice were used by colonial governors to trace and record the body, “producing an image type that was amenable to scientific analysis, archival classification, and indexical veracity” (Waits 2016, 24). As art historian Mira Rai Waits (2016) states, these were moments of imaging that inspired obedience and subjugation. The colonial administrator, on taking a handprint and placing it on a contract, “appropriated” the subject’s body. He assumed control over it. Waits adds that “confronted with such an image there would be no escape from honouring legal obligations” (2016, 8).

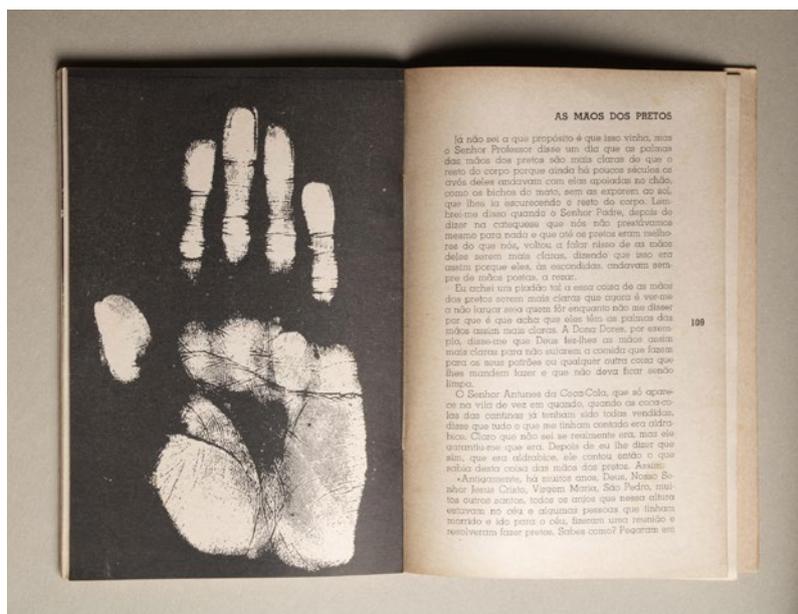


Image 4  
Lopes’s handprint.  
Photography:  
Carlos Marzia Studio.

“A Mão dos Pretos” is narrated by a child who remains nameless throughout. The boy, in his endearingly telling curiosity, interrogates several representatives of Mozambican society—a priest, a teacher, a distributor, a shop owner, anyone and everyone he encounters—looking for a satisfactory response to the question, why are the palms of Black people, why are my palms light? Hands are employed by Honwana as a synecdoche (Franco 1998, 5) for a wider discussion and acknowledgement of a structural problem in Mozambican society, one that pervaded schools, churches and colonial society at large: racialism (implemented via colonialism both through segregation and assimilation). The range of insidiously damaging and denigrating responses is indicative of the racist collective unconscious that posits whiteness as the norm. The child is happiest with his mother’s response, even though it too is heavily tainted with racial bias. For her, God made the palms of man the same “to show that what men do is only the work of men . . . That what men do is done by hands that are the same — hands of people who, if they had any sense, would know that before everything else they are men.”<sup>27</sup>

Lopes’s last drawing appears besides “Nhinguitimo”. In her drawing, a lone child, perhaps an infant, fills the page. He suckles on what looks like a pacifier. Are his raised arms a sign that he wishes to be lifted, raised, nurtured? In his text, Honwana remains true to his style, blending reality and fiction to disclose the living conditions of the majority of Mozambicans. If Honwana is a chronicler of his time (Franco 1998, 34), Lopes, like her peer Malangantana Valente Ngwenya (1936-2011), was its portraitist. The story allegorically speaks of the overthrow of colonial government. The Nhinguitimo is a southerly wind that blows in the southern region of Libombo, signalling an incoming storm. In Honwana’s tale, this wind is an allegorical, poetic representation of a guerrilla expedition:<sup>28</sup>

Now Nhinguitimo comes.

Heavy clouds break loose from the Libombo mountains, roll down the slopes, and cross over the valley. The dust wind ceases and retreats to the depths of the bush on the other side of the river. The air is motionless, the insects seek their burrows, the naked thorn trees pierce sharply into the grey sky.

Suddenly Nhinguitimo bursts through the valley and instantly sucks up the dust that fills

<sup>27</sup> For the mother’s full response, and to understand the bias, see Honwana 1969, 111. I have intentionally refrained from repeating this triggering content.

<sup>28</sup> Two years after its formation in Tanzania in 1962, Frelimo launched a guerrilla war against the Portuguese colonialists. This was the start of liberation war (*guerra da libertação*). Initially, guerrilla action was limited to ambushes and targeted assaults against military posts with immediate retreat, particularly in the north of the country. Salazar responded by attempting to contain the revolt. He adopted two strategies: weapons (Portuguese troops were sent to chase the fighters), and a programme of public works to change public perception. In addition to roads, schools and hospitals, the Portuguese Government began work on the Cahora Bassa dam (Franco 2002). According to Charlie Walker (2017), the project was accompanied by slick brochures and public announcements, lauding the benefits of the \$515 million dam, namely an expansion of farming, further European settlement, greater capacity for mining, improved communications, reduced flooding and the production of energy for export (82% of all energy was to be sold to the South African government). I mention the dam here to emphasize the international interests that were at play.

the air. Swiftly it sweeps through the lands, batters the corn stalks, and bows the thorn trees, which moan in anguish (Honwana 1969, 55).

Like Honwana, Lopes represents the new life that is stirring around her, and in her, reaching for its destiny and destination. The representation of this stirring, this vortex and whirlwind of emotions and change—the *Nhinguitimo*—manifests across Lopes's oeuvre as a metaphor for the past in the present; the radial lines which keep appearing in her work, charged with a restless energy, stand as a testament to how this moment in history affected and marked Lopes's generation.

According to Francisco Topa, “[Honwana's] work did not attract much attention at the time on the part of critics, for reasons only understood: on the one hand, the denunciatory effect of the anthology of short stories and the colonial context of the time; on the other, the situation of the author himself, arrested in that same year of 1964 on the charge of having brought subversive material from Swaziland” (2018, 319).<sup>29</sup> In actual fact, *Nós Matámos o Cão-Tinhoso* was apprehended by the authorities in September 1964 (Lemos 1965, 211, footnote 1), rendering its circulation impossible. Not only was the book censored and Honwana arrested, but Lopes too saw her life change. According to Teresa Sá Nogueira, a “young pretty irreverent mulatto, with ideas of her own, Lopes ended up attracting PIDE's attention” (Sá Nogueira 1985, 33) and was obliged to leave in a flurry. In Lopes's words, it was her teaching and ties to the Associação Africana that forced her into exile.<sup>30</sup> Each time Lopes met with José Craveirinha, Rui Nogar, Rui Baltazar, João Ferreira, Ricardo Rangel and Luís Bernardo Honwana, a PIDE informant was there.<sup>31</sup> She eventually departed for Europe, abandoning her post as a teacher. After six months in Lisbon, supported by a bursary to study ceramics under Querubim Lapa,

<sup>29</sup> Despite its censorship, the book did receive early favourable reviews by Urbano Tavares Rodrigues in the *República* newspaper and *Présence Africaine* (Topa 2018, 320). Writing for the latter, Virgílio de Lemos, who had fled to Paris two years earlier, saw in Honwana the first writer of “*mozambicainité*”: “*Il a plutôt cherché à employer un langage littéraire, cultivé, libre des obstacles très souvent intraduisible que sont certaines expressions locales et dont le sens n'est compris que par les habitants d'une région donnée. Bien que son style ne s'identifie pas totalement à l'art de conter particulier du groupe bantou auquel il appartient et bien que certains passages rappellent la virilité alliée des oeuvres de Steinbeck et de Faulkner, l'auteur révèle dans sa façon de juger les hommes, les animaux et les choses un type d'observation et d'analyse subtile et profonde, identique à celui des conteurs d'histoires bantous, sans pour autant lui ressembler*” (Lemos 1965, 211-212)

<sup>30</sup> Lopes, “Sinto nostalgia da minha terra.”

According to Eugénio de Lemos's memoirs (Lopes 1995, 39), Bertina's parents lived on Avenida 24 de Julho, next to a bus stop in the Alto Maé neighbourhood. The family home was close to the Associação Africana (Domingos 2013). It was from the family home in Alto Maé that Eugénio as a boy observed the no. 7 bus which took Black workers to Xipamanine (an informal settlement or *caniço* on the outskirts of then Lourenço Marques). It was also from this point that he would catch a different bus to the Diário de Moçambique, where he would visit his childhood idol, Luís Bernardo Honwana. Lemos describes him as a tall, good looking, bespectacled, heavy lipped man with a dense, warm voice. Behind his glasses, two elongated eyes. Lopes recalls how he would read poetry to him (Lopes 1995, 40).

<sup>31</sup> Painter Fernando Sumbana recalls the censorship. In his words, “It was hard to express ourselves when the Portuguese were here, for fear of arrest or detention. There was no freedom to speak about our problems or our poverty. To be for Frelimo was against the law. I painted because I wanted to, but also because I had to. It was the only way to express what I was thinking, what I was seeing” (Alpers 1983, 175).

she left to start a new life in Italy, only to return on independence.<sup>32</sup> By then, she had already remarried and established herself within the Italian art scene, giving flight to her abstraction and imagination, whilst never abandoning that place of communion and dream, Mafalala.



Image 5  
Bertina Lopes, *Mafalala*  
(1969-70), oil on Masonite.  
Image reproduced with  
the permission of Mary Angela  
Schroth, Consultant, Bertina  
Lopes Archive.

<sup>32</sup> Her return to Mozambique at Independence marks a new phase in her work, where she began producing work on large-scaled canvases. “I need space to paint the joy of my people” she declared (Sá Nogueira 1985, 33).

It was here, in this *caniço* (an informal settlement) that an entire generation met. For Lopes, Noémia de Sousa and José Craveirinha, Mafalala became a signifier and metaphor for a particular space and time (Mendonça 2016), the firepit and flame that warmed the nationalist clarion call. It was here too that José Craveirinha penned *Poema do Futuro Cidadão* (Poem of a Future Citizen):<sup>33</sup>

I have come from all the parts  
of a Nation yet to be.  
I have come and here I am!

I wasn't born as myself alone  
neither were you or anyone else...  
but as a Brother.

But  
I have to love to give to the clenched.  
Love being what I am  
and nothing else.

And  
I have in my heart  
screams which are not only mine  
because I come from a Country yet to be.

Ah! being what I am  
I have Love to give to all.  
I!  
Every man  
a citizen of a Nation yet to be.

Looking at Lopes' painting from 1969 (Image 5), multiple spectral figures dance before our eyes, licked by the flames of this metaphorical, eternal fire. Three children from what I see as belonging or a ghostly extension the Mangy Dog suite appear huddled together in the front, with elders in kufi caps, some with distended abdomens, present the background. It was here that Lopes sewed the seed of her identity, under the provident cashew tree, besides the corrugated metal and wood dwelling she describes in an interview with Teresa Sá Nogueira (1985). And it is *Mafalala* that best encapsulates

<sup>33</sup> Translated by Luís Rafael and Stephen Gray. See Luís Rafael, Stephen Gray and José Craveirinha, "Seven Poems by José Craveirinha", *Portuguese Studies* 12 (1996), 204, 206.

the “long-distance nationalism”<sup>34</sup> that she shared with those that stayed, and those, like her,<sup>35</sup> who were forced to leave.

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**34** First coined by Benedict Anderson, the concept of “long-distance nationalism” refers to the role exiles and immigrants have in nationalism. This is a type of nationalism that is a product of transnationalism, of keeping a transnational field of social relations between those who have migrated and those who stayed. As José Miguel Sobral (2018) has noted, it binds together immigrants and their descendants and those who have remained in a transborder citizenry. Immigrants and those who stayed share a sense of “peoplehood” and a continued commitment to the nation-state.

**35** I am referring here to Noémia de Sousa (born Carolina Noémia Abranched de Sousa). Like Lopes, Sousa attended the Associação Africana and was a life-long friend of Craveirinha. She published her poems and writing in *O Brado Africano*, a newspaper with ties to the Associação. In 1951, due to persecution by Portugal’s security police, she left Lourenço Marques for Lisbon, and in 1964, for Paris, where she was in contact with Mário Pinto de Andrade. She returned to Portugal in 1975. Besides a poet and writer, Sousa was an accomplished translator, having worked on the Portuguese translation of Aime Césaire’s *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (Passos 2020, 162).

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