

A Landscape Transformed: Narrative Shifts in Lídia Jorge's *O vento assobiando nas gruas*

Sobre Lídia Jorge

O vento assobiando nas gruas. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2002.

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Since her novelistic debut in 1980, Lídia Jorge has consistently used her fiction to develop an intricate portrait of contemporary Portuguese experience as it has developed in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution. Through the creation of characters who often reflect contradictions arising from abrupt and often unexpected changes in the nation's social fabric since the fall of the *Estado Novo* and Portugal's concomitant loss of empire, Jorge portrays a nation forced to reimagine itself and to reassess its past and present relationships with Europe and Africa. She is always conscious, however, of the limitations and dangers of using literary language to reflect collective experience. Her novels repeatedly deploy complex narrative strategies that at once condense and problematize traditional representational practices. In her continued investigations into the links between language and power, Lídia Jorge seeks, in effect, to call attention to unspoken cruelties and to the violence that frequently lurks just beneath the surface of order and method.

O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas, Jorge's eighth published novel and the winner of the *Grande Prémio* of the Portuguese Writer's Association (APE) for the year 2002, continues this project with the author's return to Valmares, a fictional district in the Algarve that was the setting of Jorge's previous novel, *O Vale da Paixão* (1998). The events of this more recent novel take place at a later date, though, and the characters are asked to play by the rules of a very different game. Revolving around an unlikely love story, the plot of *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas* recounts the meeting of two very distinct and seemingly incomprehensible worlds. As a friendship and romance develops between Milene, the orphaned granddaughter of the local matriarch, and Antonino Mata, the second son of a large Cape Verdean family, Milene's aunts and uncles, heirs to a once thriving local industry, are thrust into a

series of unexpected situations that ultimately serve to reveal their many weaknesses, fears and prejudices.

Descended from José Joaquim Leandro, founder in 1908 of the family business, *Fábrica de Conservas Leandro*, the third generation of Leandros have made names for themselves in the fields of law, commerce, education and health care. They are leaders of the community and are active in local politics. Antonino's family, originally from the island of Santiago and proud of their heritage as *bádios di pé ratchado*, are the de facto caretakers of the now defunct cannery. The Leandros disparagingly refer to the Matas as representatives of a third, and perhaps final, wave (*a terceira vaga*) in the history of their factory, which they privately refer to as the *diamante*. It is, of course, inconceivable to them that Antonino or any other members of this "third wave" should enter their private sphere or alter the course of their lives and fortunes.

The novel opens with a short section entitled "Cerimônia" in which Milene, waiting outside the factory, recalls the events put into motion by her grandmother's death five days earlier. It is August 1994 and, because the other members of Leandro family are all out of the country on vacation, Milene's grandmother, Avó Regina, had been entrusted to the care of a rest home. Her children's plan of assuring themselves tranquil, guilt-free vacations was to be ruined, nonetheless, for the old woman managed to disappear when an ambulance charged with returning her home stopped for directions at a busy gas station. Shortly thereafter, her body was found on the threshold of the *diamante*, leaving Milene to arrange for the funeral:

Pelas ruas de Santa Maria de Valmares, deambulavam magotes de pessoas estrangeiras, com o olhar vagamente espantado sob as palas dos bonés, parando diante das fachadas das casas brancas, admirativas, como diante de um Nilo seco. De resto Milene ainda se havia cruzado com algumas pessoas simpáticas, que até lhe sorriam de passagem, mas nenhuma delas tinha a ver com a sua vida, muito menos com a vida dos seu tios. Não ia pedir-lhes que parassem no lancil para lhes contar o sucedido. (23)

After five days alone in a town as empty of family and neighbors as it is full of vaguely smiling foreign tourists, Milene is drawn to the space where her grandmother's life had ended. Finding herself unable to come up with an explanation of the events that might satisfy her aunts and uncles, she retreats from the world, hiding in the factory's inner courtyard behind several rows of

laundry that the Matas had left out to dry.

The story that follows is comprised of some four hundred pages that bear the title “O Livro de Milene.” When the Matas return from Lisbon, where they had gone to watch Antonino’s brother, Janina, make his singing debut on national television, they find Milene and recognize her as their landlady’s granddaughter. After spending several days in the Matas’ care, Milene is finally reunited with her family. However, she is sent back to live in the now empty house where she receives only occasional visits from her two aunts: tia Ângela Margarida, whose husband, Rui Ludovice, is Valmares’ recently elected mayor, and tia Gininha, the wife of a successful, if somewhat shady, businessman (for a bit on his past, see 190-196). The world inhabited by Regina Leandro’s children is haunted by past mistakes and rivalries, making them incapable of caring for Milene and unwilling or unable to understand her needs. In the Mata household, on the other hand, Milene had caught a glimpse of the kindness and affection that she had earlier been denied or lost. It is inevitable that she be drawn to Antonino, her dependence on him evolving into an affection that leads to their mutual attraction and shared desire.

As Milene’s relationship with Antonino develops, several parallel stories unfold. One of the novel’s sub-plots follows Janina Mata King’s ever more successful musical career, chronicling the various pressures and temptations that accompany his rapid rise to fame. In many respects, Janina’s story complements that of Milene’s two uncles by marriage, both of whom are local powerbrokers. While played out in very different worlds, the greed that threatens to corrupt Janina is no different than the rapacious acquisitiveness exhibited by Milene’s tio Dom. (short for Domitílio) Silvestre, who runs a quarry that is aptly named *Indústria Extractiva, Explorações Dom. Silvestre*. Milene’s other uncle, tio Rui Ludovice, executes a series of calculated bids to maintain political control at any cost. Despite his campaign slogan, “Outros só Fazem Gestos, Nós Somos a Acção,” tio Rui Ludovice’s lack of genuine interest in the well-being of his constituents, coupled with his obsession with maintaining his image as a man of action, neatly balances and supplements his brother-in-law’s moral corruption, extending it to the political sphere.

The most important, overarching story of this novel is, however, the story of the *diamante* itself. During dinner with a Dutch developer who has plans to build a hotel on the land occupied by the cannery, Milene’s tio Afonso explains that his use of the term *vaga* is really no more than a means of marking the different stages of the family’s changing fortunes. In short, it refers to

a perceived betrayal of the family heritage and patrimony. When Avó Regina signed the lease with the Mata family, her children saw her actions as inconceivable, even though the factory had long been inactive. By coining the phrase *terceira vaga*, tio Afonso likens the Matas' arrival at the cannery to an earlier wave that was also unexpected and unwanted. The *segunda vaga*, as it is retrospectively designated, took place at the time of the 1974 revolution, when Milene's father ceremoniously turned the keys of the factory over to a group of revolutionary workers: "o irmão havia concluído que não valia a pena lutar contra os ventos da História, e numa manhã de Setembro de setenta e cinco resolveu entregar as chaves da Fábrica aos novos responsáveis. Pior um pouco. O irmão José Carlos tinha tido a ideia de assumir o acto por inteiro, entregando as chaves aos operários sobre um almofada de veludo, onde se lia, em letras bordadas, a palavra *Leandros*" (291).

The factory was eventually returned to the Leandros in early 1984, when the utopian project of a successful workers' cooperative had failed. No longer of use to the family as a productive business, the abandoned industrial space was then briefly taken over by Milene and her two cousins, who would thereafter refer to the adventures of that time as "o melhor Verão das nossas vidas." As the narrator recalls, however, "the best summer of our lives" was inevitably destined to come to an end, and the cousins, who had sworn to remain together forever, were eventually separated. By the time of Avó Regina's death, only Milene remains in Valmares, as both her cousins have left to study in the United States. While she calls one of them, João Paulo, almost every night, nobody is ever there, and Milene's only chance to "converse" with him comes through the messages she leaves on his answering machine.

The distance that has come between the cousins is emblematic of the times in which they live. Communication has been relegated to the impersonal realm of a machine that records words, but it is unclear whether anyone will ever hear them. In general, the five years that divide the second *vaga* from the third were marked by a loss of innocence and by the Leandro family's attendant entrance into the realm of self-interest. This is evident, above all, in the very words they use to make sense of history's uncontrollable upsurge and flow. While the term *vaga* may have been coined in an effort to command the past and dominate the present, it does little more than call attention to Milene's elders' shared disenchantment and their growing cynicism. By the time of the events narrated, the family has successfully turned the political and economic disappointments associated with revolution's

aftermath (with its failure, if you will) to their financial and political advantage. The hostility implied in their seemingly innocent verbal exercise reminds us, nonetheless, of their collective moral bankruptcy.

The *gruas* (construction cranes) referred to in the novel's title are, of course, symbolic of the abrupt transitions that have occurred in Portugal in the decades following the revolution. Calling attention to the Algarve's many building projects, the image of the *gruas* framing the horizon stands as a constant reminder of the region's rapid geographical and economic transformation into a busy resort area. On a more terrestrial plane, the *gruas* also designate Antonino's job as a construction worker who often operates the crane at the Vila Camarga resort project. When seen from Milene's perspective, Antonino controls an enormous machine that is able to raise, lower and shift large objects that humans cannot move unaided. It may be true that the *gruas* are working a visible change on the landscape and that Antonino, from the top of his crane, has a wide-ranging view of the land below. Unfortunately, though, he is no more capable of controlling the hidden forces that determine the region's transformation than he is able to protect Milene from her aunt's possibly well-meaning, but terribly misguided, plans for her.

In her portrait of the Leandros and the Matas, and in the accompanying description of Valmares, Lídia Jorge succeeds in both reflecting and refracting certain easily identifiable elements of contemporary Portuguese society. Like the *Bairro dos Espelhos*, a clandestine neighborhood predominantly inhabited by Cape Verdeans that was once home to the Mata family, rays of light bounce off opaque and dust-covered surfaces in this novel, illuminating them in often unexpected ways. "O Bairro dos Espelhos não passava de um aglomerado raso, sem nome no mapa, e era assim chamado porque, a partir das cinco da tarde as chapas de alumínio e os vidros incrustados nas janelas uniam-se em milhares de reflexos, como se fossem lamelas numa estação orbital construída à semelhança dum olho de mosca" (45). While the characters' actions seem to logically arise in response to a unique, concrete situation, each individual is also so broadly delineated as to attain representative, symbolic dimensions. It is in the figure of Milene, above all, that this story's suggestive, almost allegorical, nature becomes apparent.

Possessing an innocence that her cousin describes in the end as a "sabedoria sem ciência" (527), Milene belongs neither to the world of the Leandros nor to that of the Matas. With her simple yet compelling behavior, she demonstrates a fundamental disregard for society's rules. A specific and logi-

cal explanation for Milene's conduct is given at a certain point in the narrative, but this clarification does little to account for her actions. Milene lives, in fact, outside of history and is free of its attendant nightmares. For this reason, her actions bring unspoken social tensions to the surface and call attention to the Matas' and the Leandros' many cultural misapprehensions. However, it is also Milene, in the final analysis, who has the potential to link the future of the two families, granting the Matas and the Leandros the possibility of reaching new heights. As the novel's closing image attests, one day they may be able to look back at themselves, as though from the top of a crane, only to realize that their differences have faded away:

Milene e Antonino encaminharam-se na direção do portal. Os circunstantes voltaram a formar duas alas. Ali, rente ao chão, éramos cerca de quarenta, e ainda estávamos todos presentes. Para quem nos visse a partir da abóbada branca, seríamos todos parecidos. A partir da rotas dos pássaros, todos iguais. Existiríamos para a abóbada celeste? O padre fez um sinal de despedida sorrindo. Um raio de sol batia nele, fazendo brilhar a ramagem de ouro espalhada na sua capa. A voz prateada do coro, dirigido às alturas, ainda disse “—*Oh! Meu Senhor! Quando Te veremos?*”

Lá fora, onde o grupo se formava, tiravam-se fotografias, sem cessar. (538)

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