

Confession and the Cultural Turn: Revising the Historical Critique of Lídia Jorge's *A costa dos murmúrios*

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Abstract: Lídia Jorge's *A costa dos murmúrios* (1988) has been primarily theorized as a subversion of historical discourse. Similar to a number of Jorge's examinations of social changes emerging as the Estado Novo declined, the novel juxtaposes two competing versions of the past, in this case a fictional representation of the colonial wars and a woman's testimonial account twenty years later. This article reconsiders the novel's status as historical deconstruction, arguing that its oral and visual strategies instead correspond to the methodology of cultural historiography that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. Expanding Helena Kaufman's reading of the testimonial as "deliterarization," I analyze how a slippage of critical terminology over time has equated historical fiction with narrative history. After examining the competing agendas of cultural history and literary postmodernism, I demonstrate how reconceiving Jorge's historical "annulment" as a productive revision of fiction provides a model of complementary history facilitating interdisciplinary engagement.

Keywords: Cultural history, historiographic metafiction, postmodernism, Africa, Portugal

At various points during her literary career, Lídia Jorge has returned to the period surrounding Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution, employing the device of personal confession to highlight the role of female experience in the wake of the Estado Novo (1933-1974). In these instances, the tensions created by juxtaposing

competing personal accounts become symptomatic of larger national processes of reckoning. In Jorge's third novel, *Notícia da cidade silvestre* (1983), Júlia Grei's oppositional confession reveals as much about female social liberation as it does the lingering effects of the dictatorship symbolized by Lisbon's urban decay. Similarly, in Jorge's most recent novel, *Os memoráveis* (2014), a female journalist creating a documentary about the coup intertwines her own experience with the testimonies of witnesses she interviews. It is, however, the use of this technique in her fourth work, *A costa dos murmúrios* (1988), which has generated the greatest critical response regarding the place of collective memory in the politics of the past. Via a military bride who revises a literary account of her estrangement from her husband during the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-74), Jorge symbolically evokes the impending liberation of the country's African colonies.

If the novel's titular "murmurs" allude to the end of the colonial enterprise, they have also been linked to a different end, that of historical representation. Significantly, instead of merely setting disparate individual memories against one another, *A costa dos murmúrios* focuses on how competing narrative *genres* mutually inform history, quickly fusing the dimensions of private confession and social critique. The experimental novel begins with "Os gafanhotos," a thirty-page account of Portuguese bride Evita's experience in Mozambique during the colonial wars in what appears to be the late 1960s, although the internal tale purposefully withholds specific dates. Because Jorge also avoids providing editorial context, it is only upon finishing "Os gafanhotos" that the reader discovers it is a piece of historical fiction, as the rest of the novel consists of an extended monologue that ostensibly take place twenty years after the story's events (i.e., contemporary to the novel's publication date). In effect, Eva, the "real" woman upon whom the fictional story is based, uses her own autobiographical description to undercut the authority of an unidentified short story author. Eva provides a clue to the novel's enigmatic title when on the book's final page, she hands back "Os gafanhotos" and makes a pronouncement regarding the author's imagined version of her husband's death: "Deixe ficar aí, suspenso, sem qualquer sentido útil, não prolongue, não oiça as palavras. A pouco e pouco as palavras isolam-se dos objetos que designam, depois das palavras só se desprendem sons, e dos sons restam só os murmúrios, o derradeiro estádio antes do apagamento" (259). After this potential endorsement of

relativism, the novel closes with an unidentified narrator claiming that Eva has effectively “annulled” the short story. Nonetheless, while Eva’s evaluation of the short story’s deviation from fact seems to be simultaneously laudatory and dismissive, the reference to annulment has led to a slippage in concepts wherein her critique of historical literature has become equated with the deconstruction of historiography itself.

The dual structure of Jorge’s novel complicates its categorization within any single genre; this is one of the reasons why a variety of competing agendas have laid claim to the narrative, both as a postcolonial war novel that recuperates marginalized voices (Medeiros, “Hauntings”; Moutinho) and a manifesto of gender and sexual difference (Ferreira; Sousa, “I was Evita”). As Paulo de Medeiros has noted, however, the most recurrent critical concern has highlighted the novel’s relation to—and, importantly, its subversion of—historical discourse (“Memória infinita” 63). A short review of the novel’s scholarly corpus reveals numerous explorations of this historical critique (Santos; Ferreira; Kaufman; Kaufman and Ornelas; Sousa, “The Critique of History”; Tosta; Simas-Almeida), which served an important role during the 1980s and 1990s as academics sought to reaffirm the place of literature in making productive contributions to postmodernism. This assertion need not come at the expense of the collaborative relation between literature and history, however, as both faced similar postmodern challenges during this period.

Jorge uses the figure of Eva to revise “Os gafanhotos” by reflecting on the events in question twenty years after their occurrence. In a similar fashion, we may also revisit the critical framework surrounding the novel three decades after its publication to provide an opportunity to reconsider its relation to history. Although Eva’s skepticism seems to intersect with postmodern tendencies, Jorge does not ultimately promote relativism or subvert epistemological categories. Instead, because she is invested in uncovering collective truths and “reattaching” the words to the objects they designate (to reframe Eva’s final rejoinder), Jorge ultimately questions the limits of fictional representation by privileging visual and verbal sources in the construction of private archives of historical knowledge. In this sense, Jorge does not subvert traditional historiography so much as participate in a then-growing interdisciplinary tendency to privilege oral testimonies and situate larger historical events within the context of everyday experience. In general terms, an emerging concern with the construction of

identity led to increased interest in first-person diaries and autobiographies of less visible groups, while cultural historians turned to micro-histories of individual experiences that they saw as emblematic of greater societal shifts (Burke, *What is Cultural History?* 43).

In a work contemporaneous with Jorge's novel, cultural historian Peter Burke highlights the 1980s shift in historiography toward the incorporation of non-written sources such as photography and oral testimony. By increasing disciplinary self-awareness, the use of unconventional sources, including unofficial images and film, has not only revealed the limitations of dependence upon written texts but it has also "unmasked the assumption that the camera is an objective record of reality, emphasizing not only the selection made by photographers according to their interests, beliefs, values, prejudices, and so on, but also their debt, conscious or otherwise, to pictorial conventions" (Burke, "Overture" 13). Additionally, the notion that historiography was dispassionately objective in its presentation of the past was increasingly challenged in the 1970s after New Left historians, feminists, and minority scholars began revealing how so-called popular history was in fact being influenced by private interests (Novick 513). *A costa dos murmúrios* draws attention to both these tendencies through its simultaneous investigation into the private interests served by the control of information and its purposefully subjective representations of women's and minorities' experiences. Equally telling is that Eva's only access to public information under the colonial regime emerges through discarded photographs and unsanctioned interviews of low-ranking soldiers rather than the exposé of an investigative journalist. Ultimately, this approach to piecing together a narrative involves as much a displacement of the history of "great men" as it does fictional and journalistic discourses.

Interpreting the fictional confession within *A costa dos murmúrios* as indicative of the cultural turn in history rather than a literary attack upon historiography not only acknowledges the inherent challenges involved in any good-faith attempt to reconstruct the past—whether traditional or unconventional, cultural or economic, inclusive or exclusive—but also provides the opportunity to view literary and historical methods working in tandem to further a revisionist agenda. In order to reframe the novel's historical critique, I reframe its dialogic structure within the context of the contemporary shifts in cultural and literary attitudes mentioned above. While both the rise of

postmodern literary theory and the cultural turn in history changed how fiction was accorded political value during the 1980s, these disciplinary shifts provide distinct parameters for identifying the strategies central to the confessional device in *A costa dos murmúrios*. After establishing the interdependence of contemporary historical and literary shifts, then, I therefore examine in similar terms how the two oppositional parts of the novel are also mutually constitutive. These symmetrical relationships facilitate a reframing of the prevailing approach towards Jorge's critique of written representations of Portugal's recent patriarchal past.

Contextualizing Postmodern Literary Skepticism and Cultural History

The cultural and historical shifts that preceded Jorge's text are part of a general reconsideration of Portuguese national identity after the fall of António de Oliveira Salazar's Estado Novo. Emerging to fill the void created by strict censorship in preceding decades, writers began looking to the past both in search of new myths to unite the country and the origins of present-day political hardships. As Helena Kaufman and Jose Ornelas have argued, this was partially a consequence of the manner in which Salazar had himself manipulated national-mythological symbols in order to justify the regime's continued occupation of African colonies. Thus, the literary goal was not merely to recuperate events and individuals from the past for contemporary audiences, but also to undermine the singular narrative of national unity and progress disseminated by the dictatorship and thus "focus on the historical process as such and render it problematic" (146). In keeping with the Estado Novo's tight suppression of information regarding the colonial wars, the narrator of *A costa dos murmúrios* is largely ignorant of Portugal's military operations even after she arrives, despite her husband's frequent deployment. Thus Eva—and by extension, the reader—learns only via secondhand, unofficial sources about the depravity to which this so-called civilizing mission has equally subjected Portugal's own soldiers.

Demonstrating the heterogeneous nature of the historical turn in Portuguese letters through a broad survey that includes José Saramago, Lídia Jorge, António Lobo Antunes, Carlos Pires, and Augusto Abelaira, Kaufman and Ornelas propose a helpful three-tiered model for categorizing new literary historical tendencies:

1. The juxtaposition of official and marginal discourses in an attempt to reclaim the margins;
2. The metatextual juxtaposition of historical facts, interpretations, fictions, and parodic parables;
3. The interrogation of historical representation that blurs the line between history and fiction. (147)

This model dovetails with cultural historiography's emphasis on minorities and women, yet it also provides a convenient template against which to demonstrate Jorge's novelty in *A costa dos murmúrios*. Corresponding to the first tendency, where dominant and marginal accounts are treated on equal terms, Eva's extended oration not only dominates the space of the novel but it also provides agency for the other wives' voices silenced by the patriarchal social codes in the military and media during the 1960s (Kaufman 45). In "Os gafanhotos," Evita's husband highlights Portugal's geopolitical marginalization relative to Europe when he remarks after a mission: "Que África Austral? Moçambique está para a África Austral como a Península Ibérica está para a Europa—estão ambas como a bainha está para as calças" (28). While postcolonial critics may note Eva's privileged position in terms of race and social class, questioning her marginality relative to the notable absence of African ethnic representation, this may also be a ploy on Jorge's part to draw attention to that silence as a "deliberately constructed *appearance* of complicity, of speaking from within the discourse it aims to subvert" (Moutinho 95). When promoting female agency, however, it is important to note within the novel that Eva is confined to responding to the author's story in an unofficial capacity rather than publicly presenting the everyday horrors of what she has witnessed.

The novel's relation to Kaufman and Ornelas's second category is more ambiguous. While its very structure establishes self-reflexivity, the book does not employ parody to distort figures and events in Mozambique. Jorge presents Eva's microhistory in mimetic terms associated with traditional historical fiction, although her incorporation of seemingly minor vignettes provides a means for discussing the concept of history in decidedly unofficial terms; the most frequently cited story reveals that while the mistreatment of a woman's body may not be documented in military history, the incident has very tangible

ramifications for international politics. Eva learns that a soldier's pregnant wife loses her child in the waiting room (tearing her sphincter muscle in the process) after a petty bureaucratic dispute over a monetary deposit prevents her from being admitted to the hospital during labor. This event effectively wedges a social divide between military families and the city's demonstrating inhabitants who, in response to a mass of methyl alcohol-related deaths, vandalize the hotel where the families have isolated themselves. This is the invisible side of history, or as Eva explains in her monologue, in her own "conceito de História cabe a influência dos músculos invisíveis que baixam e levantam o ânus. Pois se não fosse esse acidente com o corpo da mulher do Zurique, o [Hotel] Stella não se teria alheado da morte do pianista, a gincana não teria sido imprevista e as portas não teriam sido metidas dentro" (196).¹ Although Eva's memories take on documentary rather than parodic dimensions, the metaphorical importance of the body in this feminist account clearly provides a stark contrast to the great men approach to political history.

Kaufman and Ornelas's third tendency describes the blurring of fact and fiction. Jorge's Eva reflects upon the role of chance in how historical events take on causal meaning, yet her critique of "Os gafanhotos" in fact draws attention to the differences between history and literature rather than their similarities. In other words, at the same time that Eva questions the poetic license taken in "Os gafanhotos," she also acknowledges the fact that fiction is able to elicit emotional responses and provide the closure lacking in her own traumatic experience, which is neither resolved nor follows a logical plot. She acknowledges that rhetorical devices create an empathetic connection with an audience that mere facts alone cannot communicate. Hayden White first theorized this form of "emplotment" in *Metahistory* (1973), claiming that narrative history and literature made use of the same tropes to determine whether audiences would interpret events as tragic, comedic, or satirical. Notably, while "Os gafanhotos" tends towards satire and Eva's confession tragedy, the protagonist never argues that her own memories should be considered official representations as a counterpoint to the short story. Despite what the unknown narrator suggests in

¹ See Ferreira (273) for more on the importance of the body within the novel's representation of history.

the novel's closing line, Eva's narrative is one of loss, but not of erasure, for she seeks to revive the events of the short story.

If Eva's realistic tone and complex positionality in *A costa dos murmúrios* both correspond to and deviate from documented tendencies in Portuguese new historical fiction, what has driven the novel's association with the subversion of historiography? The answer is postmodern literary theory, which had become closely associated with history by the late 1980s. The role of parody and the blurring of fact and fiction central to Kaufman and Ornelas's model is indicative of the transnational influence of Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon. In the same year that Jorge published *A costa dos murmúrios*, Hutcheon would argue that "historiographic metafiction," or "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages" (5), was not only a political gesture but also the primary manifestation of cultural postmodernism. Embracing the contradiction of paradox and arguing that self-aware fictions provided voice to the marginalized by decentering dominant conventions, Hutcheon refers to a doubleness in contemporary political literature that utilizes the primary strategies of parody and intertextuality to unseat assumptions about how traditional history is constructed. Hutcheon is careful to clarify what she means by parody, which does not signal "the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions," but rather "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). Despite claiming the revolutionary power of postmodernism to call into question the authority of scientific disciplines that make truth-claims, however, she does not specify what exactly "traditional" history constitutes. The novelty and the urgency of her claims nonetheless made the concept of historiographic metafiction particularly attractive for scholars seeking to complicate reductive attacks on postmodernism as politically relativist, and this impetus is notably visible in the first decade of criticism following the publication of *A costa dos murmúrios*. Under the cited influence of Hutcheon, Jorge's association with the subversion of historical discourse has involved responses to both parody and relativism (Moutinho 79; Kaufman 46).

The attempt to subvert official or traditional history was particularly important in the early 1990s, and by revisiting these responses twenty years on, we may draw attention to certain counter-readings without "annulling" the important interventions that were performed during the rise of new historical

fiction. One of the dangers of Hutcheon's use of "traditional history" as a synonym for the representation of dominant ideology, after all, is the assumption that historiography is a static discipline. This reflects a reductive understanding of historiography that does not consider the effects of poststructural theory equally felt in history departments. Indeed, when Lynn Hunt's *The New Cultural History* appeared in 1989, it catalogued two decades' worth of new approaches influenced by literary and anthropological methods, several of which helped the discipline begin to address issues targeted by literary critique.

Under the influence of Marxism, for example, social history had emerged in the 1960s as a means of refocusing political approaches to historiography on the close analysis of the working classes and thus represent groups typically excluded from the record. The increasing influence of feminist critique also brought attention to the fact that collective and structural approaches could not account for the underrepresented roles of women, minorities, or individuals. The resulting rise of cultural history not only expanded the archive to oral and visual culture but also its methodologies—including microhistories as well as histories of the body—allowed historians to turn their attention to previously overlooked unofficial sources and marginalized groups.² Distancing themselves from social historians' focus on quantitative analysis, cultural historians returned to narrative form and engaged in a meta-literary examination of the limitations of writing in the process. Perhaps even more importantly, practitioners of cultural history called into question three traditional distinctions central to sociological methods: 1) the division between high culture and popular culture; 2) production and consumption; and 3) reality versus fiction (Poster 7-8). These theoretical and methodological deconstructions notably share much with Kaufman and Ornelas's subsequent model for new historical literature. In essence, Eva's oral testimony acts as a form of microhistory, while her dialogue with a literary text in *A costa dos murmúrios* may be more productively reframed as a fictionalized form of cultural history. Understood in these terms, the two competing accounts of Eva's past reveal a complementary means of staging public debate on international questions.

² See chapters three and four of Burke (*What Is Cultural History?*) for an account of cultural history's response to social history and the role of feminism in expanding the field.

Visual Tropes and the Limits of Fiction

When Eva hands back “Os gafanhotos” in the final lines of the novel, she is not annulling a piece of professional historiography, for the short story is not a critical biography or scholarly intervention claiming objectivity. Helena Kaufman has examined the story’s literary strategies, suggesting Eva’s subsequent monologue as a form of “deliterarization” of the former that reveals where the unnamed author’s poetic images deviate from the “truth” (43). I would argue, however, that Eva’s deliterarization is not limited to the specifics of “Os gafanhotos” but also reveals a general unmasking of the limits of literature and historical emplotment. This does not mean that the protagonist believes the short story fails to take the idea of history seriously, though she suggests that fiction should exist for art’s sake rather than in the service of political ideology. As Eva explains after correcting a passage from the story: “Embora, ao contrário do que pensa, não ignore a História. Acho até interessante a pretensão da História, ela é um jogo muito mais útil e complexo do que as cartas de jogar. Mas neste caso, porque insiste em História e em memória, e ideias dessas que tanto inquietam? Ah, se conta, conte por contar, e é tudo o que vale e fica dessa cansa!” (42) In this instance, Eva clearly evokes a form of history distinct from the invisible one she ties to the female body, yet it is telling that her gaze is trained as much on the technique as the politics of “Os gafanhotos.”

Unlike her unresolved experience in Mozambique, the story acts as a closed system of relations with a definable beginning, narrative arc, and climactic end. Virtually her very first suggestion for the writer, then, is how to avoid slavishly reproducing documented facts and events associated with traditional historical literature, for this ultimately amounts to “illusion” (42). In her estimation, irrespective of its divergence from actual events, fiction achieves truth when it accurately reflects the attitudes and sentiments of a particular setting or exchange. If on one level Eva may undermine the story’s authority by revealing the author’s inaccuracies, she also admits that the text creates its own truth through the effects of its symbolism, descriptive errors, and temporal compressions. In effect, Eva’s lecture on fiction provides a road map for interpreting *A costa dos murmúrios* as a whole, for while her autobiography presents itself as the more authoritative version of the short story’s events, it too is ultimately literature that Jorge employs to rhetorical ends. From the visible

irony of the prefatory story to Eva's subjective testimony, neither narrative is designed to reproduce the presumed objectivity of nonfiction discourse, yet each text's power emerges by revealing the discursive limitations of the other.

A brief overview of "Os gafanhotos" helps to illustrate the interdependence of the two versions of Eva's past, for while it may appear that they represent separate axes of the novel, the narratives are not in fact independent entities. For example, "Os gafanhotos" features an epigraph attributed to Alvaro Sabino, yet it only becomes clear in Eva's later testimony that Sabino is in fact a journalist with whom she had an affair during the extended deployment of her estranged husband. Furthermore, the epigraph, which describes the descent of a plague of locusts upon the city that covers everything below the hotel rooftop in a green cloud, is actually a fragment from one of Sabino's editorial columns that Eva cites in its entirety near the end of her monologue (248). The journalist in the short story is identified only by his role in the text rather than by name, however, and this subtle intertextuality is only evident upon re-reading the short story after finishing Eva's response. If Eva's own recollections of the specifics differ from the unnamed author's suggestion that the rooftop elevated the military families above the infestation in the city below, she nonetheless appreciates how the author metaphorically yokes the mass destruction of these insects to the Portuguese military's own invasive presence in Africa.

The story opens with Evita's wedding ceremony in the city of Beira to Lieutenant Luís Alex on the rooftop of the hotel overlooking the Indian Ocean. Evita is introduced to her husband's captain, Jaime Forza Leal, whose bravado is evidenced by the facial scars he bears with pride. Just as they will in Eva's monologue, photographic images act as central narrative devices in the story, though to different ends. The text opens with the description of images as they are staged by the wedding photographer (the bride and groom kissing, posing against the horizon, etc.). Nonetheless, this celebratory setting is quickly problematized, as the narrator's reference to the early warning signs of a storm (14) begins to take on multiple connotations. After night falls and the newlyweds retreat to their room, a series of screams wakes hotel residents and they congregate on the rooftop where they are able to see numerous locals floating in the ocean. While the trucks begin loading up the bodies and disappearing, the military families are led to believe that the victims intercepted a shipment of methyl alcohol and mistakenly drank it. Only made explicit in Eva's narration

later on, however, is that the military has in fact secretly poisoned local supplies of potable alcohol in order to control the male population. A Portuguese soldier returns the short story to the staging power of images when he unwittingly evokes the power of controlling information: “Sim, se ninguém fotografou nem escreveu, o que aconteceu durante a noite acabou com a madrugada—não chegou a existir” (21). This reference to the lack of visual or print documentation presents a key to understanding the novel as a whole, as we shall shortly see, for *A costa dos murmúrios* allows Jorge to prevent just such an erasure in order for her fictional history to serve a public function rather than private interests.

Given that the hotel rooftop allows the military families literally and metaphorically to look down upon the methyl alcohol victims, the critical tone of “Os gafanhotos” emerges by revealing deep-seated racial and social prejudices. While it seems implausible that the locals would have engaged in such an act of mass depravity, the author demonstrates with bitter irony how colonial logic permits the military to cover up its massacre through misinformation: “Era uma colônia de cafres aquela que estavam a defender de si mesma [...]. [Os portugueses] poderiam regressar todos ao terraço, pedir ao Gerente que mandasse servir lá em cima o almoço, e se possível o jantar, para não perderem a cena de barbárie que estava afinal ocorrendo” (24). If the image of the locusts evokes the dead floating in the water on the one hand, it also becomes tied to military’s own culture of violence. As the locusts descend upon the spectators out on the roof, the repetition of the word “naturally” works to suggest precisely the unnaturalness of Captain Forza Leal’s response when men admire his wife’s beauty: “Naturalmente que o capitão reparou nos olhares que choviam como dardos. Naturalmente o capitão esbofeteou a mulher. Ainda mais naturalmente—porque tinha a ver com a dinâmica e a cinética—a mulher ficou encostada ao ferro da varanda que separava o Stella do Índico. Com a face esbofeteada, era naturalmente cada vez mais linda” (29). Juxtaposed against both the description of the Captain’s own war scars and the insinuation that the millions of locusts hide the fingerprints left on the faces of other wives similarly beaten by their husbands—another instance of the invisible history of the body—such descriptions suggest a much deeper, systemic level of domestic violence that becomes normalized within the sphere of official war. Indeed, when the journalist arrives to ask questions about the methyl alcohol, he is roughly forced off the premises. Evita’s husband chases him at gunpoint into the ocean, and after

the sound of shots, the reader initially assumes that the journalist has been murdered. What seems at first to be an act of military intimidation against an attempt to discover the “truth,” however, ends up being suicide. In its final lines, the narrative implies that Luís Alex turns the gun on himself, providing a final image far removed from the staged beauty of the wedding ceremony snapshots. In an ironic reversal of the colonial gaze, the soldier’s body is found floating in the same waters as the poisoned locals the night before.

“Os gafanhotos” is not traditional history, *per se*, but rather a highly stylized meditation on the consequences for both victim and victimizer within the colonial wars. It is particularly curious that Jorge, despite using Eva to provide the context that fills the gaps of the story, never provides any context about the unnamed author or the story itself. How would knowledge of the author’s gender affect its reception? In other words, what are the motivations behind the literary project, and what is the writer’s relation to these events? Is the short story itself an example of new Portuguese historical fiction or is it a postcolonial response from an author in Mozambique? Where, for that matter, does the interview between the two individuals occur? The effect of this ahistorical encounter is ironically to dislocate “Os gafanhotos” from the historical context it pretends to address, despite the fact that the author seems to share similar concerns about exposing a particularly problematic chapter of national history. It is clear that the unnamed writer has interviewed individuals such as the journalist, yet given Eva’s correction of the hotel terrace’s misrepresentation, it stands to reason that the individual did not witness the events firsthand.

Furthermore, Eva’s monologue, while delivered in the first person, features verbal cues that suggest the author has specifically asked for her feedback to the story. Thus, the word “annul” is a disingenuous description of Eva’s engagement—rather, she revises through the process of critique. After questioning the unnamed author’s sympathetic portrayal of the journalist, Eva qualifies her comments, noting that “embora aí eu não tenha mais autoridade para afirmar nada, porque as vozes se esbatem, á medida que o fim se aproxima devagar, com um pezinho de seda. Dificilmente represento uma ou outra voz, e nenhuma delas tem força para se opor ao depoimento do jornalista” (253). Much like Hutcheon admits that postmodern texts paradoxically depend upon the source texts they parody for their own meaning, Eva is paradoxically able to speak because of the existence of the written story, however imperfect its critical

message may be. If it is the author who seeks feedback and revision, thus indicating a dialogic relation between these two versions of the past, then it is no accident that Eva's apparent testimonial is designed to reproduce the conventions of verbal speech. Orality plays an important role in the revision of the protagonist's preconceived notions about the war, thus it is appropriate that her revisions would themselves be communicated orally within the text rather than presented as a written rebuttal. In a matter of speaking, Eva's confession, to which I now turn my attention, interrogates the capacity of the written word in general to effectively transmit the experience of individual loss, not simply bureaucratic descriptions, traditional history, or critical fiction.

The Dangers of Writing: Repression and Russian Roulette

It has been suggested that while "Os gafanhotos" relies on narrative linearity, Eva's account favors the image because of its frequent reference to the act of seeing as she recounts her traumatic experiences (Kaufman 45). While different from the use of the image in the short story, however, the visual logic undergirding Eva's response also applies to her detective work regarding the military's crime against the colonial population. Reminiscent of the tension between public and private history, Eva's attempts to see the crimes exposed through journalism fail, and it is only through unwritten and unofficial modes that she is able to uncover the disturbing connection between the military's destruction of an entire people and her husband's individual loss of humanity. One of the reasons for her turn to unconventional sources concerns the way that access to the written word is controlled. Eva refers to the military archives determine who has the "privilege" to access the past, noting that "é sempre gente simpática, a que guarda a História" (216) before reminding the author of "Os gafanhotos" about the disconnect between keeping records private and disseminating public knowledge:

Meta as mãos nos farelos da história, veja como ela empalidece implacavelmente nas caixas, como morre e murcha, e os seus intérpretes vão. Vão, sim, a caminho do fim do seu tempo, cada vez mais rápido, cada vez mais escuro, sem que nada importe—

nem as grandezas, nem os crimes. Muitos crimes cheios de dever,
que é o que faz a grande história. (216)

Great history here takes on an ironic overtone, for there is nothing noble about the deeds she uncovers through her own investigation. In fact, the above description is much closer to the notion of “erasure” that Eva evokes in the book’s final lines, although she works against this silencing, for her goals are revealed to be similar to those of the author of “Os gafanhotos,” even if their methods contrast. In exposing a system that victimizes both colonizer and colonized, Eva learns there are multiple and competing accounts of events depending upon whom she interviews, but this does not mean she accepts them all as legitimate in relativist terms. Indeed, the very nature of her attempts to correct the short story reveal that both Eva and Jorge believe certain versions are both more plausible and more ethical than others, including the imperfect fiction proffered by the unnamed author.

The fulcrum of the text rests upon Eva’s discovery that the war has transformed her husband from a mild-mannered mathematician into a sadistic murderer. Eva strikes up an ambiguous relationship with Captain Forza Leal’s wife while their husbands are away on an extended mission, and during one visit to the woman’s house Eva is presented with several boxes of military photographs that will be destroyed if the Portuguese lose the war. Eva knows that the Captain’s wife previously had a lover who died after Forza Leal learned of the affair and forced the man to play Russian roulette during an interrogation. Yet despite recognizing the violent consequences should this different form of betrayal be discovered, Eva readily explores the candid images. Unlike the romanticized wedding photos that initiate the “Os gafanhotos,” which are designed to create memories, the images taken from a variety of missions into the jungle document a visual narrative of dehumanization too dangerous to be made public. The envelopes inside are labelled “Spoiled,” and it becomes clear this adjective connotes both the status of the images and the soldiers in her husband’s unit who appear in them. “Quando houvesse uma independência branca, aqueles seriam os documentos que haveriam de atestar quem tinha e não tinha ido à guerra” (131), Eva recounts the hired photographer’s documentation of her husband’s unit, though it is difficult to imagine this archive serving as a point of public reference. Gruesome images of torture are mixed with series from

which elderly women, children, and groups of prisoners suddenly disappear, their executions under the thin pretense of being military threats not pictured. And most shocking of all for Eva is how the wordless narrative documents her husband's descent into depravity after the death of one of his friends during a mission.

To make sense of the jarring images, Eva turns to another unconventional source, visiting a sick soldier in the hospital, his wife ironically embarrassed that her husband is unable to take part in the company's final mission, if only because he is so "photogenic." Because there are no other soldiers present, Eva is able to pressure the patient into providing the narrative account behind the secret dossier of photographs. As he puts it, "Graças a Deus que os tipos da informação estão cozidos com quem tem mais mãos a lavar do que a tropa regular. Senão este pequeno episódio podia ser um perigo. Mas não há azar. Só que se eles soubessem, com fotografias, tudo... Podia dar pano para mangas" (152). The soldier seems to consider Eva's status as a woman to mean she is not a threat; thus, he explains the motives behind shots of Eva's husband placing enemies' decapitated heads on hut roofs. Perhaps even more disturbing, the protagonist learns that Luís Alex has developed a passion for meaninglessly maiming chickens by shooting them in the anus. The seeming randomness of this particular detail is not accidental within the symbolic landscape of Jorge's novel, for it echoes the military's role in the torn sphincter suffered by the wife who loses her child, which metonymically conjures up the personal costs of a nation torn asunder.

As Eva confirms her suspicions regarding the military's responsibility for the methyl alcohol massacre, she is forced to decide what to do with the various pieces of information her detective work has uncovered. Clearly, she cannot expect Captain Leal or the military forces to recognize her evidence, and her status as both female and Portuguese limits her ability to find a platform within the local community. Feeling an increasing sense of moral obligation, she instead turns to investigative journalist Sabino in an attempt to seek justice and publicize the issue while her husband's company is away. At times during her narration, Eva readily admits the fallibility of individual memory, but in this case, she pronounces, "Não tenho dúvidas—é essa imagem que me faz entrar no [Jornal] *Hinterland* e pedir para falar com o homem que me atendeu no outro dia" (122). Despite the power she imagines the written word will yield, she is sorely

disappointed. Sabino claims to risk his safety through his satirical column, yet his claim that this is to avoid censure belies his fear to openly confront the military powers. When Eva suggests that parody is less powerful than direct information, a decidedly anti-postmodern stance, his response is telling: “Nos regimes como este, mesmo caindo aos pedaços, não se escreve, cifra-se. Não se lê, decifra-se” (147).

Eva’s disgust at his slovenly appearance and cowardice notwithstanding, in her loneliness she begins an affair with the journalist, who inhabits a curious space between colonizer and colonized. Eva is alienated not only in geographical and cultural terms, but also marital, for she no longer recognizes the man her husband once was. By accompanying the journalist to a poor neighborhood where he keeps a black mistress, Eva begins to see the country’s divisions in ways that were impossible from within the sanctity of the hotel. Yet even when she finally convinces Sabino to openly expose the military plot, the newspaper largely fails to publicize the exposé because its publication coincides with the return of the troops in her husband’s unit. Sabino is interrogated, beaten, and then forced to play Russian roulette with Luís Alex in retaliation for his sexual union with Eva. As the reader learns, however, Luís Alex did not in fact commit suicide as the author of “Os gafanhotos” has surmised, but rather was the unlucky loser of the forced “game.”

Unlike her fictionalized counterpart in “Os gafanhotos,” Eva knows that the military dumped the lieutenant’s body in the ocean and concealed the evidence, leading people at the hotel to imagine him as a victim driven to suicide because of Eva’s unfaithfulness. She is quickly marginalized by the only community in which she had been accepted in Mozambique, yet before she can repatriate, Sabino has already fled Mozambique. As Eva explains of the journalist, who soils himself in fear during the interrogation, his search for truth was never a genuine one, because in his writing “[n]unca chamou mortos aos mortos, nunca chamou veneno ao metanol, nunca chamou crime aos assassínios, mesmo aos gafanhotos Álvaro Sabina tinha chamado esmeraldas voadoras, e se até ao nosso coito ele havia chamado Europa decúbito sobre África, obviamente que ao desafio deveria ter chamado passagem de avião” (257). Thus, when Eva speaks critically on the novel’s final page about how words “isolam-se dos objectos que designam,” Sabino’s disingenuous use of language is a more direct reference than the unnamed author’s poetic license. In fact, the comment comes immediately after

Eva refers to the police's complicity in covering up her husband's death as "spineless."

The random justice evoked by Russian roulette is not only an ironic commentary on the multiple forms of military and sexual conquest portrayed in the novel, but it also has important value for understanding Eva's reaction to "Os gafanhotos." In addition to providing the missing information that radically revises the reader's previous understanding of the short story, the role of Russian roulette has a secondary function, for the game is also symbolic of the issue Eva takes in general with historical fiction. The short story is necessarily plotted, attributing meaning to events of war through a series of causes and effects, whereas Eva's experience suggests that there was no logic, no purpose behind the Portuguese and Mozambican casualties of war. In contrast to the narrative resolution provided by Luís Alex's suicide in the short story, the random nature of Russian roulette removes any potential for psychological closure within Eva's memory. She religiously protects her personal truth, one through which she creates her own agency, precisely because of her continued need to come to terms with both the loss of her husband and the absence of meaning behind his death. When reread as a culminating reflection upon the artificiality of emplotment, her final comment to the short story's author takes on a different, less historical, bent: "Deixe ficar aí, suspenso, sem qualquer sentido útil, não prolongue, não oiça as palavras. A pouco e pouco as palavras isolam-se dos objetos que designam, depois das palavras só se desprendem sons, e dos sons restam só os murmúrios, o derradeiro estádio antes do apagamento." Forced to return to Portugal, Eva has been left with no tangible documentation regarding the dissolution of her life—no archive of photographs, no investigative reportage—other than her own recollections. The written form of the "Os gafanhotos" threatens to revise and displace her oral version, though she does not negate the value of the former. She recognizes the paradox of the author providing her a platform to narrate her invisible history and discuss national accountability. It is never revealed whether or how the author responds to Eva's comments, though it is ultimately not important. By forcing the reader to negotiate gaps in each source, the two accounts also revise the narrative of historical conquest.

A costa dos murmúrios demonstrates the self-awareness and multiplicity associated with postmodern fiction, but rather than negating the epistemology of historical authority, Jorge provides a context in which different forms of

meaning-making interact in complementary fashion to revise one another. If there is a postmodern paradox in her work, it is that the novel's emotional power is established through its claim to narrative failure. As I have argued, Eva's description of the final stage before erasure establishes that she and the unnamed author use opposing tropes to structure the same events. Although their methods may exist at cross-purposes, both of the narratives are ultimately critical of Portugal's subjugation of colonial Africa and the military's reproduction of violence within its ranks. In fact, "Os gafanhotos" is a microcosm for *A costa dos murmúrios* as a whole, for both stylized approaches to historical fiction provoke emotional responses and stimulate national debate. Just as Eva notes of the short story, the truth of Jorge's novel's truth stems from its evocation of sentiment rather than its correspondence to documented fact. Taken together, then, these dueling accounts similarly explore truth as a form of accountability to the invisible actors in political history.

If Jorge's model illustrates the need for mutual forms of historical expression and revision rather than subversion of historical discourse, this does not make its contributions any less political. Cultural historiography functions in similar terms, not by negating male-oriented political history, but by resituating the same events within a complex network of everyday experience. Indeed, one of hallmarks of cultural history is its consideration of both multiple disciplines and distinct viewpoints documenting a particular period (Burke, *What is Cultural History?* 76). The question of representation has meant that cultural historians have been influenced by literature, anthropology, and sociology, yet significantly, those same disciplines have increasingly returned to history to contextualize their objects of study as a consequence (Hunt 22). *A costa dos murmúrios* thus models through fiction how such an interdisciplinary relationship would work. As part of the cultural turn, Eva's confession reveals the importance of multiple media for establishing a baseline of historical awareness. Eva complains midway through the novel that because nothing is written about the war, truth is a mere rumor, and this suggests that the murmurs referenced by Jorge's title also ultimately refer to the systemic lack of transparency and truth that Eva uncovers in Mozambique. Through her embrace of orality, images, and other increasingly accepted sources within the field of history, Jorge and her protagonist's detective work provide a cultural alternative to such historical erasure.

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