

**ENTRE NÓS:
A CONVERSATION WITH LÍDIA JORGE**

Ana Paula Ferreira and Amélia Hutchinson

Lídia Jorge, one of the most distinguished Portuguese writers living today and, undoubtedly, the woman writer who has received the most national and international critical recognition, honored the American Portuguese Studies Association with her presence at the Fourth International Congress of the Association, held October 14-16, 2004, at the University of Maryland. Lídia Jorge delivered the opening plenary talk, “Para um destinatário ignorado,” and subsequently attended a two day Colloquium dedicated to her work, which took place concurrently with the Congress. Organized by Ana Paula Ferreira, the Colloquium brought together a host of specialists on Lídia Jorge’s work from the US and abroad. The occasion was propitious to begin formalizing and further developing lines of conversation entertained individually between assiduous readers of Lídia Jorge and the Author. Hence began the present interview for *ellipsis*, originally conducted in Portuguese by Ana Paula Ferreira and Amélia Hutchinson, who are responsible for translating the questions and Lídia Jorge’s answers into English.

APF: Back in the period when you were a student at the University of Lisbon, what authors and reading experiences would you say most marked you?

LJ: When you have read novels since a young age, by the time you get to college the great discovery is not fiction as much as thought. When I was eighteen, my initial discoveries were around the area of Philosophy. Fragments of Spengler, Toynbee or Hegel, introduced by way of Classical Culture, brought me much more joy than did *The Brothers Karamazov*. Amidst my literary voraciousness of those years, I nonetheless remember making the discovery of life-long precious books, such as *Nada*, by the Catalanian, Carmen Laforet, or *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf, or books by

authors who were popular at the time—Malraux, Sartre, Camus, or, for other more private reasons, Marguerite Duras and Alain-Robbe Grillet. From the present perspective, however, I ask myself if the remembrance of delight that I associate with those readings corresponds to something real or is a construction of memory.

APF: What authors and, more generally, what aesthetic trends were most debated among readers of your generation during the disturbing period (in Portugal as elsewhere) between the sixties and seventies?

LJ: The big issue in Portugal at the time was still framed by the opposition between authors of realist or even neo-realist tendency and those of modernist leanings, or of existentialist inspiration, as was the case with Vergílio Ferreira. That was the domestic issue, naturally tied to the political differences entailed by each of those currents. But outside of that local context, what was debated in those years was the disengagement of literary models from the French sphere of influence. Suddenly, there were groups rejecting anything that could be French as, for example, the *nouveau roman* and existentialism, with the goal of associating themselves with transatlantic aesthetics. This was the time of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, followed by that of the Latin American boom. At the end of the seventies, writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez were more popular among readers of the younger generation than was Jorge Luis Borges, who was then considered a reactionary who would never be awarded the Nobel Prize. Literature then was far from being considered a useless leftover of modernity. For better or for worse, it was still considered ideology, which implied transient passion, but passion nonetheless.

APF: You have often recognized the role that Vergílio Ferreira played at the beginning of your literary career. Could you please elaborate on this? Subsequently, what other national or foreign authors have attracted your interest?

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LJ: When I was a young student, Vergílio Ferreira emerged in my world as a modern author. I discovered him when I thought Portuguese fiction had remained stuck in the nineteenth century with Eça [de Queirós]'s last publications. After Vergílio, I would go on to find Agustina Bessa-Luís and José Cardoso Pires. Then, I discovered the poets, and [Fernando] Pessoa in all his splendor, way before being held up as the great figure of twentieth-century Poetry. At that time, my close contact with the first Pessoaan scholar, Maria Aliete Galhós, would eventually lead me into the galaxy of the heteronyms. Those were extraordinary moments. They led to my total surrender to the literary, insofar as the literary is the irreplaceable foundation on which the ontological home is constructed.

APF: You emerged as a writer within the context of a new wave of Portuguese fiction in the aftermath of the April 25 1974 Revolution. Would you describe this new wave as a generation, a movement, or simply the result of a creative impulse encouraged by the newly reacquired freedom of expression?

LJ: The vast group of new writers who began publishing from the early eighties is a generation because of the deep and unifying mark of a past closely linked to the issue of Portuguese identity. We are bound by the strange experiences we shared when we were young—dictatorship, the Colonial War, and the Revolution—but we are profoundly separated by literary expression. There are several of us but, besides a shared language moulding some expressions and directing fragments of thought, each one of us is unique. In literary terms, we are prodigal siblings.

APF: Do you agree that from that period on fiction by women gains a renewed impetus in Portugal? How would you account for this?

LJ: The history of women's writing in Portugal is much richer than it seems at first sight. In fact, if we speak of fiction, there are several names that should be mentioned. For example—Agustina Bessa-Luís and Maria Velho da Costa,

just to mention two. I think that all women writers who came after them owe the experience of psychological depth to the first and the formalist essay to the second. As for the women writers who are closer to me in time, they are still too close. Might there be a sociological relation between women's affirmation and the desire to take up a voice? Certainly. In all truth, I prefer to say that it was only recently that women learned how to read and write about their lives. Yet, the great women writers, as the great men writers, do not write about their lives. This is the question that should be asked in order to distinguish between those who write literary books and those who re-write books. The matter is complex. Somebody will eventually go over it in detail.

APF: There was a time when defining a "feminine writing" was the order of the day; there are still those who refer to works published by women, yours included, with the phrase, "feminine literature"; and there has also been some tendency to associate the said literature with feminism. What is your position regarding these critical trends? Do you think they have conditioned the reception and dissemination of your work?

LJ: It is possible that, in essence, the feminine and the masculine are different. So far, when we look in the mirror the difference seems to be there. Why shouldn't this difference exist in the objects made by men and women? And why shouldn't the different image that brings us together and separates us bear its mark, if nowhere else, at least in the game of love? Why not, above all, in the objects constructed by the raw material of language? There have to be differences. And they do exist. One can spend much time reviewing the form in which a woman wrote a story and wondering how it would have been written by a man. But the issue is always something else; it is always outside forms. The interest of the matter lies only in the measure to which lives shape the stories that one tells. And here, the feminine and the masculine are closely connected to one's origins, to one's name, to the wars that were witnessed, to the utopias that were shared. The issue of the gender of writing is

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merely the basin of a river. At the level of reception, the reason why writing authored by women is conditioned by the fact that it is by women continues to be expressed in funny episodes that tend to be discriminating, I would say. But that is another story that always begins where literature ends. Only literature matters; it belongs above all to the domain of experience, much more than to that of triumph.

APF: It seems to me that your fiction takes account of the ideological constructions of gender at a specific time and place, as it investigates the various webs of power relations that include but also extend beyond gender relations. Could you comment on what has led you to pursue these questions?

LJ: I have difficulty shedding light on an issue whose complexity may hark back to the reason why someone writes. I would put it in the following terms: At the start of human relationships, once the moment of self-defense is past, one immediately dreams of total harmony. The wish to fulfill the joy of living that is missing when one is alone becomes the mother of all movement once the other person is present. This desire for totality exists and persists and, yet, an epiphany hardly occurs, or only occurs momentarily. Why do we wish to love each other and cannot arrive at loving each other? For what kind of world are we postponing this project? This is, I think, what I write about. Every narrative that I open begins with this knot and endeavors to figure out this “we.” The ends of the knot may be clearly seen, albeit momentarily, but the knot can never be totally disentangled. I think that the issue of gender is deeply imbued in this much vaster order of concern. Or, rather, the struggle between the sexes is my own archaic form of writing the only possible philosophy.

AH: In *Walden Pond*, Henry Thoreau stated that “men lead lives of quiet desperation.” This seems also to be the case with your characters, even if the causes of their desperation seem to differ according to gender, class, etc. Why the desperation?

LJ: In art, not waiting is usually a most active form of waiting because the essence of transfiguration contains something stated, something unstated, and some form of contradiction; and these elements need to be understood and distinguished from each other. In relation to a not waiting that is an active form of waiting, I always associate messages with the oxymoron, especially with regard to literature, because literature is the area of discourse where messages cross to create ambiguity. This is the essence of literature. Are my pages filled with despair? Do the characters in my books reflect a state of despair? I do not consciously create them as such. I always consider my fictional characters as projects of people, other people, longing for another world, demanding other types of words, other logic and other destiny. If, from this drama, what strikes the reader is a feeling of unresolved despair, this is because the human face I try to bring together through the miracle of the beauty that words are supposed to bring is not there. The truth is that, in literature, what is opposed to disorder is not necessarily order, it is beauty. In the literary universe, the quiet desperation is the attitude of humans acting under the guise of the characters' own words in search of meanings that are denied to us by daily existence. For a fiction writer what matters is to follow the way in which these men or women, whether rich or poor, lost or re-encountered, move about in this world. I do not ignore any of them as long as they move me.

AH: Due partly to the detail with which they are presented, many of your characters give the impression of being familiar to the reader. Would you like to comment if, in fact, your goal is to bring the reader to a process of recognition? A kind of revelation or alert?

LJ: I must confess that my objective is only to bear witness to the world. Only this, and no more. But your question forces me to recall a good ten characters from the pages of my books, and to evaluate what they may actually mean to the readers, because some of them do not present the same degree of definition. I would say that there is an inevitable

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similarity between what a writer does with the characters as they are being invented, and what the reader can make up from them in the process of reading. I recognize that the characters I create partly belong to reality. For the other part I propose a new reality. If there is anything which results from the act of creation, it is perhaps, and above all, the hope that the reader can understand my proposal of transfiguration of the real. I admit that I write in order to subvert, if not to invert. But the first experience, the one coming to life in the solitude of writing, has no intended receiver other than the one sitting at my own table. It is there that the subversion does or does not take place; the rest is evidence of its effort and survival.

AH: Your novels evoke certain historical and national contexts from a clearly regional perspective, most notably, the Algarve. Yet, as is the case with Miguel Torga's *Tales from the Mountain*, the regional suggests a world that transcends it. Could you elaborate on the relation between the regional and the so-called universal?

LJ: I always have the notion that I am not writing about individual regions or cities, or about specific times, but about something broader, which originates from them. In other words, I believe the essence of what is literary is like a ghost rising above the Earth's horizon, as high above the ground as possible, though without ever losing sight of it. This, to me, is the essence of what is called universal. It has to do with depth and height but not extension, which belongs to the regional. This is not a problem any more, because it has been agreed that the geography of one's own experience inevitably becomes a component of the act of writing. In my case, Lisbon, Europe, Africa, bits and pieces of the world I become acquainted with through either work or pleasure; how can one reject this essential knowledge afforded by experience? In fact, the question of regional versus universal does not play a significant role in my vision of reality, when brought to life through literature or art. I write completely free of any concerns in that regard. I allow geography to enter into my writing as naturally as I allow other

experiences to step in. Therefore, I may as well place my fictional space in Lisbon, in Africa, or simply return to a place that is particularly meaningful to me, the Algarve. But if the south of Portugal is of such interest to me from a literary standpoint, this is due to the fact that this region features specific conditions pointing to a very particular experience of contemporary life. In this contemporary space, the archaic world penetrates the modern world, becoming part of it, imprinting upon it a very intense quality. This intensity, a mixing of the enthralling call of heritage and of promise, offers a magnificent range of variation of human existence. This is the field of passions I am most interested in. In any case, the question was fully settled in the last century. Nowadays, it seems to have been displaced much more toward a confrontation between the universal and the exotic, with the explosion in communications dangerously exploiting the provincial.

AH: If one considers the phenomenal impact of some of your images—for example, the landlady in *O Jardim sem Limites*, who lays down on the table after setting it for dinner—one wonders how much of your writing answers to the temptation of the image. In what sense does it constitute an epistemological and/or formal lever?

LJ: All begins with an image and all ends with an image. Between that first moment and the last, that is the time for demonstration. Incidentally, not long ago, someone pointed out that this is the way my first book, *O Dia dos Prodígios*, begins. Perhaps it suffices to recall that brief introduction as an epigraph in order to illustrate my point. But it may be necessary to add that the first image to emerge only succeeds, and therefore it can only be an actual first image, if that embryonic seed already contains voices, faces, movements, a sketch of songs, a hint of conflicts, and sufficient tension. All are necessary for the dynamic process of different wills to erupt into a dispute for something; something which, in the end, can be projected as an idea. This is ultimately, an image, a synthesis of what at the beginning was no more than a complex force. *O Jardim sem*

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Limites opens and ends with a house where four characters come together to confront the angel of destruction. Between the first and the last page stands the narrative—the demonstration of their acts.

AH: The world of dream, of instinct, desire, and terror is frequently woven into your fiction together with what appears to be the world of so-called reality. This is done in such a way as to blur the logical-rational division between the two spheres of experience. How significant is for you that “wild” world that tends to be suppressed by the hegemonic order of the “city”?

LJ: Imagine a man smoking at the back of a bar. Imagine a woman walking in the snow. They look like beings limited by their own material nature, beings that occupy a limited space. But we know it is not so. We know that their existence occupies other spaces, occupies uncontrollable, vast bodies, scattered about the earth perhaps free of any limitation. If it was possible to trace the flux of life encircling a given person, one could see that around each human being there are other limitless bodies. This is precisely the domain that interests me, the one we do not share, or that is only scarcely revealed. The zone made out of the wish for life or death, and which we are unable to control; the place where the social, the ontological and ourselves are a living concoction of human and imaginary ingredients. This is the field of fiction, my field. This is what I meant when I once spoke about *a Notícia da Cidade Silvestre*—a softened form of expression, because what I actually wanted to address was our untamed life. The aspects of life we have in common with the animals: an amalgamation of instinct and innocence, which coexist in profound souls. It is also a simultaneous elusiveness of angelic things. Isn't all this what we see in another person sitting at our table?

AH: Your prose is frequently poetic not only due to the role that evocation and dream have in it, but also due to your use of a language whose semantics and rhythms evoke an

oral tradition. Should we expect a volume of poetry from you someday?

LJ: Sometimes I write texts that look like poems. Are they real poems? They are timeless narratives, without a space, without characters. Is what we are left with the essence of poetry? If it is, then I write poems and one day I may very well publish them in a book.

AH: Several of your books have been translated into French and German; yet only two have been translated into English. Could you account for this disparity?

LJ: Books can be grouped into three categories—those written in English, those translatable and publishable in English, and whatever is left. It is true that I only have two books translated into English. It is possibly a question of readership. It is possible that the English-speaking public is not interested in the world I speak about or, alternatively, they do not appreciate the way I write about it. Perhaps my writing style presents a certain degree of difficulty.

AH: One of your most popular novels has recently been made into a movie. Are you satisfied with the adaptation, realization, and final result of the movie as an autonomous text?

LJ: *The Murmuring Coast* was adapted for the cinema by Margarida Cardoso, a young Portuguese filmmaker. I must say that it turned into a wonderful film, a moving film based on an episode of the Colonial War fought by the Portuguese, and into which the director was able to encompass the embryonic violence unleashed by all wars within those who either instigate them, or live side-by-side with them. I must confess that I am quite happy with the adaptation. One must admit that there is a certain contrast of means, because a book contains infinite images, whereas a film offers finite images. On the other hand, the finite images of the film reach a degree of definition that the images created with words can never reach. That is why there is usually a conflict between both media. But I feel that is not the case here. In cinematographic terms, Margarida

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Cardoso selected from the book what was essential and estimated well the power of the elements of her choice. This is a film about poetic memory, the hallucinated memory of an Africa in times of transition, as seen through the eyes of women turned into spies in a house of war. The film functions as an intimate chronicle, extremely dense and sober(ing), with a message that is linked to the post-colonial world we live in today.

AH: Among your other novels, which do you think lends itself better to be translated or adapted into cinema and why?

LJ: I suppose that *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas*, for example, is a book with enough visual suggestion to be made into a film. The characters have been defined and have enough interactive discourse capable of establishing a dynamic narrative thread. There is also a concrete, visible space. Milene could offer a reasonable character in cinematographic terms. The theme contains a contemporary line of questioning. But the “unstated” component of the book may prevent the rest from being visualized. To create a successful film I think it would require someone like Margarida Cardoso, someone capable of touching the non-cinematographic soul of the book and transform it into its visual equivalent, as was the case with *The Murmuring Coast*. Nevertheless, *O Dia dos Prodígios*, is still the book offering the greatest possibilities for a film adaptation, although no project has been realized as yet.

AH: Your work has chronicled the great changes that everyday life in Portugal has undergone in the last three decades or so. Do you think that concepts traditionally associated with a supposed essence of Portuguese culture (e.g. “saudade,” sea and overseas, fatalism, dream, etc.) still persist in the Portuguese imagination?

LJ: Those vaguely grandiose elements, such as dream, nostalgia, fatalism, the sea and the overseas all have in common the concept of distance. They were rooted in the belief that an earthly union is impossible owing to an insurmountable element of separation. In fact, it is hard to

believe that the European nation to unite the largest number of continents, by sailing across the oceans, has preserved above all else the deep-seated memory of insurmountable distance, instead of the dynamics of enterprise. "Saudade," that great Portuguese myth present in the plaintive notes of fado and other cultural expressions, speaks of nothing else but this depressive condition. Nevertheless, I do not believe that such sentiment of distance sharpened by melancholy can survive, or that, at least, it will not change substantially. In fact, it is already changing in so far as in the last twenty years distances have been drastically reduced. I believe that the new generations, benefiting from other types of communication and, above all, from other means of travel, are not going to remain captive to old myths once they lose their dynamic role. Present-day literature bears witness to this change.

APF: The question of national identity in your work has received much critical attention. Do you believe that there is or there was a stable national identity and, if so, in what ways is it expressed?

LJ: I think that there are powerful identity elements that still persist, such as some of those referred to earlier. I would say there is a heritage transmitted by language, by the construction of the thought process, by dispersal through geographical space, by the repressive past, and other elements shaping a sort of pattern of what could be called the Portuguese character. Some of those elements, by the way, offer considerable resistance against modernity. They are archaic forms displaced into the new communication society, bringing it down with the exuberance of their cruelty. But I believe that it is the insularity of Portugal that enables those identity elements to survive. The country always remained an island, even when it was the true builder of bridges between Europe, the Orient, and the New World. Today, no matter what, the island is open. Portuguese identity is changing. Soon we will have to talk about various identities, with other bridges and frontiers. The "caso português," "Portugueseness," will assume other forms.

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APF: With reference to a central myth of Portuguese culture, your novel *O Vento Assobiando nas Gruas* reveals insidious forms of racism, which have always existed and which have been authorized by the myth of an exceptionally friendly Portuguese type of conviviality. In *The Murmuring Coast*, you had already evoked the violence of colonial racism. Why has there been critical resistance to the theme?

LJ: That is precisely an example of Portugueseness—the Portuguese do not like to see themselves in the mirror, they cannot bear to be confronted with their own image. We all talk about the historical reasons, but I am not sure whether we know enough about the matter. The fact that we cannot see ourselves distinctly too often leads us to make up an image of ourselves, sometimes exaggerating the positive, sometimes exaggerating the extremely negative. I would say that the idea that we are good, tolerant, peace-loving and convivial with other races and other groups of people is a superb fantasy that we encourage. The hidden ways in which we live violence or racism lead us to nurture that fantasy about ourselves. As I stated above, I am not sure of the causes, although I suspect that the special type of Catholicism experienced in Portugal, combined with prolonged totalitarian regimes, have provided the conditions for that furtive form of intolerance and violence against the Other, while keeping up appearances to the contrary. Let us not forget that the expression, “país de brandos costumes,” a country of tolerant social customs, belongs to Oliveira Salazar [the fascist dictator], who repressed them. Even nowadays, Portuguese society still enjoys Eça de Queirós’s works, reading them repeatedly. This is partly due to the writer’s talent, and partly because, while reading him, it is possible to partake in the social critique of the nineteenth-century writer without having to face one’s own society. The type of literature published nowadays and containing those traits of social criticism is seldom appreciated for that kind of confrontation. It is a known fact—uncomfortable themes in Portugal do not generate polemic, they generate silence.

APF: Since the relatively controversial notion of “lusofonia” has created so much confusion, can you comment on it? What would be your reaction if you saw one of your works included in a syllabus for a course titled, “Postcolonial Lusophone Writers?”

LJ: I would understand that title perfectly well. The world is large and the world of knowledge is too. How can one compartmentalize languages, books, themes of books, authors, countries, the history that leads to books? What about the history that books also generate? In order to avoid getting lost, it is necessary to determine what are to be the entry points into this maze. “Lusofonia” can be one of those entry points. There are shared traits amongst the various literatures written in Portuguese, because there is a past history that brought us together, for better or for worse. The pain of humiliation, which brings feelings of revulsion when we face each other, is undeniably a part of our common heritage. If we have any doubts as to what we are referring to, all we need to do is read [Fernando Pessoa/Álvaro de Campos’s] “Ode Marítima,” the song of the Great Pirate. Until now, this history has brought us together. But will it continue to do so? Won’t future alliances be different? When we realize that there is a certain resistance against even the word “Lusofonia,” a strange word, evoking meanings that are not the opposite of any attempt of a linguistic monopoly, then, one can understand that this is a concept with wounds still to be identified, and a lot still to be healed. I would say that “Lusofonia” is still a myth for the future. But if I still have doubts about the word and its concept due to the obstacles that it can still raise, at least I have no doubts about the word “postcolonial” in Portuguese. As opposed to other postcolonial spaces, ours are still being written as fiction in a very particular way. They are closely related to today’s confrontations, which are no more than great postcolonial sequels lived on a global scale.

APF: What does it mean for you to be a Portuguese professional woman writer? Here are three categories of

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identity that, in my view at least, are neither fixed nor “natural,” and yet interpellate you in some way.

LJ: A Portuguese woman writer as a profession?—an interesting question. But in these words there is something excessive and something missing. In my life, writing has been above all an experience, a form of coming closer to an area of knowledge not yet mastered. That subjective space is very powerful. My hand still hesitates when I have to write the word “writer” next to my name to state my profession. My hesitation is not due to my writing being disconnected from the social and the objective, but because of the respect for something that is, above all, lived within one’s own intimacy. In any case, this question is often made easier in my country. The rhetoric of the internal revenue, for instance, recognizes copyright but not the author. For them, the writer does not exist. This is proof that those who rule over money have a solid wisdom. People like me are grateful for the ontological distinction.