

LÍDIA JORGE.

A noite das mulheres cantoras.

Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2011.

Cities recapture what they once were. Oblivion, the dissimulated manifestation of any loss, is an unresolved ever-present “endless cycle” (227). *A noite das mulheres cantoras*, the latest book by Lídia Jorge, is set in Lisbon in the late 1980s and represents the stage of a society saturated with “presentism” (Hartog). This extraordinary tale of five female singers against the ephemerality of the “minute empire” (the term Jorge uses to describe the dizzying speed of the roaring ’80s) is an exercise in “acknowledging the singularities” (Traverso 2008)—“I go back to the trivialities of the past and tie myself to their use” (30)—of the collective history of the “realm of the ephemeral” (18) into which postrevolutionary Portugal and postwar Europe in general were transformed. On the one hand, these are the singularities of a group of women who are “joyful because they are so sad” (152). On the other hand, they are also the singularities of a time without “any visible order” (312), a time of both celebration and mourning. They are described from the perspective of Solange de Matos, the protagonist. Although at first sight the scenes show no causal relation to one another, they interweave the thread of the narrative as they are bound by remembrance, the absurd, and the art of improvisation when faced with memory gaps. In short, the narrative focuses on a woman’s body—the narrator’s and simultaneously the archetypal female—looking for a stage while straining against the transcendence of the “limitless abundance” (310) and its underlying oblivion: “If I insist on the oblivion issue, it is because maybe no other issue has been this important” (229). The stage is also the text, and the act of writing memory is a way of simultaneously celebrating and putting on the show.

The setting is the 1980s and a mysterious halo of forbidden uncertainties, the beginning of “the society of the spectacle” in Portugal, shortly after it entered the European Union. Solange, the main character and first-person narrator, is a nineteen-year-old student who has started the music group *ApósCalipso* with Gisela Batista, the Unstoppable Maestro, the Alcides sisters, Maria Luísa

and Nani, and Madalena Micaia, a black jazz singer. They intend to change the world with their pop swing music: “We want to forget everything that is behind us and to determine everything that is before us” (198). The story focuses on the recording of their debut album, and more specifically on their rehearsals in a garage somewhere near the Tagus. In fact, a series of uncommon adventures unfold, where behind the curtain laughter goes hand in hand with naked bodies on stage—and catastrophe. Being quickly forgotten is another feature of the “minute empire,” but behind a curtain there is always an old looking glass—the other side of the illusion—which is also where the world begins and ends.

This tale is told twenty-one years after the “minute night,” or “Perfect Night,” which is the title of the first section of the book and refers to the night on which the main characters meet again on a live TV summer game show. It has been exactly two decades since the end of the adventures described. The real threat is the past—“Anyone who would try to reproduce it would be a fool” (24)—and this dictates the need to tell the story. This is also a tale about what is left of that ghostly realm of comfort and abundance, which is buried and resurfaces over and over, because, as Jorge tells us early on, “the history of a group always reflects the history of a people” (9). The well-kept secret of this group of women mingles with the secret of this “suspended world” (14), namely, Portugal in the ’80s, and it is impossible to disentangle one from the other. In fact, the tragicomic history of this secret is described as an “unstoppable mass of air” (202) of which, as it passes, only dust remains.

To a certain extent, the ’80s were the time when art took over the stage; “I believe we are on a stage and all improvisation is allowed,” says Solange (245). Jorge describes the memory of several bodies in ecstasy taking on several stages: time, which is volatile, reconstructed and extended, and facing oblivion; space, namely, the city, here representing the large stage of the profound social and cultural changes Portugal was undergoing in that decade. These bodies are also transformed into spectacle, “dancer[s]” (281) of memory and of the surrounding scenery, the “bright” city (150), “full of junk and drifting papers” (197), as it slowly falls asleep. However, a body vanishes. Narrative is also a way of bringing that empty space into the scene, filled by the silence of practically all that is mute in history and in memory. In a body brought back on stage, its disappearance stands out. Celebration or mourning? There is no definite premise. Meanwhile, both coexist peacefully in this “small minute world which Earth has become”

(299). What is certain is that irony is also a state of exhilaration and that the text is the balance, or the art of (un)tidying up and making everything fall into place.

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