

BOOK REVIEW

Hatoum, Milton. *Um solitário à espreita: crônicas*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013. 184 pp.

MILTON Hatoum, one of the foremost novelists of Brazil, follows in the footsteps of Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Clarice Lispector in exploring the *crônica* genre as one of his literary territories. *Um solitário à espreita* (2013) is his first collection of *crônicas*, previously available only in newspapers (mainly in *O Estado de São Paulo*) and on-line (*Terra Magazine*). In organizing the volume, Hatoum revisited, selected, and polished his most representative pieces of the last ten years. As he explains in a concise “Nota do Autor,” genre anxiety does not worry him: readers might in fact consider these texts as short stories or fragments of memory. Major themes of Hatoum’s novels (such as memory, personal apprenticeship, family, and intercultural exchanges) are all represented in these pages in which the great Brazilian tradition of the *crônica* is enriched by Hatoum’s ability to observe details in the life of others, not unlike solitary travelers in texts by Italo Calvino. As in Calvino’s writings, gravity alternates with lightness: dramatic social problems and heartfelt and comic portraits of friends (and pets) are elements of a sentimental *Wunderkammer* that aims to please readers through an inexhaustible diversity of themes.

Um solitário à espreita is a also very sensorial book that privileges sounds: pieces of dialogue captured in public spaces, memorable words by singular characters (women in particular), animal sounds, musical references, and unexpected conversations with strangers infuse the book. The texts in *Um solitário à espreita* can be enjoyed independently from Hatoum’s novels, although habitual readers of this author might find interesting to read this book along with “Um certo Oriente,” an essay he published in 2002 in the Italian academic journal *Letterature d’America* (pp. 5-17; also available at: <http://www.miltonhatoum.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Letterature-DAmerica.pdf>). With his characteristic vivid prose, Hatoum revisits his apprenticeship years as a novelist and the traumatic episode he witnessed at the

PUC University of São Paulo on September 22, 1977 and explains the importance of spacial and temporal distance in order to create what he calls, quoting Céline, his *petite musique*. “E a literatura que mais me interessa fala sobre a reconstrução de ruínas, sobre uma época que já esquecemos ou pensamos ter esquecido . . . Talvez por isso eu tenha deixado de lado a saga das minhas andanças de norte a sul do Brasil” ‘The literature that most interests me talks about the reconstruction of ruins, about a period that we forgot or that we think we forgot . . . Perhaps for this reason I left out the saga of my years wandering from North to South in Brazil’ (7, my translation.) In a sense, the *crônicas* complement Hatoum’s novels: they focus on images, places, and individuals reworked by the author’s imagination and give importance to travels (within and outside Brazil) and to that plain factual dimension that his novels subsume and aim to transform.

Hatoum divides the collection into four sections: “Dança da espera” (“Waiting Dance”), “Escorpiões, suicidas e políticos” (“Scorpions, suicides, and politicians”), “Adeus aos corações que aguentaram o tranco” (“Goodbye to the enduring hearts”), “Dormindo em pé, com meus sonhos” (“Asleep standing up and dreaming”). Each section privileges a macro-theme or a literary technique: 1) the double apprenticeship of life and literature; 2) socio-political themes; 3) the practice of reading and the formation of a personal literary canon; 4) experimentation with different narrative voices. This is, of course, a very schematic view of the organization of the book; in fact, topics constantly intersect.

A typical *crônica* by Hatoum tries to represent impressions through a web of associations and departures, as fluid as the circles traced in the air by the “sentimental insect” described in the first *crônica*. No stream of consciousness is present. The author connects facts and people through images or words. Hatoum’s *crônicas* often capture the moment of connection between two ideas, when the associative knot is being made. They are elastic in their narrative paths. For example, in “Celebidades, personagens e bananas” (“Celebrities, characters, and bananas”), the narrator begins discussing the option of fictionalizing real people in literature, then discusses contemporary and ephemeral *Big Brother* stars (destined to become dispensable “casca de banana,” “banana skins”), and closes with a paragraph on the benefits of bananas on one’s mood. In a digressive and humorous way, the narrator, perplexed and revolted by superficial aspects of modernity, carves for himself a space of ironic distance and resistance.

Although the dominating mood of these texts might be nostalgic (many portraits of family members, lost friends, and bigger-than-life characters from childhood come to mind), many texts are written in a comic vein; others, with a painful feeling of sadness and rage for the many forms of violence and injustice practiced in Brazil to date (torture and police violence, extreme poverty, waste of resources, impunity, forms of contemporary slavery) and for the proliferation of architectural monstrosities within Brazilian cities. In *Um solitário à espreita*, Milton Hatoum demonstrates a vast curiosity for his own country as well as for many other geographical and cultural contexts. Sometimes the gaze of the traveler is very critical: his experience as a visiting professor at UC Berkeley prompts him to write about suffocating aspects of U.S. academia (“Cartões de visita”, “Business cards”). In other texts, literature and places are deeply connected: the former allows a deeper appreciation of geographies, as in “Perto das palmeiras selvagens” (“Near to the wild palms”), where the narrator searches for Faulknerian landscapes in the deep U.S. South and rejoices in encountering another traveler inspired by the same literary passion.

Who is the narrator in these *crônicas*? Readers might think that narrator and empirical author coincide, due to the profusion of biographical details in these texts. Hatoum is of course very aware of this common misreading and, subverting readers’ expectations, closes his volume with a section in which other characters (including female ones who seem to share the complaining tone, despair, and desolate humor of some fictional women narrators of Portuguese António Lobo Antunes) take the stage, complicating the mere biographical reading of these *crônicas*. Although not experimental, Hatoum’s *crônicas* also play with form. They might imitate long dialogues between strangers, be shaped as letters, monologues, or pastiches (see, for example, the intertextual explicit dialogue with Kafka in “Quatro filhas” “Four daughters”).

Among the most impressive and memorable *crônicas* of the volume, six stand out. “Saudades do divã” (“Couch nostalgia”) functions as a hinge between the first and the second, more politically engaged, section. In a psychotherapy session, the narrator tells his analyst of a dream about Alex, a university student assassinated in 1973 for his anti-dictatorship activism. The therapy session prompts a note on the act of writing as “um modo de ser menos infeliz, de mitigar o sofrimento e evitar o abismo da depressão,” ‘a way to be less unhappy, to mitigate suffering, and to avoid the depths of depression’ (92). In the second section, a dog steals the attention of the passers-by in a street of São Paulo, while a hungry black man is asking for help a few steps away and ignored (“Domingo sem cachorro”, “Dogless Sunday”). “Estádios novos,

miséria antiga” (“New stadiums, old misery”) anticipates contemporary forms of protest against the inconsiderate construction of new stadiums for the FIFA World Cup 2014; “Carta a uma amiga francesa” (“Letter to a French friend”) addresses the lack of citizenship rights for many Brazilians and the issue of impunity in the country. In the third section, “Um jovem, o velho e um livro” (“A young man, an old man, and a book”), portrays a storyteller in the city of Manaus who knows by heart passages by author Graciliano Ramos and infuses the love of literature in children. Finally, in the last section, “Um solitário à espreita” (“A peeping loner”) mirrors the trivialization of the dictatorship experience in a dialogue between customers in a bar in contemporary Brazil. These six *crônicas* exemplify the multiple interests and motifs of this book.

Slim and sharply written, *Um solitário à espreita* is a vivid depiction of the colors and the shadows of Brazil today. It is a substantial contribution to the national *crônica* genre and to the production of Hatoum, an author who over the years has proved to be extremely selective in publishing. Of the many aspects of Brazil represented in the book, one image stands out: a stadium crowded by followers blinded by a religious leader. The narrator of “Tarde delirante no Pacaembu” (“Delirious afternoon in Pacaembu Stadium”) compares that massive congregation of people to a vast mental asylum and wonders if that image could also function as a metonym of Brazil. In a time of absurdly costly sports mega-events, it seems important to reflect on this observation.

Nicola Gavioli
Florida International University