No Gods Live Here: Selected Poems by Conceição Lima (review)

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historical revisionism risks perpetuating gender oppression by denying women full agency, often rendering them passive in relation to male protagonists.

As noted earlier, *Saramago After the Nobel* was published in the centenary year of Saramago and is a significant contribution to the study of his work. While this thought-provoking volume primarily focuses on his post-Nobel writings, it also sheds light on his broader literary career, underscoring the lasting relevance and contemporaneity of his work.

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Conceição Lima, *No Gods Live Here: Selected Poems*, translated by Shook (Dallas, TX: Phoneme Media; Deep Vellum, 2024). 255 pages. Print and ebook.

Reviewed by Robert Patrick Newcomb (University of California, Davis)

No Gods Live Here presents a career-spanning, bilingual selection of work by the Santomean poet Conceição Lima (b. 1961), in which the original Portuguese texts are presented alongside English translations. Lima published the first of her four poetry collections, *O Útero da Casa* [The Womb of the House] in 2004, and has since emerged as a major voice in Santomean letters, following in the tradition of Caetano da Costa Alegre, Francisco José Tenreiro, and Alda do Espírito Santo. She is also a key figure in the broader field of contemporary Lusophone poetry and should be considered a major contemporary African poet; hopefully the publication of *No Gods Live Here*, which makes so much of her work available in English translation, will raise her profile beyond the Portuguese-speaking world.

Among her many merits as a poet, Lima is notable for her sophisticated examination of how cultures and individuals are formed through the interplay of dialectically opposed forces such as rootedness and exile, presence and absence, and generosity and cruelty. Lima's observations are broadly applicable: what person or group is *not* the product of contradiction? However, they are also grounded in her homeland's specific history. São Tomé and Príncipe, is, as Lima puts it, an 'Afroinsular' country comprised of two islands and several islets located just north of the equator, off Africa's Atlantic coast. It is the smallest of the five countries that prior to 1974–75 constituted Portugal's African colonies. When the Portuguese first arrived in the late fifteenth century, the islands were uninhabited. São Tomé and Príncipe's population is descended overwhelmingly from enslaved and, later, coerced Africans whom the Portuguese brought from the continent and from Cabo Verde over the centuries to work in brutal conditions on sugar and, later, cacao plantations. The islands' history of displacement, exploitation, and disenfranchisement, but also of ethnogenesis, cultural formation, and nation-building, leads Lima to ponder several difficult questions for herself and her fellow Santomeans: How can one be 'rooted' in

Siege of Lisbon)', *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies*, 6 (2001), 221–38.

an island when one is also 'displaced', in an ancestral sense, from continental Africa? Can islands that have been places of exile also be 'home'? And finally, how can a culture be built from unimaginable suffering, that is, 'quando impassível marchou a infernal engrenagem | e o mundo emergiu' [when the infernal gear shifted impassively | and the world emerged], as she writes in 'Espanto' [Astonishment] (pp. 72–73)?

Lima employs several techniques to draw out these complexities. First, she often describes contradiction through oxymoron, as in her reference to 'ambíguas claridades' [ambiguous clarities] in 'Afroinsularidade' [Afroinsularity], as well as paradox, as when she states of an enslaved African in colonial São Tomé, 'terá sofrido no Equador o frio da Gronelândia' [even here, on the equator, he would have ached with the chill of Greenland] in the stunning 'Canto Obscuro às Raízes' [Dark Song to My Roots]. She also makes several references to transmutation, as in 'Espanto,' in which she describes the history of her islands as follows: 'A Ocidente se abriu uma vanguarda de tumbas | que expande do deserto a metamorfose | em novos hinos, outros abismos chamados ilhas [The West unfurled a frontline of tombs | that expands metamorphosis from the desert | in new hymns, other abysses called islands] (pp. 38–39, 58–59, 72–73). Second, she frequently employs the terms *raiz* and *raízes* [root, roots], and often opposes images and ideas of rootedness to uprooting, displacement, or death. In 'Roça' [Plantation] the poetic voice asks: 'Perguntam os mortos: || Porque brotam raízes dos nossos pés? || […] Que reino foi esse que plantámos?' [The dead ask: || Why do roots sprout from our feet? || […] What was this kingdom that we planted?] (pp. 32–33). Elsewhere she refers to 'outras cargas sem sonhos nem raízes' [other dreamless, rootless cargos] in 'Afroinsularidade' (pp. 36–37), and to 'esta raiz enxertada de epitáfios' [this root grafted with epitaphs] in 'A Mão' [The Hand] (pp. 82–83). Finally, Lima routinely invokes absent or displaced gods, referring to their absence *from* São Tomé and Príncipe, as when she declares in 'Arquipélago' [Archipelago] that 'aqui não moram deuses' [no gods live here] (pp. 84–85), and to the idea that African gods — and perhaps African cultures and cosmovisions generally — are exiled in the islands, as when she refers to '[a] indelével lembrança dos deuses | Desterrados' [the indelible memory of gods | In exile] in 'Em Santana' [In Santana] (pp. 42–43). Lima often seems reluctant to resolve these admittedly productive contradictions, though she occasionally presents language and poetry as somehow transcending the violent oppositions of worldly life, and as privileged vehicles for clear expression, as in her recent prose poem 'A Lição dos Pássaros' [The Birds' Lesson], which concludes as follows: 'Qualquer ambiguidade é um sóbrio chamamento: não há desterro para a palavra' [Any ambiguity is a sober summons: there is no banishment for the word] (pp. 236–37).

I find Shook's English translations, which they undertook in collaboration with Lima, to be skilful and assured. In terms of style, Shook is particularly successful in conveying Lima's frequent use of alliteration and assonance

even when Portuguese and English provide different opportunities for these, as in 'Mostra-me o Sangue da Lua' [Show Me the Moon's Blood]. Here Lima refers to 'a náusea do mar | e o nojo das rochas,' which Shook translates as 'the sea's nausea | and the rocks' revulsion' (pp. 30–31; my emphasis). In terms of accuracy, having read most of these poems in the original prior to picking up *No Gods Live Here*, I find myself largely in agreement with Shook's choices. For instance, in Lima's 'Arquipélago', they render the declaration 'aqui não moram deuses' as 'no gods live here.' While 'gods don't live here' would also be accurate, it is more prosaic and lacks the punch of 'no gods live here', which, besides, provides Lima and Shook with a memorable title for the collection. Shook's translations are populated with smart choices like these.

In sum, I wholeheartedly recommend *No Gods Live Here*. This collection will certainly be of interest to readers of Conceição Lima, to specialists in and students of Lusophone and African poetry — not to mention Lusophone African poetry — and to anyone interested in spending some time with an extraordinary contemporary poet.

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