

Informal Lives and Strategies of Survival on Mozambique's Margins: João Paulo Borges Coelho's *As Duas Sombras do Rio*

SANDRA SOUSA
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Abstract

This article seeks to make a contribution to the literary criticism regarding the fiction of João Paulo Borges Coelho. It will show how his novel *As Duas Sombras do Rio* creates innovative forms to depict the harsh realities experienced by the Mozambican people. My approach includes the concept of marginality within literary theory and it moves toward an interdisciplinary treatment of marginality in Mozambique. Here societal marginality may be understood as that “by and large reflected in the underlying social conditions of people” (Gurung and Kollmair, 2005). These conditions are represented by poor living options (lack of resources, skills, and job opportunities), reduced or restricted participation in public decision-making, less use of public space, lower sense of community, and low self-esteem” (Gurung and Kollmair, 2005). In Mozambique, one cannot think of just one margin in relation to a center, but of several margins. The problem of marginality surfaces as variegated and complex, not only because the country's borders are a result of colonialism—self-identical ethnic groups live on different sides of the national border—but they are also an outcome of the colonial and civil war. Thus, we should consider that internal margins compose urban and rural spaces as much as postcolonial margins. All of these forms of marginality are defined by survival and resistance.

Keywords: Mozambican literature; marginality; informality

In the aftermath of World War II, many European thinkers believed that art, at least as it had been realized in earlier periods, had become an impossible endeavor. If art continued to exist, it would do so only on the basis of new forms: Schoenberg's twelve-tone row or Cage's musical indeterminacy; Pollock's or Mondrian's non-representational painting; the non-narrative texts of Joyce or Robbe-Grillet. The conventions of older art forms, such as the realist genres that dominated the nineteenth century, presumed that the world embodied a meaning, that this meaning could be discovered, and that one's world experience could be shared with others.

Writers, such as Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin considered that the European crisis of art acutely affected the novel and short story. Indeed, for Adorno and Benjamin, the post-war character of social experience had rendered narration itself impossible. The identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity—and that life was the only thing that made the narrator's stance possible—has disintegrated. One need only note how impossible it would be for someone who participated in the war to tell stories about it the way people used to tell stories about their adventures. (Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel" 30)

The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly (...). It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences (...). Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? (Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 83). Post-war narrators thus confronted a paradox: "It is no longer possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration" (Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator" 30).

Mozambique is a country haunted by a painful history of colonialism and the experiences of colonial and civil war. Forced labor represents only one example of the vicious reach of Portugal into Mozambique during the colonial period. Colonialism eventually gave rise to a violent struggle for independence from 1964 to 1974. After independence in 1975, the country found itself immersed for sixteen years in a brutal civil war fought mainly between two political parties, FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and RENAMO (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana). Although ostensibly an internal civil war, the conflict was in fact a proxy war between the Soviet Union which backed the Mozambican government and the United States which supported the supposedly RENAMO's insurgents. Peace agreements ending the war in 1992 led to twenty years of fragile

stability, but the country returned to violence in 2014 caused by charges of government corruption and disputed election results. The country still lives in a shaky limbo of peace.

As in post-war Europe, the traumas of war have shaped the forms and trajectory of Mozambican narrative. Poetry prevailed over prose during the 1960s; in fact, only one isolated romance of substantial length appeared (*Portagem*, a one-off prose work by the prolific poet Orlando Mendes). The social realism that flourished throughout Africa during the colonial period—an aesthetic practice that coincided with the development of African nationalism—began to recede in the 1990s. It is in this context that an explosion of novels and short stories occurred in Mozambique. Aspects of this Mozambican phenomenon recall the Latin American literary “boom” of the 1960s. New narrative forms break with classical realist forms, and literary production contributes vigorously to the articulation of regional and national identities.

According to a 2013 IMF study, Mozambique provides a “success” story despite troubling signs of poverty and political discord. These signs themselves, however, are legacies of decades of war combined with a cruelly redoubled disillusionment with society and politics: first with Mozambican “Marxism-Leninism” and then with IMF-imposed neoliberalism. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Mozambican writers found themselves situated in a post-war environment similar to the one powerfully described by Adorno and Benjamin. The world has lost intrinsic meaning; “experience has fallen in value” (Benjamin 731); the position of the narrator “is marked by a paradox: it is no longer possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration” (Adorno 30); lived experience has become “incommunicable” (Benjamin 731).

Mozambican narrators today perforce reflect upon and highlight the improbability of the novel as a contemporary genre as well as its enormous capacity for survival. In their eyes, there looms the contemporary lack of viability for realist narrative; yet, there still persists the urgent necessity for its presence. If we return to the example of the Latin American “boom,” we can understand how this kind of situation can generate artistic innovations and how new narratives help to invent fresh concepts of Africa and of Mozambique, renovating these entities as complex spaces whose identities rest on diversity and contradiction. War, dictatorship, marginality are conditions that provoke a process of questioning the social possibility of literature and can lead writers toward imaginative transformations and aesthetic mobility.

My essay reframes one of the main contemporary Mozambican writers, João Paulo Borges Coelho, whose narratives cannot be understood in isolation from larger contexts. One such context is the loss of transparent meaning in society—for example, new difficulties of cognition and decision-

making arising from the explanatory inadequacy of older schemas of individual vs. collective, globalization vs. tradition, official vs. informal cultures—with a consequent distancing of the narrator from the concrete material of daily life. The other context is the challenge of fulfilling the earlier goals of artistic realism, namely the representation and critique of lived experience, while not falling into the aesthetic traps of easy commercialization (Adorno), *kitsch* (Benjamin), or propaganda (Zhdanov).

João Paulo Borges Coelho stands out as a recent leading light in the literary world of Mozambique and throughout other Lusophone countries. His first novel, *As Duas Sombras do Rio*, was published in 2003, and his literary production has continued apace. In 2005, he also received the prestigious “José Craveirinha” prize for *As Visitas do Dr. Valdez*; in 2009 he won the Leya prize for *O Olho de Hertzog*; and in 2018, he garnered the BCI literary prize for Mozambique with *Ponta Gea*. Borges Coelho has chosen the novel as his primary genre of writing, one that in the perspective of Adorno could not be practiced anymore. Nonetheless, committed to destabilizing *doxa* through an esthetic and philosophical inquiry into paradox, his writing intersects different forms of knowledge in order to pay homage to the literary in its encounter with local life, as well as to rethink the relations between Mozambique and the imperial, post-colonial, regional, and global universes.

If for Benjamin any connection between the novel and the oral tradition vanished during the march of modernity, its development on the African continent, as in Latin America, proves otherwise. Writers such as Borges Coelho are reinventing and breathing new air into the novel. With this in mind, this article is inspired in part by anthropologist Rowan Moore Gereti’s recent book, *Go Tell the Crocodiles: Chasing Prosperity in Mozambique* (2018). Gereti’s study “explores the efforts of ordinary people to provide for themselves where foreign aid, the formal economy, and the government have been unable to” (19). For Gereti, everything important in Mozambique unfolds on the margins: “All these workarounds revealed a society where formal institutions—the police, elections—simply held less sway than I was used to, where the drive to solve problems seldom passed through official channels” (14-15).

My objective is to make a contribution to the literary criticism regarding the fiction of Borges Coelho by showing how his novels (in this case, *As Duas Sombras do Rio*, 2013) create innovative forms to depict the harsh realities experienced by the Mozambican people. My approach starts from the concept of marginality in literary theory and moves toward an interdisciplinary treatment of marginality in Mozambique. Here societal marginality may be understood as “by and large reflected in the underlying social conditions of people. The conditions are represented by poor livelihood options (lack of resources, skills and opportunities), reduced or restricted participation in public decision-

making, less use of public space, lower sense of community and low self-esteem” (Gurung and Kollmair 12). In Mozambique, one cannot think of just one margin in relation to a center, but of several margins. The problem of marginality surfaces as variegated and complex, not only because the country’s borders are a product of colonialism—self-identical ethnic groups live on different sides of the national border—but they are also a product of colonial and civil wars. We should therefore consider that internal margins compose urban and rural spaces as much as postcolonial margins do. All of these forms of marginality are defined by survival and resistance.

Several literary critics have focused their attention on Borges Coelho’s first novel. Nazir Can, for example, deals in his article, “Entre ética e estética: as pontes de João Paulo Borges Coelho,” with the presence (and absence) of the bridges in the literary works of Borges Coelho. According to Can, “as pontes de JPBC convidam o leitor a reflectir não só sobre a história do país, com especial ênfase para seu epicentro (o rio Zambeze e toda a região circundante), mas também sobre a componente estética que esta inscrição viabiliza” (56). He points out that the writer’s valorization of the bridge as *literary place of predilection* in his writings comes from a political concern as a citizen. The absence of a bridge across the Zambezi river thus accentuates the spatial division, that is also political, in the country, producing new divisions that affect the individual and collective existence of the populations (Can 56). In short, Can observes that the Zambezi river, “devido à já referida ausência de uma ponte que ligue o norte ao sul do país, constituirá o modelo mais completo destes ‘dois mundos distantes’ tão evocados pelo autor, inspirando uma escrita que assenta na constante fragmentação das partes e na posterior unidade—alcançada pela voz ironicamente desencantada dos narradores” (57). The absence of a bridge across the Zambezi commemorates essentially the spatial separation (between the country’s north and the south), as a main cause of the communitarian and existential division of the characters (Can 61). In her analysis of *As Duas Sombras do Rio*, Carmen Lucia Tindó Secco also mentions the image of the bridge in the novel. In her words: “A ponte simboliza uma possibilidade de ligação entre a ilha e a terra, entre o imaginário e a construção do real histórico. Funciona, metaforicamente, como um fio que pode cruzar memórias, histórias e novos enredos” (78). And she adds that “essa imagem do fio é ambígua; remete tanto ao que pode ligar, como às fronteiras que dividem o norte e o sul do país. Assemelha-se à linha do rio Zambeze, cortando, quase ao meio a nação moçambicana” (78). Regarding the same novel, Ana Margarida Fonseca centers her analysis in the “liquid borders,” developing the argument that the river plays a central role in this and other novels by Borges Coelho as an important and multi-signifier border. Fonseca notes that “A ideia de fronteira está espesso de forma clara, mas num sentido de divisão: o rio separa não só dois espaços (duas

margens) mas fundamentalmente duas visões do mundo; é também uma via que permite o exaurir da força humana da terra, pelo transporte dos seus habitantes, tornados escravos. Por outro lado, reconhece-se que é em torno do rio que se estrutura a vida de toda a comunidade” (94). It is a “liquid limit,” of changeable and permeable contours as it is proper of the borders (94).

As this small sample of literary critics highlight, the general presence of margins, borders, and bridges in the work of Borges Coelho (*As Duas Sombras do Rio*, in particular) is clear evidence of his concern with marginality. In fact, in the novel’s opening page, the word “margin” appears in the second sentence, as an inescapable motif present throughout the whole narrative. *As Duas Sombras do Rio* tells the story of the fisherman Leónidas Ntsato, a man divided between the world of the snake (representing the feminine, millennial, primordial knowledge of the north) and the world of the lion (representing masculine elements, the fire, the power, the modernity of the south) in a background of civil war. It is the war that permeates and guides the daily lives of the characters; it places them in situations of conflict, tension, and displacement. I intend not to just define different types of margins included in the novel (as previously discussed, this has been done by other literary critics) margins created by the Zambezi river that divides the north from the south of the country and establishes a social differentiation between groups of people. The rivers also serve as geographical margins dividing neighbor countries and similar ethnic groups and form the fragile political margins between the colonial past and the independent present as well as the margins between tradition and modernization that exclude some groups; margins created by economic power which creates margins within already socially marginalized people; political margins and so forth and so on—, but to go a step further and look at the ways in each the characters are able to find mechanisms of survival and resistance in order to maintain a certain idea of “normality” within their lives.

Phillip Brian Harper’s *Framing the Margins* alerts us that the term “social marginality” is a highly problematic because it is well-nigh oxymoronic, that is, “on the one hand, the idea of ‘marginality’ depends on the notion of a fixed ‘center’ in relation to which it derives its meaning; on the other hand, it is precisely one of the lessons of postmodernity . . . that the disposition of various subjects in a social entity is anything but fixed” (12). Despite his theory, I will argue that “it is clear . . . that certain individuals have less access than others to political power” in whatever society we may chose to look at, in this case, Mozambique, “based on the configuration of their ‘identities’ and other factors that mark them socially” (Harper 12). Given the difficulty of reconciling the simplifying designation of “social marginality” with “the complicated and unstable nature of lived power relations in the context under question” (12), I am here using marginality to evoke the phenomena described by Gurung and

Kollmair quoting the International Geographical Union (IGU 2003:2), “Marginality can be defined as ‘the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic), . . . in mind, when one excludes certain domains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy” (10). In addition, I will also be guided by the description offered by Kenneth Toah Nsah (2017), in which marginality

includes forced exclusion, lack of recognition and even indecision among people, places and ideas/philosophies; marginalized people, places and ideas/philosophies are caught between worlds and are usually deprived of existing and exercising their functions where and when they rightfully and morally ought to. (...) Marginality embodies perpetual, mutual confrontation as centers are created within margins and margins within centers-margins strive to become centers thereby turning previous centers into margins. (97)

In Borges Coelho’s *As Duas Sombras do Rio* the complex phenomenon of shifting margins is one that is very much present in the narrative since, in this case, mainly because of the depiction of civil war¹, we can observe an engagement with the complexities of social relations as they are lived in the world beyond the fictional realm. As a matter of fact, the author includes in the narrative historical figures, specific places such as Cacessemo, Zambeze, Zumbo, Tete, Kanyemba, Bawa, Feira, Panhame (including a map at the beginning of the book), and characters with names of real people in the region. As Can notes, “Nesta organização que faz dialogar história e ficção, o rio Zambeze é o testemunho topográfico de uma divisão ancestral que assenta em dois imaginários opostos” (58), that is, the northern and the southern imaginaria. It is at the river margin that we have the first depiction of a northern community that has been forgotten by the political powers located in the south of the country: the small and poor community of Zumbo that uses the margins of the Zambezi and the river itself in order to subsist. It is a village divided by the work performed by the men, mainly fishing, and by the women, who cultivate in the “machambas”² “junto à margem, . . . curvadas sobre si próprias, como que perscrutando o chão mas na verdade plantando nele alguma coisa” (Borges Coelho 15). These women then sell their products in “pequenas bancas de legumes amarelos e mirrados, sobrevoados por moscas” (15). The “machambas” is where “nas famílias pobres... estão os tesouros” (17), the base of the economy coming from what the soil and the river are capable of offering. The families of Zumbo are therefore poor and Leónidas Ntsato and Amina’s is no exception. Theirs is also a big family composed of “cinco filhos, a sobrinha herdada de um irmão morto e a mulher” (16)

all of whom can aggravate their problems when Leónidas is incapable of providing for the family given his interior indecision/division between the margins. This village, as poor as it might nonetheless be, does not escape the social hierarchies, since there is a secretary chief, Sigaúke, who distinguishes himself by being “o único calçado com sapatos verdadeiros” (16). Yet, he is the one with power, a power that seems to be violated when Leónidas decides to change his situation. His supposed madness empowers him to cross hierarchical borders and spaces, those between the administration and the people:

Resolutamente, atravessou a praça em direcção ao edifício (só os desvairados podem avançar assim, como se tivessem um objectivo amadurecido, embora o escolham de entre outros objectivos de forma aparentemente arbitrária). Hesitou ainda no primeiro degrau mas foi coisa pouca. Os seus pés descalços subiram as escadas, e em vez de seguir em frente como convidava a porta sempre aberta da secretaria virou à direita, na varanda, e caminhou em direcção à porta fechada do gabinete do administrador, que é como quem diz que ali não entra ninguém sem ser chamado. Bateu duas vezes—um resto de respeito, que não estava na sua natureza suave faltar ao respeito—e entrou logo em seguida.

O administrador sobressaltou-se. Alguém entrava sem ser chamado. (45)

Madness can thereby be interpreted in the novel as a way of survival and of resisting the power created by village administrators, crossing spatial borders in order to be listened, or ignored since the administrator decides to ignore Leónidas advertence by expelling him: “—Amanhã é o último dia desta terra e vão chover pedras na Administração! O fogo há-de queimar esses teus papéis!” (49). Sigaúke sees Leónidas as a “caso de dissidência política a merecer um correctivo” (48). He is nonetheless a foreigner, someone from outside of the world of Zumbo who has been instructed in the school of the administrators to create margins between the world of tradition (“obscurantist”) and the word of modernization (“materialism” and “law”). Despite that Sigaúke has been taught by the population to understand the “limites do seu poder face a uma comunidade que ainda não conhecia, mas que já aprendera a respeitar” (79), a community that keeps resisting being pushed even further to the margins of their existence. As the war reaches the village of Zumbo, the administrator Sigaúke has no option but to cross the Zambezi river to Bawa, where is left at odds with his power: “Rumou a Bawa onde o esperava o administrador Sigaúke, deslocado da sua administração do Zumbo e sem saber aqui como restaurar a sua administrative dignidade” (138).

Among those who cross the river when Zumbo is attacked by the guerrillas is Amina, Leónidas' wife. Her life seems to be a constant flight from the war. She had come to Zumbo from Murunguja, “porque o chefe da aldeia tinha medo dos guerrilheiros que na altura já rondavam por lá” (21). There she met and married Leónidas and her father felt lucky since “Os refugiados não casam as filhas, apenas deixam de as controlar. Não têm estabilidade nem imponência social que permitam apoiá-las na altura do casamento. Anónimos, pobres, só lhes restam esperar pela fatídica notícia de que elas foram um dia derrubadas por algum jovem feroso, esperar que a barriga lhes cresça e finalmente amar um neto sem o poder manifestar, por ele ser fruto da vergonha” (22). The refugees are systematically depicted in the novel in so far as its main theme is the civil war that devastated the country and uprooted close to six million people. These groups of displaced generate within the villages that shelter them other layers of social marginality as well as gender marginality, as in the case of Amina. Despite the luck in having married Leónidas, a stable fisherman who was able to provide for the family, his sudden conflict turned into a sort of madness, again changed life for Amina. Nonetheless, she is able to adapt to this “nova normalidade” (39) and adds to her responsibilities “uma masculina responsabilidade,” “pois agora é ela quem tem que cuidar de tudo” (39). When Zumbo is attacked, she has no other choice than to join the other villagers and cross the Aruângua river to Zambian village of Feira. She will again become displaced this time to a foreign country.

Caminhavam para oeste, para o lado oposto da vila, em direcção às margens do rio Aruângua, fugindo à catástrofe e aproximando-se de nova e dissimulada catástrofe. Amina corria também, uma criança em cada braço (as outras não as via), uma trouxa à cabeça, Jonas atrás com a velha ao colo. Pensou ainda nas aves de criação que ficavam para trás mas não havia tempo para indecisões. Olhava em redor, desesperada, e não via o marido, perdido como sempre nos caminhos ou no canavial. O filho, atrás de si, incitava-a sem parar e só lhe restou esperar que a guerra não desse com ele. (66)

On the other side of the river, the surprise is also evident since the margins that separate both peoples are made of water and political/strategic decisions, since “Afinal eram familiares e conhecidos quem ali vinha abordando o Aruângua de forma tão insensata” (67). The Zambian authorities have no choice but to send boats to rescue the people. At day's end, “a Feira era agora uma grande cidade de sobreviventes atordoados vagueando sem direcção por ruas novas, desconhecidas de quase todos” (68). With the new refugee statute, Zumbo's survivors will be sent to “Unkwini, o campo de refugiados, onde o seu novo estatuto será oficializado” (84), thus their social marginality is once again shifted to a lower condition. In a tone where irony is perceived, the narrator tells us that “de outra

forma não poderia ser pois ficando todos na Feira, que não passa de um lugarejo, ultrapassariam em número os locais, desfigurando-a e confundindo a geografia. Não é natural que uma cidade tenha por habitantes os moradores de outra. O Zumbo é o Zumbo e a Feira é a Feira, e assim deve continuar a ser apesar da tragédia” (84). Another group of Zumbo’s population crossed the Zambezi river and landed in the Mozambican village of Bawa, searching for “um espaço de vida provisória onde pudesse fazer uma balanço” (104). Different fates await the two groups: the first will be aided by foreign international help; the second, nothing is left but to contemplate their village across the river and wait for better days. A hard choice that “uns fizeram por razões próprias e outros deixaram que fosse feita em seu nome. Uma escolha entre bens raros mas presentes, e a visão de um bem toda a vida conhecido e agora ausente” (104). Facing the war catastrophe and having lost their small possessions, the people of Zumbo does not give up and step by step start looking for ways of surviving and taking care of their basic needs:

Os dias passam uns atrás dos outros, e é nesse mesmo grande rio que começam a surgir tímidas almadias. Sempre guardando respeitável distância da costa norte, é certo, mas aumentando em número que o atrevimento está na natureza daquele povo. Começam por sair de noite, furtivamente, apesar dos hipopótamos e dos baixios, passam ao largo do Zumbo e rumam à Feira. . . . Depois é já de dia, desabridamente, que aquele náutico movimento se processa, atarefadas as almadias, carregadas para lá como para cá. Porque para cá vem comida como seria de esperar, mas também as coisas mais inusitadas como pentes coloridos, cervejas e outras mais. Com isto retorna ao Zambeze alguma da alegria de outrora. (109)

People look for several survival strategies, inasmuch as their government does not seem to send any help, left forgotten in this rough area of the country. They are, however, able to create new businesses by reinventing their old ones. The fishermen are a good example. They start to use their “almadias” not to carry fish, but as a “taxi service” carrying people from one river margin to the other. They surpass local authorities who, “a princípio . . . lhes forneciam pequena guarnição, dois ou três soldados, não mais, e seleccionavam os passageiros com base em critérios nem sempre discerníveis” (110-11), to take control of their lives. By so doing, they create “um bifurcado cordão umbilical que alimentava Bawa quer a partir da Feira quer dos restos do esventrado Zumbo. E assim ia Bawa sobrevivendo, destas diligências dos seus atarefados habitantes, os locais e os outros, esperando que a chuva chegasse e lhe germinasse as poucas sementes” (111).

Others, like the younger ones, find other ways of surviving, guided by their dreams and impatient with the slow, but more efficient and fair, collective solutions: “De modo que segredavam entre si, ignoravam a censura dos mais-velhos, viravam as costas a um mundo que parecia não ter solução, feito de esperas, subserviências e migalhas, e punham-se a caminho” (112). Jonas, son of Amina and Leónidas, chooses to depart and cross the Zimbabwean border, despite lieutenant Zvobo’s efforts, “que tentava tudo para não os deixar entrar mas não tinha como deter a força de toda aquela imaginação” (113). He and his companions improve their lives by working either in the sugarcane fields or in the mines, an effort that would open “as portas a um mundo novo de roupas coloridas, de música maravilhosa, de muitos e desconhecidos sonhos que só se podiam sonhar a partir daí e nunca antes, nunca quando a pobreza é tal que até os sonhos resultam magros e sem cor” (113). Traveling, that is, crossing physical and temporal borders—turning the colonial past much closer to the present—, is their solution: “Jonas não inovava. Limitava-se a repetir o gesto de seus avós, que cem anos antes também partiam pelos mesmíssimos caminhos em busca de dinheiro para pagar o imposto colonial, e sobretudo curiosos de conhecer esse mesmo desconhecido” (114).

Another way of living across borders and surviving is personified by several characters, at the top of whom is Mama Mère, a Congolese woman who sets up her informal (and illegal) business in Zambia’s village of Feira. Maxwell Zvobo, a lieutenant of the Zimbabwean army, is trying to catch her and those who work for her in their illegal elephant killings to sell the ivory. Zvobo seems to be able to cross the border to Zambia with extreme ease and exert some power there:

—Posso dizer-lhe duas, por exemplo. A primeira é sobre essa senhora congoleza que vocês aí têm. Tenho ouvido muitas histórias a respeito dela. Dizem que tem caçadores que andam por aí a trabalhar para ela. Nada disso me diria respeito se ela limitasse as suas actividades a Moçambique, onde as coisas são tão complicadas que parece não haver autoridade. Se não me tivesse dito, igualmente, que alguns desses caçadores andam a entrar no Zimbabwe. Aí sim, já me diz respeito. E como confio em si aqui me tem a perguntar-lhe por essa senhora. (55)

Million, the superintendent responsible for the National Park of the Low Zambezi, “sente um calafrio a percorrer-lhe a espinha” (55) since he has favored Mama Mère by ignoring her illicit business. Her fall would mean his own fall. Despite all that can be said about the illegality of Mama Mère’s business, it can be argued that it is the lack of resources and the marginality in people’s lives that induces them into this type of subsistence. Mama Mère and those hunters who work for her risk their lives to be able to make a living and ascend the already precarious social ladder. Regardless of the risks, Mama

Mère is unstoppable, going to the extreme of challenging the business of Dona Flora, her counterpart, across the border by invading her social space:

Via, sobretudo, como eram ágeis os pescadores moçambicanos e graciosas as suas almadias, sempre atarefadas para cá e para lá. Começo, assim, a comprar-lhes o peixe. E para o comprar teve que começar por fazê-lo do outro lado que eles não sabiam tão valioso o produto próprio, a ponto de ter aceitação no estrangeiro. Levava, Mama Mère, panos, açúcar e sal para o zumbo, iniciando uma longa inimizade com Dona Flora, até então a dona e senhora do comércio naquelas paragens. (61)

The region's commerce leads to a constant dispute between the two women, with Mama Mère coming out better because she, unlike Dona Flora who becomes almost dispossessed, is not affected by the war.

Arguably, one of the most interesting ways of survival depicted in the novel is the case of Inês, a nurse in Zumbo who was unable to escape after the war reached the village. Her life was spared because she was able to take care of the wounded and because Salamanga, the guerrillas' leader, took an interest in her. Despite being beaten and sexually abused by Salamanga, Inês decides to stay with the guerrilla group instead of running away, since “tratava-se agora de sobreviver” (96) and her chances would be higher. If her job as a nurse had given her some social status within the Zumbo society and she is now able to keep it within the group of guerrillas, her gender also displaces her to the margins of a war system in which she needs to give in to Salamanga's often violent sexual appetite.. Nonetheless, she feels privileged compared to other prisoners:

Enquanto lava, Inês examina a sua particular situação. É um privilégio estar assim só, à beira da água, tomando banho e lavando roupa. Nenhum outro prisioneiro poderia aspirar a tanto, tratados que são como um gado triste normalmente no redil, circulando apenas, cabisbaixo, para fazer algum serviço. . . . Inês é uma excepção. Embora prisioneira já dá ordens, quer como enfermeira quando precisa de ajudantes quer na qualidade de amante do chefe. (195)

As time passed, Inês was able to earn freedom of movement and was finally able to run away with a group of villagers. They found the river margin where they were ironically rescued by Estrela-do-Mar, a boat from colonial times. Its pilot, Ricardo Mar-Picado (a nickname taken from the previous owner), started as an assistant in the boat, and took it over when no one seemed interested in it after his Portuguese owner left. Ricardo had no experience as a pilot, but the boat was how he survived and crossed social margins: “na falta de alguém com carta de patrão ascendeu ele próprio a piloto. Medida

de elementar justiça porque carta da prática já ele tinha há muito, não por lhe terem ensinado mas por ter ele próprio observado e aprendido” (191). As Zumbo is again attacked, it is Estrela-do Mar and its captain Ricardo who serve as rescuers of the village’s population—Other had stayed behind resisting the attack and taking the invaders by surprise: “A partir daí foi um tiroteio generalizado e muito pouco natural, em que os que atacava, estavam lá dentro e os que defendiam cá fora” (156).

The boat finally ran aground on the island of Cacessemo and would probably never navigate again. With its grounding, “voltam a ser frágeis os laços que ligam o Zumbo ao exterior” (249) and people will be staying “cada vez mais no mesmo lugar, a sós com o seu destino” (250), living now within the limits of tighter margins. Regardless of being stranded on the island, people continue their fight for survival:

Cada um se arranjou como pôde. Maria Isabel voltou à velha machamba que tinha na ilha e passa os dias a cavar . . . Meia-Chuva faz patrulhas com os seus fiéis, seguindo os movimentos distantes com atenção e temendo apenas o dia em que o administrador e os seus soldados voltem a ter suficiente energia para os irem ali buscar. Ricardo Mar-Picado passa os dias no areal, à sombra de um Estrela-do-Mar com raízes cada vez mais fundas. Jonas Ntsato está casado mas vai voltar a partir. (250)

Notwithstanding, the island serves as a safe place for those who now live in it. In the middle of the river, at the exact border between north and south, it provides a balanced living to its inhabitants. The novel ends in a complex way, where a fragile equilibrium is obtained, but the margins of the river are furthest away from each other, making bridges an impossible project. Leónidas Ntsato, the character who could function as “*personagem-ponte*” (Can 59), dives into the river waters leaving behind the knowledge of his intent: “se procurava chegar a Cacessemo para alongar a sua perplexidade nessa fronteira, se lhe bastava perder-se nas águas para ganhar a tranquilidade e a indiferença dos afogados” (260).

What seems evident is that there is a sense that the future for the people of the north of Mozambique will be characterized not only by a “*vivir en el margen*,” but a “*vivir al margen*,” (141) to borrow Mónica Aubán Borrell’s phrase.

In *As Duas Sombras do Rio*, Borges Coelho depicts episodes of his country’s history by providing facts that if, on the one hand “sugerem a veracidade do que se conta, por outro lado, o modo como aparecem organizados sustenta a verossimilhança do enredo e assegura densidade à matéria narrativa” (Chaves 192). Besides telling the story of a civil war that was especially cruel in the Zumbo region, he uses the creative literary process to show the complexity of those whose lives are

at the margins of society. As one of the real characters interviewed by Gerety (2018) mentioned, “Africa *é informal*. . . . What we’re seeing in this country is the informal being institutionalized: Everything important here happens on the margins” (13). To survive war and the absence of a government that seems not to care about their existence, Borges Coelho’s characters have no alternative but to improvise, sometimes crossing social, economic, political, and geographic borders in order to survive. Whether legally or illegally, all that matters is survival.

Contrary to what Adorno or Benjamin had predicted, lived experience has not become incommunicable. Borges Coelho shows us with *As Duas Sombras do Rio* the social possibility of literature, engaging in a creative and imaginative process that can lead to a better understanding of those lives who are relegated to the margins yet are able to change their lot.

Notes

¹ The civil war in Mozambique brought a huge setback for the population. Some of the consequences of this 16-year war, according to estimates by the U.S. Committee for Refugees, were the destruction of much of the country's infrastructure, causing as many as 1 million deaths, and uprooting close to 6 million people. Zumbo is the westernmost town in Mozambique, located on the Zambezi River and bordering Zambia and Zimbabwe. The town's strategic location meant that during the Mozambican Civil War, guerrilla warfare was active in and around the town and many landmines were laid. The town end up partially destroyed. It's economy is based on fishing in the river and lake as well as on trade with the neighbouring countries, inevitably involving smuggling.

² A "machamba" is a plot of cultivated land.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Notas de literatura I*. Duas Cidades, 2003.
- . *Notes to Literature*., Edited by Rold Tiedemann, Columbia UP, 1991.
- Benjamin, Walter.. “The storyteller: reflections on the works of Nicolai Leskov.” *Illuminations*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, pp. 83-109.
- Borrell, Mónica Aubán. “The divided city: the territory of informality as an affective field.” *Abriu: Estudos de Textualidade do Brasil, Galícia e Portugal*, no. 5, 2016, pp. 137-50.
- Can, Nazir Ahmed. “Entre ética e estética: as pontes de João Paulo Borges Coelho.” *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros*, edited by Sheila Khan, Sandra Sousa, Leonor Simas-Almeida, Isabel A. Ferreira Gould, Nazir Ahmed Can, Nazir Ahmed, Colibri, 2017, pp. 53-74.
- Chaves, Rita. “Notas sobre a Ficção e a História em João Paulo Borges Coelho.” *Moçambique: Das Palavras Escritas*, edited by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Maria Paula Meneses, Edições Afrontamento, 2008, pp. 187-198.
- Coelho, João Paulo Borges. *As Duas Sombras do Rio*. Caminho, 2013.
- Fonseca, Ana Margarida. “Líquidas fronteiras—Representações dos Rios em *As Duas Sombras do Rio e Campo de Trânsito*.” *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros*, edited by Sheila Khan, Sandra Sousa, Leonor Simas-Almeida, Isabel A. Ferreira Gould, Nazir Ahmed Can, Nazir Ahmed, Colibri, 2017, pp. 89-104.
- Gerety, Rowan Moore. *Go Tell the Crocodiles. Chasing Prosperity in Mozambique*. The New Press, 2018.
- Gurung, Ghana S. and Michael Kollmair. *Marginality: Concepts and their Limitations*. IP6, Working Paper No. 4. Zurich: Department of Geography, University of Zurich, 2005.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. *Framing the margins: the social logic of postmodern culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Nsah, Kenneth Toah. “Triple Marginality in Cameroon Anglophone Literature.” *Re-writing Pasts, Imagining Futures: Critical Explorations of Contemporary African Fiction and Theater*, edited by Gomia, N., Gilbert S. Ndi, African Books Collective, 2017, pp. 96-110.
- Secco, Carmen Lúcia Tindó. “Fraturnas e tensões: o repensar crítico da nação moçambicana. História, mito e ficção em *As Duas Sombras do Rio*.” *Visitas a João Paulo Borges Coelho. Leituras, diálogos e futuros*, edited by Sheila Khan, Sandra Sousa, Leonor Simas-Almeida, Isabel A. Ferreira Gould, Nazir Ahmed Can, Nazir Ahmed, Colibri, 2017, pp. 75-88.