The Lacuna, or what's missing

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The Lacuna *by Barbara Kingsolver, New York: Random House, 2009, 342 pp.*

Barbara Kingsolver's new novel, *The Lacuna*, was recently nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Before that, it appeared on US best-seller lists for several months.

The subject matter of the book is compelling. Kingsolver recounts the life of a fictional writer named Harrison Shepherd, mixing his story in with those of such historical figures as the Mexican painters Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, in the late 1930s. She describes the persecution Shepherd faces for his left-wing associations during the anti-communist witch-hunts after the second world war.

Kingsolver has published 13 books, seven of them novels or stories, which tend to feature the oppressed and disinherited: native peoples in the US, orphans, workers, and ordinary people of the poorest nations. She wrote with considerable sympathy (though with less scientific and historical insight) about a bitter labor struggle, the strike at Phelps-Dodge Copper in Morenci, Arizona, in her 1989 work, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*, for which she did interviews with strikers and their supporters.

More recently, her essays and non-fiction books have often examined the natural world (Kingsolver is a trained biologist) and exhibit a focus on local solutions to international issues. *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* (2007), a book about eating the food she and her family grew, was widely praised.

While a previous novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), sets family life against revolutionary developments in the Congo in 1960, *The Lacuna*, her sixth novel, is Kingsolver's most ambitious work so far.

The novel opens in 1929. As a boy, Shepherd lives in both Mexico with his mother and the United States with his father. The book provides a sense of Mexico in the aftermath of the 1910 Revolution. The country's peasants, subjugated for centuries, have begun to have aspirations of their own, but still live in desperate poverty. Its ruling classes are determined to sell the wealth of the country to American businessmen.

Kingsolver makes Shepherd something of an outcast. In Mexico, his mother doesn't have much time for him as she hunts for a rich husband. She sends him to a school for underachievers, a society of misfits living in a world of their own.

Back in Washington D.C., his father puts him in a boarding school. In a horrific sequence, he witnesses the massacre of the Bonus Army marchers in 1932. His isolation only increases when he discovers that he is gay. This is dealt with in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

Harrison returns to Mexico and is able to demonstrate his talent as a plasterer to the artist Diego Rivera who is painting his murals in the National Palace in Mexico City. He soon becomes a cook for the Rivera household and the protégé of Rivera's wife, the painter Frida Kahlo.

There is some substance to Kingsolver's portraits of Rivera and Kahlo. Rivera's egoism and his great energy and passion suffuse this part of the book. Kahlo's sense of purpose, nourished by her determination to overcome the life-long injuries she received in an accident as a young woman, helps Shepherd to become an artist in his own right.

Kingsolver brings her biologist's eye to Rivera's work in the National Palace: "The great mural grows down the staircase day by day, like a root into the ground. Presidents and soldiers and Indians, all coming alive. The sun opens its eyes …"

In 1937 Shepherd begins to work in the household of their prominent guest, the exiled Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky, until the latter's assassination in 1940—this is simultaneously perhaps the strongest and weakest portrait in the book, about which we will say more below.

During the second world war, Shepherd lives in Asheville, North Carolina and publishes novels set in ancient Mexico. By the end of the 1940s, he has become a popular literary figure and enjoys some of the happiest years of his life.

However, his past association with Kahlo, Rivera, and Trotsky makes him a target of anti-communist witch-hunters in the US government. Visits from the FBI begin and the newspapers conduct a smear campaign to ruin him. One can truly feel the isolation of the man as his neighbors and lovers turn away from him. His only friend is his stenographer, Violet Brown, who narrates much of this part of the novel.

Kingsolver has Shepherd undergo some extraordinary experiences, in the company of some extraordinary personalities. Unfortunately, as a character, Shepherd remains passive and seems relatively unaffected by most of what happens to him. Kingsolver has made him a victim of historical defeats and setbacks and clearly empathizes with him because of this.

However, Shepherd seems disconnected from his own time. To one extent or another, this is a problem with the other characters as well: there is a "lacuna" between history and human behavior that bedevils the entire novel.

Repeatedly, Kingsolver reveals an indifference to the significance of the events of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Elementary facts of social life such as economics, class, and politics do not help motivate or shape her characters' behavior, although a materialist view of history, which gives prominence to such features of life, was the conception that many of them shared, or at least aspired to.

For all the prominence of Diego Rivera and especially Frida Kahlo in *The Lacuna*, the reader is only offered glimpses of these artists living and breathing in their epoch. In the scenes involving the artists, the most essential issues are only treated in small doses.

In March 1936, for instance, Kahlo tells Shepherd, referring to a domestic dispute, "Don't worry, I am a revolutionist, I approve of insurrections."

This was also the year the Spanish Revolution erupted, when the historical Frida Kahlo wrote to her doctor, "What I would like to do would be to go to Spain, since I believe it is now the center of all the most interesting things that are now happening in the world" [1].

Yet in *The Lacuna*, such titanic events do not seem to powerfully shake and help shape the lives of the characters, they do not appear to be *inside* them, as they undoubtedly were in actuality. The critical episodes of the 1930s become mere fodder for arguments at drunken gatherings of painters.

Kingsolver puts forward a subjective view that attributes the decisive roles in history to accident and personality. This outlook comes to the fore

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with the entrance of Trotsky into the novel.

Trotsky's principled character and his great stature as a revolutionary come across in *The Lacuna*. One sees a man fighting for his political honor and his life against the ever-tightening encirclement by Stalinist jackals.

This is the period of the Moscow Trials, through which Stalin framed up the surviving leaders of the 1917 revolution and executed them. Trotsky was accused *in absentia* of seeking to destroy the Soviet Union through alliances with fascist and other imperialist forces.

One of these conversations sums up the author's wrongheaded outlook. Shepherd raises the question with Trotsky of why Stalin was able to come to power and suggests that (according to Rivera) it was an "accident of history. Like a coin toss, that could have gone either way."

Far from refuting this, Trotsky thinks a moment and responds that Stalin sent him a misleading telegram after Lenin's death in 1924 and delayed his appearance at the funeral. Furthermore, "Stalin moved so quickly to fill the bureaucracy with men who swore loyalty to him. These were supposed to be neutral positions, men dedicated only to the country."

In other words, Stalin gained power due to the success of his personal machinations against Trotsky. The cancerous development of bureaucracy and eventual counterrevolution in the USSR, we are meant to believe, were the products of such historical small change.

These are Kingsolver's views, not Trotsky's. Or, rather, hers is the *conventional* view of the rise of Stalinism. Over the decades, Kingsolver has assimilated such notions, while retaining a personal sympathy for Trotsky. The sympathy remains, but the essence of his life and struggles has been lost.

At the time, in reality, Trotsky was writing his remarkable biography of Stalin, in which he deepened his analysis of the fate of the Russian Revolution and explained brilliantly how the objective world situation, and the backwardness and isolation of the Soviet state in particular, contributed to the rise of a bureaucratic, national-minded caste, which found its most perfect expression in the person of Stalin.

Kingsolver makes it appear that the struggle between Trotsky and Stalin was over by 1924. In fact, it had barely begun. In the face of persecution and slander, Trotsky and his co-thinkers organized the Left Opposition over the next nine years in a fight to replace the Stalinist bureaucracy and to regenerate the Communist movement inside and outside the USSR.

The novelist sees this struggle largely in moral terms. The conflict between Stalin and Trotsky is one of good versus evil. Absent from *The Lacuna* is any sense of contending social forces in the USSR and around the world.

The Lacuna is a work of fiction, not a history book. But even where a creative artist bends or alters historical facts, a successful imaginative reworking must come out of a profound knowledge and intellectual grasp of the objective, historical world.

When history (and such history, in this case!) is merely a passive backdrop, and not the essential stuff of character and story, a neglect of important details is apt to come easily. This grievously reveals itself when Kingsolver treats Trotsky's assassination. The most striking omissions concern the role of the Stalinist secret police (the GPU at the time) in his murder.

In fact, the circumstances of Trotsky's assassination were not satisfactorily accounted for in the decades following his death. In the 1970s, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) conducted a major investigation into Trotsky's assassination, known as *Security and the Fourth International*. The investigation revealed the extensive character of the GPU conspiracy against Trotsky, including the Stalinist agency's penetration of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which was charged with guarding Trotsky.

The ICFI published testimony of various Soviet agents to the House Un-American Activities Committee, which had been classified for decades. *Security and the Fourth International* led to the depositions of a number of former Trotskyist leaders from the period. It established the identity of numerous Stalinist spies in the Trotskyist movement, including Sylvia Franklin, SWP leader James P. Cannon's secretary. These facts are now widely known.

In her novel, Kingsolver follows the assassin Ramon Mercader (known by his pseudonym Frank Jacson), and seriously addresses the impact of the murders of Trotsky's followers, including his son Leon Sedov.

Nevertheless, Kingsolver has made numerous choices about the circumstances surrounding the GPU plan to kill Trotsky that seem dubious.

For example, one of Trotsky's guards—and a character in the novel—was Robert Sheldon Harte, who disappeared with David Siqueiros and his gang after the first attempt on Trotsky's life in May 1940, and was later slain. In Kingsolver's book, he is a friend of Shepherd's, and the latter even visits his family later in the story.

But there is overwhelming evidence, largely uncovered by the *Security* investigation, that Sheldon Harte was a GPU agent.

Harold Robins, one of Trotsky's guards (and later a proponent of *Security and the Fourth International*), is mentioned in the novel, but is not present at Trotsky's side following the attack on his life, as he actually was.

Also worth noting is that Kingsolver raises no questions about Joseph Hansen's role. Hansen is a minor character in *The Lacuna*. The ICFI uncovered US government documents that revealed that Hansen, later a leading member of the SWP, had met with the FBI shortly following Trotsky's assassination.

In the 1970s, the SWP led by Joseph Hansen, and Trotskyist only in name, did everything it could, including slander and threats, to prevent the ICFI's investigation of Trotsky's murder.

Kingsolver was a supporter of the SWP during those years. But this by itself does not fully explain why she recreates Trotsky and his admirers as half, or less, of what they were. It is clear that she is a sincere artist, and the absence of the impact of historical events from her characters' psychology must indicate a deeper issue.

The problem is at root objective, bound up with the political stagnation and reaction of the past third of a century, the period during which Kingsolver matured as a writer. In those years the working class has not mobilized on a mass scale and open class struggle has not played a major role in American life.

The artists, in part as a consequence, have tended to turn their attention away from the influence of history and social struggle on psychology and emotional life, and devoted themselves to purely private and personal motivations. The results have been harmful.

Moreover, the promotion of identity politics by the SWP and organizations like it has certainly played a role in disorienting a generation of writers, as has the general propagation of subjectivist and 'postmodernist' conceptions.

For a particular type of left or liberal writer who came of age after the 1970s, that history develops *lawfully* is generally an alien notion, even when he or she is sensitive to the lives of ordinary people.

Family and the individual are the central concerns in most contemporary fiction, but for writers like Kingsolver, Margaret Atwood, or Russell Banks, who have all published recent work that deals with historical issues, it is the good or bad individual who moves events, and more or less accidentally at that.

Kingsolver denies the most important features of social development their proper weight, and this has had definite artistic consequences. Some of the most dramatic events of the last century produce only a shallow and unsatisfying impact on the lives of *The Lacuna's* characters.

[1] Quoted in: Hayden Herrera: *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, New York: Harper, 1983, p. 203

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