

Clarice Lispector's *A hora da estrela*: Remapping Culture and the Nation-Space

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In his landmark essay "O entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano" Silviano Santiago emphasizes the calibanic vengeance of Latin American culture, its constant and systematic subversion of the hegemonic Western concept of homogeneous truth, order, and reality through tropes of difference (18-19). He ends his essay with the following remark:

Between sacrifice and play, between prison and transgression, between submission to the code and aggression, between obedience and rebellion, between assimilation and expression - there, in this apparently empty place, its temple and place of clandestinity, Latin American literature realizes its anthropophagous rituals.¹ (28)

By ascribing a *liminal* condition and a subversive particularity to Latin American literature,² Silviano Santiago anticipates what Homi Bhabha would later term "the 'inter' -the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between space*," (38) a hybrid space where cultural meaning is produced and reproduced in a continuous process. This interstitial space is characterized by tension and ambiguity precisely because it instantiates the limit of the in-between of hegemony, a hybrid zone "where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*," (25) signifies the transcendence of polarities and the possibility of formulating new social arrangements. Taking the signifying space of in-betweenness as a point of departure, this essay concentrates on the way Clarice Lispector remaps the Brazilian nation and culture in *A hora da estrela*.³ It will briefly engage in a discussion of in-betweenness in Lispector's writing and then move to an analysis of the cultural politics of alterity inscribed in the novel's poetics of enunciative liminality.

Lispector's deconstructive poetics can be seen as an oxymoronic writing that basically problematizes the autonomous subject, the mimetic representation of the real through language and the process of narration, history as a linear continuum, and the implicit issues of truth and origin. She writes (in) liminality, a textual and existential contact zone where representation and transgression, objectivity and subjectivity, meet and grapple with each other on the border separating the "intangible of the real" (*Água viva* 17) from the "figurative of the unnameable" (86); where

the "I" is pluralized in fragments of discursive representations through "a relentless process of de-selfing [...] de-egoization" (Cixous 136); where the human, the animal, the mineral and the vegetal create links that dissolve stable borders into liminality; where silence speaks in the interspace between the said and the unsaid; where the interval between the creation of discourse and its materialization is problematized; where static description becomes an open-ended process of constant becoming; a stream of signification that transcends its closed semiotic boundaries, flowing into the heteroclitite and heterotopic space of ambiguity, contradiction and transformation. Take, for instance, these examples from *Água viva*: "What I tell you is never what I tell you but something else. [...] I slowly enter into writing. [...] It is a tangled world of lianas, syllables, honeysuckles, colors, and words—the threshold of an ancestral cavern which is the uterus of the world, and from it I shall be born" (18-19); "My state is that of a garden with running water. [...] I am before, I am almost, I am never" (21-22); "I improvise in the same way they improvise in jazz, frenzied jazz [...] an orgiastic, confused beauty" (27); "Read the energy that is in my silence" (34) and "What guides me is simply a sense of discovery. Behind what is behind thinking" (71). Moreover, consider these examples from *A hora da estrela*: "[...] emptiness, too, has its value and somehow resembles abundance," (14) "The facts are sonorous but among the facts there is a murmuring. It is the murmuring that frightens me" (24);

But what about me? Here I am telling a story about events that have never happened to me or to anyone known to me. I am amazed at my own perception of the truth. Can it be that it's my painful task to perceive [...] truths that no one wants to face? (56)

Each of these examples shows a different aspect of the politicized poetics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization which imbues the style, structure, and themes of Lispector's fiction. Here language is less defined by what it says directly, than by the signifying rustle (*in-between*) the facts. Propelled by the desire to go beyond words, meanings, and sources, that is, beyond any single essence, any border, these poetics attempt to liberate the synchronic temporality and spatiality of rational thinking into their nonsimultaneous counterparts, which, according to Ernst Bloch, are characterized by "contradictions" and a "dialectic process of [...] 'irrational' contents," that is, by a "polyphonic [...] and multispatial dialectic" (126). This deterritorializing movement, carried by a rhetorical strategy of de-articulation and re-articulation, opens up a liminal space that facilitates the process and (utopian) construction of emotional reason(ing)-as-freedom intent on knowing the things behind things—Lispector's mysterious "it,"

the "fourth dimension" buried in the fleeting "now-instant." Note the epistemic reversal and displacement of the fixed border separating objective thought (truth) from subjective feeling (falsehood), which opens up this interstice:

When one sees, the act of seeing has no form—what one sees sometimes has form, sometimes not. The act of seeing is inexpressible. And sometimes what is seen is also inexpressible. And it thus becomes a kind of thought-feeling that I will call "freedom," just to give it a name. Freedom per se—as an act of perception—has no form. And since true thought thinks itself, that type of thought attains its objective in the act of thinking itself. (*Água* 94-95)

Freedom, according to Lispector, is to be found in the interstitial space where thought and feeling come together, serving as both the inner and the outer of the other. It is in this in-between space and liminal process of written performance, where, according to Nádia Gotlib, "art is both representation and life," (324) that Lispector problematizes the (im)possibility of giving a voice to the Other, the subaltern woman. As the following reading of *A hora da estrela* will illustrate, Lispector's deconstructive problematization of representation, that is how one sees, knows, makes and transmits meaning in the interstice between objective and subjective thought,⁴ reveals crucial aspects of how the concept of *brasilidade* is constructed in a borderized Brazilian nation-space.

The novel deals with two interrelated crises: the tension between literary representation and the process of literary production, and the identity crisis of subaltern women in Brazilian society. They are linked through (1) a highly fragmented plot that presents two stories—Macabéa's life and death in Rio de Janeiro and the narrator's problematization of how to narrate Macabéa's experience—and (2) Lispector's underlying discussion of the representation of the Other (woman) from another region (the Northeast), in an alienating southern urban environment. Macabéa has migrated from the poverty-stricken state of Alagoas to Rio de Janeiro in search of work. Making a living as a typist, she shares a room with other girls in a run-down boardinghouse. The narrative discloses her life through a series of fragmented episodes: her childhood in the house of her strict Catholic aunt, her living conditions, her work experience, her short affair with Olímpico, her visit to a fortune-teller, and her death. In order to illustrate the ambiguity of mimetic representation and thereby to deconstruct the traditional idea of literature as a transparent reflection of the real, Lispector uses an ambiguous narrative voice that is internally split

into basically two different categories: a first-person masculine voice, Rodrigo S.M., who functions at the same time as a framed author-narrator, Rodrigo S.M.-Clarice Lispector. (S)he problematizes this gendered narrative identity in an ironic way: "It strikes me that [...] what I am writing could be written by another. Another writer, of course, but it would have to be a man for a woman writer would weep her heart out," (14) and tries to circumvent it: "The action of this story will result in my transfiguration into someone else and in my ultimate materialization into an object [...] sweet tones of the flute and become entwined in a creeper vine" (20). The ultimate failure of this androgynous process—"I feel, without becoming her" (32)—does not minimize the overall objective, namely to deconstruct the traditional masculine narrative position by means of a constant dialogue with its feminine other. This negotiation of different narrative voices inscribes the mark of gender alterity into the semantical and syntactical articulation of the narrative enunciation: a double-voicedness as enunciative in-betweenness that problematizes the politics of representation, creating a performative temporality on the level of discourse in which the separation between the private and public spheres is subverted. Through this double-voiced narrator, Lispector succeeds in rendering public not only the intimate experience of writing the multiple others which compose herself,⁵ but also her own experience on the threshold of death.⁶

It is within this liminal enunciative space that she re-creates Macabéa's story as an alienating in-between experience within an internally split nation-space. Lispector's postmodern textual/cultural space is a heterogeneous in-between "zone of occult instability" (Fanon 183). *A hora da estrela's* Rio de Janeiro is a space characterized by a constant clash of disjunctive temporalities; a contact zone where local and global, centric and peripheral sociocultural forces and practices create a fluid field of antagonistic, complementary relationships between groups; a hybrid place crisscrossed by a variety of shifting boundaries where stable ontological values are disseminated in the continuous flow of dislocations and relocations. It is a setting where different local ways of life are subjected to the global sign of constantly changing times—an ever-quickening pace—as a result of the transnationalization of economic systems and the 'worlding' of cultural systems through the expansion of transportation, communication and new media networks.⁷ This simultaneity of nonsynchronous temporalities is impressively problematized in Macabéa's relation to the radio: "Every morning she switched on the transistor radio [...] she invariably turned into Radio Clock, a channel that broadcast the

correct time and educational programmes [...] commercials. She adored commercials" (37). As Macabéa's source of information and communication, this radio station determines her spatial and temporal (dis)orientation in an anonymous urban space. The crucial fact is that Macabéa, who comes from a culture whose values are grounded in orality and collectivity, accepts the "rádio relógio" as reality per se. Whereas in the Northeast she is an integral part of the community, in Rio de Janeiro she begins to imagine herself out of the margin into a simulated urban collectivity with the help of the radio. The distance and strangeness with regard to metropolitan customs and the newly instilled desire to be at home in this place constitute a *liminal cultural limbo* in which the Northeasterner moves. Although Macabéa, who suffers from malnutrition, tries to change her diet to fast food and begins to wear make-up in order to look like Marilyn Monroe, her experience seems to be doomed to invisibility, solitude, and speechlessness. Yet, according to Virginia Woolf, solitude may lead to freedom through consciousness-raising. At one point, Macabéa experiences the climax of her everyday life, namely a room of her own:

The following day [...] she could enjoy at long last the greatest privilege of all: solitude. She had the room all to herself. The girl could scarcely believe that all this space was hers to enjoy [...] She danced and waltzed round the room for solitude made her: f-r-e-e! [...] To confront herself was a pleasure that she had never before experienced. (41)

On the one hand, Lispector celebrates Woolf's concept of freedom. On the other, she emphasizes the difficult applicability of Woolf's Western ideas—the satisfaction of intellectual hunger, the fight for one's space and to actively take control of one's destiny—in a hybrid tropical metropolitan space where the migrant's hunger is less spiritual than physical and where deterritorialization is not only experienced in terms of gender and sexuality, but as a combination of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and region. Whereas Woolf's objective is to achieve freedom and to find truth by means of an intellectual process, Lispector uses a split narrative voice oscillating between objectivity and subjectivity to deconstruct such an essentialist *unity*.

Lispector, in delineating Macabéa's experience, inscribes the dramatic collision between different cultural realities in Macabéa's psychosexual, psychophysical and psychosocial condition. In the process, she diagnoses the social changes of urban life in the 1970s, a phase of massive modernization which based on foreign capital sought to uniform cultural

differences and thus create a homogeneous nation-people. The contradictions underlying this process of modernization are most tellingly described in the episode of Macabéa and Olímpico's Sunday affair. Whereas in the Northeast lovers meet in the city park on Sundays, Macabéa and Olímpico are two strangers in exile, roaming the streets in the pouring rain.⁸ Note, for instance, their inability to communicate with each other and to understand the new cultural environment:

On the radio they discuss 'culture,' and use difficult words. For instance, what does the 'electronic'? Silence. -I know what it means but I'm not telling you [...] What does 'income per head' mean? - [...] That's easy, it has something to do with medicine. (49-50)

It seems from this that both cannot keep pace with the changing events and, furthermore, that their out-of-place position has an alienating effect on their relationship. Yet Lispector makes it clear that what strangles their relationship is a regional (cultural) difference shot through with color and race as organizing principles of inequality. Thus it is no accident that Macabéa's successful rival is Gloria, a mulatta who "dyed her curly mop of hair bright yellow" (59). Not only does Gloria represent the dominant beauty code, but the fact that she belongs to the "privileged class who inhabited Southern Brazil" (59) turns her into Olímpico's irresistible object of desire: in a move that recalls Julien Sorel's in Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir*, Olímpico leaves Macabéa and begins a relationship with Gloria. In the process, Lispector emphasizes the effects of the social contract which are determined by classist, racial, ethnic, gendered, and regional differences. The interplay of these multiple axes of social inequality causes the violent clash of different ways of being and thinking rooted in disparate cultural spatiotemporalities. Lispector dramatizes this clash in the scene of Macabéa's death, contrasting physical and mental slowness:

As she fell to the ground, Macabéa, before the car sped away [...] Macabéa lay helpless by the side of the road. She felt drained of all emotion as she looked at the stones around the sewer and sprouting blades of wild grass; their greenness conveyed the most tender hope [...] Macabéa struggled in silence [...] Macabéa remembered the docks [...]. (79-82)

Lispector continues: "[...] a yellow Mercedes [...]," with technical speed, the symbol of international capital and global development, "knocked her down [...]. She died instantaneously. An instant is that particle of time in which the tire of a car going at full speed touches the ground, touches it no longer, then touches it again [...]. I ask you: -What is the weight of light?" (79-86).

Lispector's attempt at delineating Macabéa's "unremarkable adventures [...] in a hostile city," (15) her silence as death-in-life, her invisibility and objectification "in a technological society where she was a mere cog in the machine," (29) can be read as a postmodern response to and revision of modern Northeastern fiction. Her innovation resides as much in the critical self-reflection of the intellectual's role and the metafictional problematization of the process of signification as Gotlib argues,⁹ and in the poetics of "negation," to use Debra A. Castillo's term,¹⁰ as in the deconstruction of a regionalist writing that contributed to the constitution and consolidation of the national project of cultural homogenization. In order to elaborate this point, it is necessary to briefly characterize the genre which has come to be known as *romances do nordeste*.

Northeastern fiction has developed from a regional literature that focused on the particularities of the Northeast to one that inserts these particularities in a national and international context. As Silviano Santiago argues, it developed from a décor-like regionalism, characterized by local color, to a regionalism which portrays the local *conditio humana* in its contradictory dialectic with the universal condition (Vale 23). Whereas premodern Northeastern novels, such as José de Alencar's *O sertanejo* (1876), Franklin Távora's *O cabeleira* (1876), José do Patrocínio's *Os retirantes* (1879), Oliveira Paiva's *Dona Guidinha do poço* (1888), Rodolfo Teófilo's *A fome* (1890), and Domingos Olímpio's *Luzia-homem* (1903), rendered a realistically and naturalistically tinged romantic image of the region, the modernist novels of the 1920s and 1930s delineate the living conditions of the Northeasterners in a realistic and/or naturalistic documentary fashion: life on the plantation, modernization of the plantation-based agricultural economy, life in the *sertão* with its periods of droughts and the resultant migration of the *sertanejos* to the major cities, life in the slums etc. Writers such as Jose Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado, Jose Américo de Almeida and Rachel de Queiroz incorporated regional dialects and idiolects into their writings and denounced the suffering of the people in the Northeast. Their social realism demystified what Antonio Candido calls the "picturesque charm" and "ornamental chivalrousness" which was ascribed to country people (142), demonstrating that their degradation was a direct result of the national project of modernization and industrialization. The policy underlying this project of national identity formation aimed at homogenizing regional differences and integrating specific local sociocultural contexts into the bosom of the nation. Although the writers of the 1920s and 1930s criticized the official discourse of national

homogenization, they created a discursive counter-image of the Northeast grounded in memory, the search for the past as temporal dimension in the present. In other words, they reinvented a general picture of the Northeast through their psychological and sociological problematization of such related issues as the decadence of the sugar aristocracy, religious fanaticism, banditry, and urban proletarian resistance in a region flagellated by droughts and poverty. By reinventing the Northeast, a region drowning in misery, hunger, violence, and backwardness, as the genuine anticapitalist, rural, traditional cradle of the national culture and identity (in response to the southern modernism which claimed São Paulo as the center of a new, modern Brazil), and by largely ignoring specific issues, such as race, ethnicity, and gender,¹¹ the narrative discourse of these writers not only created a homogeneous picture of a highly heterogeneous region, but played into the hands of the official discourse, which based its homogeneous vision of the nation-space precisely on such dichotomies. Their fiction, by simply reverting the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism underlying the conflict between the North and the South, became an integral part of the homogenizing national discourse.

Clarice Lispector's critical answer to this literary tradition's ambiguous stance consists in the fact that she uses a *nordestina* from the lowest social stratum as the protagonist of her story. This choice should be read as a counterhegemonic move against what Ernest Renan in his essay "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" has delineated as one of the fundamental constructive elements of nationhood—that is, the importance of forgetting the conditions of the construction of the present national unity as an integral part of memory: the original violence and arbitrariness as well as the multiplicity of ethnic origins. Clarice Lispector evokes the past-present forgetting as a result of literary marginalization and silencing and thereby reveals both the implication of culture and imperialism and the absence of the subaltern woman in Brazilian literature. The significance of this choice furthermore resides in the deconstruction of the myth of the mulatta—a prominent figure of Amado's novels, which, together with soccer and carnival, became a Brazilian export commodity. Macabéa, the subaltern woman from the Northeast, embodies the *other* side of the exotic paradigm and Lispector's subaltern politics of representation: "What I wanted to say was that despite everything, she belonged to a resistant and stubborn *race of dwarfs* that would one day vindicate *the right to protest*" (79, emphasis added). The novel, then, screams with anger about the discrimination of a region and its people. In the process, Lispector uses the narrative's style, structure, and theme to unwrite Brazil as a homogeneous nation-people

and to rewrite a nation that comes apart precisely at its *syncretic* seams. By remembering the forgotten heterogeneity, she reveals the hidden fissures of the imagined community and thereby calls into question the widely held view of syncretism as a benevolent, harmonizing essence of Brazilianness. In so doing, Lispector replaces the national myth of syncretism with cultural and regional differences and redefines the nation-space as a cultural borderland and culture "as a site of social struggle," (Saldívar 295) where disjuncture and incoherence challenge the arbitrary linkage between culture, identity, and territory.

Notes

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. For an excellent historical analysis of Brazilian cultural liminality and cannibalistic resistance politics and poetics, see Santiago's article, "Atração do Mundo."
3. For this essay I use the translation by Giovanni Pontiero. All references are from this translation.
4. In her excellent analysis of Lispector's oeuvre, Lucia Helena states that Lispector undermines the "mimetic representation of the real" by stressing the "ambiguity" inherent in language-as-process (66). One might add that she accomplishes this by phrasing the rhythms of the mind and translating these mental graphs-in-process into written language.
5. One could argue that Lispector's handling of the narrative voice is a prime example of what Cixous in "The Newly Born Woman" describes as bisexual writing: the written translation of "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the non-exclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this 'permission' one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire's inscription on every part of the body and the other body" (41-42). In this process, she stirs up "gender trouble" by subverting and displacing "naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power" (Butler 33-34).
6. *A hora da estrela* was written and published in 1977, the year when Clarice Lispector died.
7. For brilliant analyses of these issues, see Renato Ortiz, *Mundialização e cultura* and Muniz Sodré, *Reinventando a cultura*.
8. In the 1986 film of the novel Suzana Amaral renders this aspect congenially by staging their rendezvous under six-laned urban freeways.
9. See *Três vezes Clarice*.
10. For a complete analysis see "Negation: Clarice Lispector."
11. With the exception of Queiroz' *O quinze* and Amado's proletarian novels. For a detailed analysis of modern Northeastern fiction see, among others, Adonias Filho, *O romance brasileiro de 30* and Flora Süssekind, *Tal Brasil, qual romance*.

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