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# Mediating Language, Translating Experience: Negotiating the Postdictatorial Metropolis in *Duas praças*

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**ABSTRACT:** In his 2005 novel *Duas praças*, Ricardo Lísias addresses the quotidian violence of contemporary São Paulo, a metropolis increasingly segregated by socio-economic classes, spatial distances, and physical barriers, as well as the concerns of truth, memory and reconciliation haunting Brazil and its neighbors in the postdictatorial years. In *Duas praças*, language plays a critical role revealing the psychological states of the characters, while also indicating the limitations of translation and transnational communication between Brazilian Portuguese and Argentine Spanish. Through a closer analysis of language and translation, this paper examines *Duas praças* as an intervention in and commentary on the disjunctive democracy transforming Brazilian metropolises into cities of walls and the politics of memory continuing to plague postdictatorial societies throughout the region.

**KEYWORDS:** *Duas praças*, violence, memory, postdictatorship, transnational communication

## INTRODUCTION

According to contemporary Brazilian novelist Ricardo Lísias “[q]ualquer utilização de linguagem é um ato político. Assim, toda obra de arte, de qualquer natureza, é política” (Lísias, *Entrevista* 1). Lísias’ statement implies the possibilities and responsibilities of language and literature within society, considerations especially relevant for recent Brazilian history. During the transition from military rule to democracy over the past two decades, Brazil has experienced an

expansion of political citizenship, a strengthening of democratic institutions and a rise of civil society, while paradoxically becoming a more unequal, violent and divided nation. Metropolitan regions, especially São Paulo, have transformed into what Teresa Caldeira terms “cities of walls” increasingly segregated by socio-economic class divisions, spatial distances, and physical barriers.<sup>1</sup> As new problems of quotidian violence and inequality emerge, the legacy of dictatorships continues to haunt the region. In a sense, Brazil is plagued by two traumas: the structural violence of everyday life in a disjunctive democracy and, to a lesser extent, the aftermath of dictatorial rule.<sup>2</sup> Given the gravity of these concerns, one might dismiss the arts as irrelevant to understanding contemporary society. However, as Lísias implies and his recent novel *Duas praças* illustrates, language and literature matter, as a writer’s public interventions and personal reflections can have explicit and implicit political consequences.

Recent Brazilian literature often provides either postdictatorial reflections or responses to the violence of everyday life. While this binary schema is obviously reductive, it provides a loose framework for understanding two of the primary concerns of recent Brazilian literature and criticism. In his influential study of postdictatorial fiction, Idelber Avelar includes Brazilian as well as Southern Cone writers. He observes that, “the imperative to mourn is the postdictatorial imperative par excellence. The literature I address in this book engages a mournful memory that attempts to overcome the trauma represented by the dictatorships” (Avelar 3). Drawing on the writings of Ricardo Piglia, Diamela Eltit, Tununa Mercado, Silviano Santiago and João Gilberto Noll, Avelar creates a theory of postdictatorial fiction informed by the ideas of psychoanalysis, allegory and mourning. These works differ thematically and aesthetically, yet Avelar loosely connects them through the postdictatorial context of Brazil and the Southern Cone. Concerns of the contemporary metropolis, such as crime, socio-spatial segregation and rights to the city, occupy a secondary place in these writings. With the turn of the millennium, this postdictatorial framework has become less present, yet has not disappeared completely from Brazilian literature with works like Fernando Bonassi’s 2003 *Prova contrária* raising questions of torture and memory.<sup>3</sup> However, as the dictatorship becomes a more distant memory, contemporary problems of the metropolis have become a pressing concern in recently published fiction including

*Eles eram muitos cavalos* by Luiz Ruffato (2001), *Capão pecado* by Ferréz (2000), and the 2005 anthology *Literatura marginal: talentos da escrita periférica*. The city and its associated problems of violence, inequality and disjunctive citizenship emerge as principal themes in these contemporary works.

In his 2005 *Duas praças*, Lísias addresses both the violence of contemporary São Paulo and the continued repercussions of the dictatorial years in Brazil and the Southern Cone. As an up-and-coming literary figure born in 1975 in São Paulo, the transition from dictatorship to disjunctive democracy has marked Lísias' life and informed his writing. He published his first novella *Cobertor das estrelas* in 1999, and has continued to publish over the past decade with his most recent novel, *O céu dos suicidas*, released earlier this year. To date, *Duas praças* has been his most acclaimed novel, receiving favorable reviews and third place in the 2006 Prêmio Portugal Telecom de Literatura Brasileira. With undergraduate and master's degrees in literature and literary theory from Unicamp and a doctorate in Brazilian literature from USP, Lísias brings a refined literary sensibility to his writing. Given the close attention to language which is characteristic of his writing, his literature merits further study. Lísias deserves recognition as a critical voice of contemporary Brazilian literature whose importance will only increase in future years. This paper intends to introduce Lísias' work to a broader public by providing one of the first critical commentaries on his novel *Duas praças*. This reading will focus on language and the related issues of mediation and translation in order to analyze how language facilitates the articulation of characters and events within the novel yet cannot render them perfectly.

#### FIGURES OF MEDIATION: A LOOK AT LANGUAGE AND POLITICS IN LÍSIAS

Divided into ninety short chapters, the novel alternates between the stories of Maria, a resident of the periphery who lives within her mental fantasies, and Marita, an Argentine graduate student in Brazil and likely a daughter of *desaparecidos*. Through these two characters, Lísias explores the transnational relations between Brazil and its Southern Cone neighbors in the postdictatorial period. The title refers to the two plazas that structure these parallel tales: one in peripheral São Paulo near Maria's house and the other the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires where the Madres and Abuelas advocate for Marita

and other children of the disappeared. While unfolding in concurrent narratives set within São Paulo, these women's lives remain separated by the socio-spatial distances and physical barriers of the city, as well as by the metaphorical walls of chapter divisions and narrative breaks created in the literary space. Although Lísias has greater familiarity with the academic realm inhabited by Marita, he attempts to represent Maria's experiences on the margins of society. Through fictional characters and narrative voices, Lísias emerges as a cultural mediator for the 21st century whose novel negotiates between the marginal and elite zones of São Paulo.

This figure of intellectual or artist as mediator between distinct social classes has often characterized Brazilian culture. As João Camillo Penna observes, notable figures of mediation include Machado de Assis, Euclides da Cunha, the *samba* aficionados moving between Tia Ciata's house and realms of erudite culture, and, more recently, Drauzio Varella and other writers of "prison testimonials." The problem of mediation as explored by Penna is a complicated one implicated in concerns of enunciation, authority, and the subjugation or formation of marginalized populations through literature. In an initial hypothesis about the contemporary cultural scene, Penna explains that:

the mediations that existed before between distinct strata of society, responsible for the cultural forms recognized as the most successful of Brazil, like Machado, *samba*, and soccer, would no longer be possible within this scene of radical segmentation, emerging as what defines the contemporary Brazilian city, and in particular its former capitol, divided between the diverse drug trafficking commanders, the militia, and the fortified upper class enclaves protected by private security, etc.; that is to say by a territorial stratification of spaces, contact and circulation. (Penna 10)<sup>4</sup>

Figures of mediation do not function as they did in the past, yet that does not mean that zones of contact and exchange within contemporary culture no longer exist. By suggesting that we view Lísias as a contemporary figure of mediation, I do not intend to condemn him as a member of the cultural elite appropriating the voices and experiences of others for his own purposes. Instead, I want to highlight the

important, if complicated, trajectory of these go-betweens in Brazilian culture and to suggest that such mediations are still possible yet distinct in their manifestations and implications.

While part of São Paulo intellectual elite, Lísias moves beyond this known realm to recount Maria's story, as well as universal fears of terror and crime, the legacies of political torture, and the psychological neurosis of others in *Anna O. e outras novelas*. In an epilogue to this 2007 short story collection, Leyla Perrone-Moisés observes that:

Another trait that distinguishes him from many contemporary young authors is the capacity to escape from himself, from his small individual problems. It is a capacity to make oneself other (“*otrar-se*”)—beautiful verb invented by Fernando Pessoa. Lísias does not pull his stories out from himself, nor does he use poverty or marginality as themes for a documentary impact. He places himself in the skin of very diverse characters, which is as much a generosity as it is a basic principle of good fiction. (Perrone-Moisés 205)

As a writer who makes himself “other” by attempting to place himself within the skin and the psyche of his characters, Lísias mediates between cultural realms without using his characters in an exploitative documentary fashion. In *Duas praças*, he positions himself between the worlds of Maria and Marita to attempt a narrative representation of the diverse experiences of trauma and pain that characterize urban life in disjunctive democracies haunted by postdictatorial memory.

Lísias brings us closer to instances of pain and suffering as readers, yet we do not experience them ourselves. We approximate this (fictional) “reality” through language, but the violence and suffering are never “ours.” Instead, they are mediated by Lísias and translated into his fictional language. Yet, certain emotions and experiences become lost in these processes of representation and translation. The notion of literary language as a means of representing and translating experiences and emotions recalls George Steiner's observation that “translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every model of meaning” (Steiner xii). Spoken words, written language, and other forms of communication all imply acts of translation, which often entail processes of transfer, adaptation and interpretation bounded

by the limitations of language and its translatability. Language may break down in the face of pain, as Elaine Scarry observes, or when confronted by psychological instability or emotional hardship, but words nonetheless form the building blocks of literary representation and translation.

Aware of this importance of language, Lísias pays close attention to his word choice as he crafts a “sophisticated object” of literature while leaving it up to readers to discover the political meaning of his texts. Further elaborating his ideas on language and writing, Lísias explains that, “A fragment is all that I can write or, in other words, it is all that I think should be written. But, I am taciturn” (Lísias, *Entrevista 1*). Not only does language have power, but each word also has a particular meaning and implication, a view of language that characterizes Lísias’ prose and its preference for economy. When language overflows its boundaries or breaks down in the tales of Maria and Marita, it often does so for a specific purpose, whether representing a fraught psychological state or indicating the limitations of communication. Although Lísias never explicitly states his political objective, his project could be read as an intervention in and commentary on the sociopolitical issues confronting contemporary Brazil. Rather than returning to the radical leftist politics typical of student movements and the national-popular during the 1960s, Lísias responds to contemporary concerns with a new form of politics. As Leyla Perrone-Moisés correctly observes:

He is a committed writer and his work is political. But what type of commitment and what type of politics are we talking about? It is no longer the commitment of 20th century writers, based on ideology and partisan causes. Lísias’ commitment is characteristic of his time and his generation, a commitment both punctual and ample. His constant themes—beggars, homeless, those driven crazy by misery, those tortured by the dictatorships and their politics—all converge to repudiate any type of oppression or violence. (Perrone-Moisés 303-304)<sup>5</sup>

Placing the parallel narratives of Maria and Marita in the same novel thus has resonances beyond the page. According to anthropologist James Holston, “the multilayerings and sheer congestion of São

Paulo's urban forms force most to mix. Everyday contaminations of difference occur inescapably. As a result, the city public of São Paulo is generally tense, often uncivil, and sometimes violent" (Holston 283). It is in this São Paulo of shared spaces, hostile language, obscenities and tense interpersonal relationships where the tales of Maria and Marita unfold. Even though their lives intersect minimally, coming into contact only at the novel's end, their tales mediate the pervasive violence experienced within the contemporary city as embedded within one's psychological state and inherited from earlier periods of authoritarian rule.

#### LIFE ON THE MARGINS: MARIA'S FRAGMENTED LANGUAGE AND MIND

Language plays a critical role in the parallel lives of these women as both Maria and Marita attempt to impose structure on their ideas, experiences and thoughts through spoken or written language, a constructed order that eventually verges towards collapse. The novel opens in the world of Maria, "uma pessoa muito elegante" with "educação refinada," as she looks out her window with disgust at the trash in her garden grass, most likely left by the young man waiting at the bus stop in front of her house (Lísias, *Duas praças* 7). While closing the window, she thinks that the man is "um enorme filho da puta" and continues to describe him as "um desgraçado de um porco filho de uma puta" (Lísias, *DP* 7-8). With its self-constructed homes, crowded bus stops, and corner bars, Maria's street could be found in any region of the São Paulo periphery. By emphasizing her education, elegance and cleanliness, Maria differentiates herself from fellow residents of the periphery in a gesture reminiscent of the diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus.<sup>6</sup> The repetition of this rhetoric constructs figurative walls around Maria that, when paired with the physical barriers of shut windows and closed doors, isolate her within her mind and her house.

Throughout Maria's monologue, language helps to define her world and her psychological state. The opening chapters illustrate a clearly structured world where the comparatively educated and well-mannered Maria separates herself from her neighbors and surroundings. Similar to the talk of crime studied by Teresa Caldeira, Maria's narration evokes a temporal distinction between past and present while attempting to establish order amidst the chaos of the contemporary city. Divided into before and after the crime, the



narratives of violence analyzed by Caldeira “simplify and enclose the world” Caldeira 20). Whereas the experience of crime “disrupts meaning and disorders the world, the talk of crime symbolically reorders it by trying to reestablish a static picture of the world” (Caldeira 20). Given that these narratives rely on stereotypes, prejudices and clear-cut distinctions between good and evil or past and present, “the talk of crime makes violence proliferate as it counteracts it and symbolically reorders the world” (Caldeira 38). Maria attempts to give order, if only symbolically, to a world marked by the quotidian violence of disjunctive democracy in the contemporary metropolis. While the narrative seeks to establish a static picture of the world, this order soon begins to disintegrate as its relatively clear, complete sentences become increasingly fragmentary.

Whereas fully formed thoughts and complete sentences characterize the initial narration of Maria’s story, her language and psychological state of mind soon exceed the simplifications and enclosures imposed on the world through narrative. From a relatively lucid state, language begins to break down as sentences dissolve into fragments and cohesion of narrative thought falters. Early in the novel, for instance, Maria reflects that, “Hoje em dia, por qualquer coisinha os bandidos entram na nossa casa” (Lísias, *DP* 14). This sentence, while subjective and open to contestation, is nonetheless a fully formed thought and a relatively coherent statement. Slightly later in her narrative, a similar thought ends in fragmentation: “Hoje em dia, os bandidos aproveitam qualquer distração para entrar na” (Lísias *DP* 37). The sentence leaves us hanging as we wonder where Maria thinks the criminals might enter. Given the similarities between the fragment and the earlier sentence, it seems likely that Maria still fears that criminals will enter “na nossa casa.” Breaking off before Maria completes her thought, the sentence provides an indication of her fragmented mental state and unstable psychological condition.

The extent of her mental instability becomes more apparent as she yells obscenities at the world outside her window and pines after a mannequin in a store window. Her love for the mannequin represents an entire component of her life about which she cannot communicate. Language collapses as uncompleted thoughts and fragmented phrases become increasingly common in Maria’s monologue to parallel the breakdown of her psychological state. Reading “Maria não gosta nem de,” we ponder what Maria does not like and why that choice is not

revealed in the novel (Lísias, *DP* 39). On maintaining appearances within society, the narrative explains that, “[n]ão é uma futilidade, mas,” leaving us to question if not a futility, then what? (Lísias, *DP* 64). Her imagination of this romantic relationship with the Mannequin becomes more elaborate to include a pregnancy, which is likely false yet could be the result of a gang rape. The monologue struggles to relate this incommunicable aspect of her life as it continues with partial clauses and half-formed thoughts. Fragmented sentences, such as “E o Manequim sabe que ela,” end abruptly and move quickly to the next phrase “Só que aquelas putas” before completing an idea (Lísias, *DP* 65). Instead of indicating a thought trailing off with ellipsis, periods punctuate these written fragments, perhaps to more closely represent the current mental state of Maria with its fractured fantasies, frantic—or perhaps manic—movements, and it leaps of logic. As the narration reveals only key words and fragmented ideas, readers must form sentences and reconstruct meaning, entering into acts of translation in order to approximate the experience of Maria.

The narrative of Maria’s story becomes progressively more fragmented and aggressive as incomplete thoughts and unfinished sentences replace the lucidity visible in the first chapters to culminate in a near complete collapse of language. Sentences disappear as distinct units of thought that lend order to the narrative, which instead becomes an ongoing, continuous and repetitive flow of words. Maria’s language exceeds the bounds often imposed by narrative to enclose, simplify and structure the world. If the explosive stream of words makes little sense, perhaps it is because this language attempts to represent Maria’s state of mind and her psychological pain. Yet, the physical pain and psychological suffering experienced by others is often difficult to understand and impossible to represent. As Elaine Scarry explains in her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, “physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 366). During her daily life on the periphery and in her tormented mind, Maria suffers physical and psychological pain that not only resists but also actively destroys language, recognizing it as inadequate to the experience.

Lísias turns towards fragments and repetitions to approximate Maria’s language as it collapses in on itself. In a burst of words most

likely directed at the Mannequin, although her interlocutor is not explicitly delineated, Maria insists that “você é o pai é o pai é o pai é o pai, menino Jesus menino Jesus seu filho de uma puta, ele vai ter um pai ele vai ter um pai meu filho vai ter um pai seu filho de uma égua e você é o pai seu pai covarde filho de uma puta vaca desgraçada que anda pela rua de noite” (Lísias, *DP* 70). This slippage between pronoun usage, references to fathers or sons, and possessive adjectives of *seu* and *meu* captures the stream of consciousness and emotional outburst of a mentally unstable woman who finally unleashes her verbal expression after years attempting to isolate and contain it through the construction of both physical and psychological walls. As she repeats phrases, links random words and mutters less than logical thoughts, she seems to be undoing sentences and unlearning language, reverting to an earlier state of verbal expression dominated by cries and sounds.

Maria’s return to a state preceding language does not necessarily imply a failure of language, but instead could be viewed as an example of what Gilles Deleuze describes as the third possibility of stuttering in literature that emerges “when *saying is doing*” (Deleuze 107). Rather than the character stuttering in speech, the writer stutters in language, an effect that occurs when “the stuttering no longer affects preexisting words, but itself introduces the words it affects; these words no longer exist independently of the stutter, which selects and links them together through itself” (Deleuze 107). Deleuze continues by explaining that “language trembles from head to toe” when it is stuttering, a process that can be understood as “a poetic comprehension of language itself: it is as if the language were stretched along an abstract and infinitely varied line” (Deleuze 109). As Lísias attempts to render Maria’s paroxysms into writing, he becomes a stutterer in language. Verbs that previously marked Maria’s enunciation, such as “falou sozinha” (Lísias, *DP* 14), “pensando nisso” (16), “repetiu gritando” (42), disappear and adjectives characterizing language become scarce. Instead, rhythms and cadences intensify as Maria’s question “porque não tem casa não tem cadê a casa cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê cadê a puta de sua mãe agora cadê a puta de sua mãe agora cadê a puta aquela puta que vai com tudo mundo” (Lísias, *DP* 78). With incessant repetition, the meaning of “cadê” as a question of location becomes less important than its sound. Words transform into a trembling abstraction as Lísias enters into what Deleuze describes as a space where “*a language is so*

*strained* that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer . . . [and it] *reaches the limit* that marks its outside and makes it confront silence” (Deleuze 110). By exploring these outside margins of language, Lísias realizes its limitations and possibilities in personal expression, artistic representation and translation, themes of importance for the novel’s other story line as well.

**MARITA AND THE MADRES: DISCOURSE AND POSTDICTATORSHIP**  
Whereas Maria’s tale unfolds in the São Paulo periphery through the spoken language of her monologue, the story of Marita develops within academic environs dominated by the written text. Postdictatorial concerns of memory and reconciliation frame this narration of the search for Marita, an Argentine student who vanishes from the university in São Paulo where she is pursuing her master’s degree in Spanish literature. The Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo must find Marita for DNA testing in order to prove their suspicions that she is the daughter of *desaparecidos*, kidnapped at a young age, and raised by a military family. Contacted by the Abuelas to help in this search, the first-person narrator, a graduate student of Brazilian literature, begins to investigate Marita’s life, academic work and potential whereabouts, a journey that raises questions of language and translation within the realms of academia and politics. Linked to geopolitical, academic and social considerations, written language emerges as a source of power that carefully constructs the world. Yet, this conscious use of language will eventually fail as much as Maria’s fragmented speech.

Questions of legibility, decipherability and translatability often reveal these limitations of written language. These concerns emerge as especially relevant when considering Marita’s unfinished master’s thesis, which proposes a study of three different translations of *Don Quixote* into Brazilian Portuguese. By studying the translations of a novel preoccupied with the written word, the project underscores the importance of language for Lísias, as well as the significance of writing within the academic realm of Marita’s storyline. Among academics, like the narrator’s advisor who insists that “tudo é discurso,” *Don Quixote* is pointed to as “o livro por excelência daqueles que compreendem que não pode existir ato político mais radical que o de intervir” (Lísias, *DP* 103-104, 108). In this intellectual world where language is seen as a political act, *Don Quixote* becomes understood as a political intervention due

to the importance of the word throughout the book's adventures and tales. When considering Quixote, Michel Foucault observes, "His whole being is nothing but language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been written down. He is made up of interwoven words; he is writing itself, wandering through the world among the resemblances of things" (Foucault 46). As a scholar particularly interested in relationships between power, discourse, language and knowledge, Foucault highlights the importance of language in the constitution of Quixote as both the man and the novel.

Similar to the Quixote of her research, Marita exists only in written language, as the scribbles on her manuscript, a subject of email correspondence, typed data in an academic file, or documents in a dossier. As readers, we access Marita primarily through these written words, namely the narrator's quixotic search for Marita and her unfinished master's project. Marita intends to compare the translations, briefly contextualize them within Brazilian history, and supplement her analysis with bibliography that includes George Steiner's landmark study of language and translation from the 1970s and Borges' essays about Spanish translations of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Dickens' *Hard Times* (Lísias, DP 45). The works of Steiner and Borges are fundamental contributions to translation theory that propose similar visions of language as constantly changing.<sup>7</sup> According to Steiner, "language is in perpetual change" (Steiner 12), an emphasis paralleled by Borges' claim that "language is shifting all the time" (Borges, *This Craft of Verse* 10). Understanding language in this manner hints at its potential power, while also implying its possibilities and limitations as a means of expression, representation and translation. References to translation, literature, *Quixote* and particularly Borges help emphasize the importance of language as a site of shifting meaning, interactive communication, multiple interpretations and potential understanding.

These themes of language and understanding are perhaps most interestingly synthesized with the narrator's brief allusion to Borges' "Pierre Menard, el autor del *Quijote*" when he comments that, "Cansado de tudo aquilo, voltei para casa com o Pierre Menard na cabeça" (Lísias, DP 45). In the short story by Borges, Pierre Menard wants to write *the Quixote*, not another *Quixote*. Rather than copy or mechanically transcribe Cervantes' sentences, Pierre Menard continues to be himself, a twentieth-century French writer, and arrives at the same exact sentences as the original *Quixote* based on his own

experiences and life. Comparing the two *Quixotes*, Borges notes that, “[e]l texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico. (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza” (Borges, *Ficciones* 52). The same words used in different spatial and temporal moments have distinct implications. Contexts shape meaning, experiences affect interpretations, and language evolves over the years. Through his comparative literary analysis of the two *Quixotes*, Borges illustrates his belief that both language and readers are shifting all the time, and that meaning is often open to interpretation. This view of language as fluid and powerful informs Lísias’ entire novel as it negotiates between the orality of the periphery and the textocentrism of the academy, between Maria’s verbal expression and Marita’s manuscript.

Similar to the spoken thoughts and verbal utterances of Maria, Marita’s thesis provides a glimpse into the expression and logic of a character that does not narrate her own tale. By attempting to decipher an early draft sketched out on “alguns papéis manuscritos cuja letra era incompreensível,” the narrator tries to access the mental world of Marita, gain insight into her experiences and perhaps discover the reason for her disappearance (*Lísias*, DP 25). Her manuscript, however, does not allow for easy access or understanding, given that “garranchos em outra lingua são ainda mais incompreensíveis” (*Lísias*, DP 26). Not only are Marita’s scribbles in Spanish incomprehensible for the narrator, but also his understanding is further hindered by the fact that he cannot “descobrir se aquilo estava escrito em português ou em espanhol” (*Lísias*, DP 26). While receiving a typed version from Marita’s advisor makes the manuscript more accessible, comprehension of the text remains difficult. After outlining the project with relatively clear sentences, the text’s lucidity begins to disintegrate as “ela parece começar a escrever de um jeito confuso demais. As frases são muito longas, às vezes sem qualquer pontuação, e a certa altura começam a aparecer uma enormidade de parênteses (que deviam ser notas de rodapé). Conforme o texto caminha, o espanhol também vi se tornando cada vez mais impcompreensível” (*Lísias*, DP 46). The manuscript moves away from clarity as sentences lengthen, punctuation disappears, parentheses interrupt the argument flow, and the written structures become increasingly incomprehensible.

In another attempt to clarify his understanding of Marita’s manuscript, the narrator consults his friend, the well-known professor

of Spanish American literature in Rio de Janeiro. She confirms his reading of the thesis draft: “O texto ia bem até um pouco depois da primeira página. Dali em diante, aos poucos ia se perdendo até que, no final . . . parece não ter nenhuma lógica” (Lísias, *DP* 85). The professor also notes that the breakdown in the argument is accompanied by an increasingly heterogeneous presence of Spanish and Portuguese as Marita switches languages every five or six lines, yet does not write in *portunhol*. While these fissures in the cohesion of thought and language could reflect Marita’s psychological state and perhaps provide insight into her recent disappearance, the professor concludes that the text reveals nothing other than sentences without meaning. As the narrator notes, “o problema da identidade, que nos poderia dizer algo, por exemplo, passava longe do texto” (Lísias, *DP* 85). Texts may have meaning, but certain elements, like the question of identity, often escape the realm of the written word and even the space of language. Searching for responses to unanswered puzzles or excavating material for specific definitions may be fruitless in instances like Marita’s story, but written language nonetheless presents itself as this space of both potentiality and limitations. In Marita’s manuscript, logic disintegrates and boundaries between languages disappear in a process of unraveling that parallels the break down of Maria’s verbal expression as it becomes increasingly fragmented and verges on collapse. As language reaches these limits, its destruction is not inevitable. Instead, it often strains and stutters while confronting silences and attempting meaning through representation and translation.

Both narrative strains examine these psychological realms of language while also considering its political implications as a means of representation and translation. Lísias explores these political aspects of language primarily through the graduate student narrator’s search for Marita within bureaucratic labyrinths, archival documentation, streams of correspondence, and personal reflections. As the narrator communicates with the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, the political stakes of translation become particularly salient. In an early correspondence with the Argentine organization, he attempts to translate “papel timbrado” (letterhead stationary) into Spanish, but even after searching the Internet and asking friends who know Spanish well, he cannot “descobrir em lugar nenhum como se pode escrever ‘papel timbrado’ na língua de Cervantes” (Lísias, *DP* 22). Since a literal translation from Portuguese into Spanish proves impossible, the

narrator instead describes the stationary and its function, approaching what Kwame Anthony Appiah might call a “thick translation” in order to contextualize and define the word.<sup>8</sup> Although a relatively insignificant word with minor repercussions, this instance of the untranslatable hints at the importance of translation when communicating across languages and cultures, an act that becomes even more important when the social and political stakes are raised.

Considerations of translation often become enmeshed with geopolitical questions and the relative power of languages within an international sphere. As the narrator continues his correspondence with the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, he becomes more involved in the details of Marita’s case and the politics of postdictatorial memory. At times, he writes to Alice Cymbal at the Argentine organization in Portuguese in order to communicate more rapidly and accurately the details of the Brazilian side of the investigation. He opts to write in Portuguese “para não correr o risco de ver um mal-entendido atrapalhar nossa conversa” (Lísias, *DP* 54). Yet, misunderstanding remains possible since a native speaker of Spanish reads and interprets the Portuguese text. Alice responds to these emails by asking the narrator to write in Spanish because “ficava mais fácil de compreender” and it is “uma das línguas universais, afinal de contas” (Lísias, *DP* 45). Through these exchanges, Alice establishes Spanish as the dominant language, which corresponds to its relative position within the region. The narrator’s acts of translation move beyond psychological, personal and poetic realms to have greater implications within sociopolitical considerations of postdictatorial memory both locally and globally.

#### A FEW CONCLUDING WORDS

The fictional world of *Duas praças* explores this extended aftermath of the dictatorial rule as well as the experiences of violence in a contemporary disjunctive democracy. Through the parallel tales of Maria and Marita, Lísias attempts to mediate starkly different lives occupying the shared space of the page and the city. The metaphorical walls of chapter breaks and the physical barriers of São Paulo’s socio-spatial segregation separate these women even though their narratives unfold concurrently. Language attempts to communicate across and through these walls by representing embodied experiences, capturing psychological states, and expressing emotions. Yet, certain



experiences cannot be rendered into language, but rather resist or even actively destroy language. A disconnect exists between what is experienced and what one is able to or willing to say. Pushed to these limits, language strains, stutters and verges on collapse, often resulting in literary works that challenge readers by evading easy understanding and simple conclusions. As Doris Sommer reminds us, “Readers bent on understanding may neglect another kind of engagement, one that would make respect a reading requirement. The slap of refused intimacy from uncooperative books can slow readers down, detain them at the boundary between contact and conquest” (Sommer ix). Lísias forces us to slow down, pause over the indecipherable moments, and consider the failures of translation. We reflect on the possibilities, and greater impossibilities, for communication and understanding in a contemporary Brazil marked by the quotidian violence of a disjunctive democracy and by the unrelenting specter of the dictatorial era. In Lísias’ São Paulo, the metaphorical and physical walls seem firmly entrenched, which is perhaps exactly the point of his mediation and political commitment for the twenty-first century.

## Notes

1. See Caldeira for a detailed study of the socio-spatial organization of São Paulo, new patterns of urban segregation characterized by more explicit physical barriers, and the paradoxical nature of transformations in citizenship rights to the city that accompany the expansion of political rights in postdictatorial years.

2. See Paul Farmer for a definition of “structural violence” as the various forms of violence produced by poverty, hunger, racism, social inequality and other structures embedded within society. Caldeira introduces the idea of Brazilian democracy as disjunctive in Chapter 9 of *City of Walls* to “call attention to its contradictory processes of simultaneous expansion and disrespect for citizenship rights” (339). For a further elaboration of this concept of disjunctive democracy and its counter-action of insurgent citizenship, see James Holston’s *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*.

3. See Lehnen for a unique reading of *Prova contrária* as both a response to concerns of memory, repression and social exclusion common in the aftermath of the military dictatorship and also a comment on issues of globalization and late capitalism.

4. This translation and others into English, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

5. See Ortiz and Ridenti for useful accounts of the rise and fall of the national-popular and its political, social and cultural implications. The twentieth century form of commitment mentioned by Perrone-Moisés refers to the model followed by, among others, Affonso Romano de Sant’Anna, Chico Buarque, Antônio Callado and Lygia Fagunde Telles.

6. See Caldeira and Holston for descriptions and photographs of this prevalence of auto-construction among peripheral neighborhoods in their ethnographies of São Paulo. The writings of the favelado Carolina Maria de Jesus evoke a similar distancing from her fellow residents of the periphery, as evidenced in *O quarto de despejo*.

7. Steiner’s *After Babel* is a watershed work within translation studies for its encompassing view of translation. Borges’ work is similarly important for its exploration of the happy and creative infidelity of the translator that matters to readers. Since the contributions of Steiner and Borges, the field of translation studies has continued to evolve to include a variety of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. See Venuti for more information about translation theory. It may be worth pondering why Lísias includes these works, instead of more recent translation theorists, in Marita’s bibliography. What are the implications of these theoretical perspectives for Marita’s pieces? How does this glimpse of translation theory relate to Lísias’ novel and broader literary and political project?

8. In his 1993 text, Appiah proposes the notion of “thick translation,” borrowing from Clifford Geertz’s idea of “thick description.” Translations that are “thick” use ethnographic approaches to literary texts so that the text can perform an ideological function in the target culture. While the processes of translation occurring within Lísias’ novel do not have an ideological function, they are often aware that there is never an appropriate match for a word, an idea or experience, a failure of literal word for word translation that necessitates a “thick” translation to convey context and meaning. For more information on Appiah’s idea, as well as other approaches to translation, see Venuti’s *The Translation Studies Reader*.

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