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Urban Space and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Brazilian Literature

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“Human subjectivity and agency are embodied and, therefore, inextricably intertwined with the material environment.”
(Prieto 18)

Abstract

Contemporary Brazilian fiction has been showing the urban space, and the city in particular, as a privileged object of reflection and poetic imagination. This paper explores the representation of urban space/city in female writing. In other words, my goal is to study the role of urban space/city in the transgression of the patriarchal system, specifically regarding the roles traditionally assigned to women. My starting point will be the following two questions. First: can the city and urban experience promote the transgression of the rules of patriarchal society and help female characters to break with the past and gain agency? And, secondly, how are contemporary female writers conveying urban space in their fiction? I intend to employ theoretical concepts that deal with the characterization of the urban space/city, such as metropolis and megalopolis. I'm using the category of space here in a culturalist perspective, which defines space as a representational category intimately intertwined with social and psychological dimensions. Thus understood, space is not an immobile surface but an ongoing sphere where several human trajectories coexist and the social is constructed (Massey 2005). Given the broad range of authors at hand, I've decided to limit my reflection to four female writers: Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), Sônia Coutinho (1939-2013), Paloma Vidal (1975-), and Ana Paula Maia (1977-).

The category of space has been conceived as a recurring and relevant theoretical and critical framework in the contemporary era, particularly after what is called the *spatial turn*, expression coined by the geographer Edward Soja at the end of the 80s. Concerned with the literary field, Wesley Kort, in the introduction to *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (2004), points out that literary criticism has relegated reflections on space to the background, giving pride of place to other dimensions such as temporality. The author notes that the language of space is always part of the narrative discourse and may even contain the power and significance of the narrative itself. In his words: “Places in narrative have force and meaning; they are related to human values and beliefs; and they are part of a larger

human world, including actions and events” (11). Narratives, therefore, imply an idea of space in which the relationship between subjectivity and territorial configurations can be revealed.

Contemporary Brazilian fiction has been presenting the urban space, and the city in particular, as a privileged object of reflection and poetic imagination. The focus on the city in Brazilian fiction is not new and, according to Elizabeth Lowe (1982), it can even be traced back to colonial times, constituting a long urban tradition. Following the same reasoning, Cristina Ferreira-Pinto, in the introduction to *Urban Voices: Contemporary Short Stories from Brazil*, explains that “The city often has a role beyond that of a mere background, functioning either as a metaphor for the social institutions that engulf the individual, or as a mythic space that promises (but seldom delivers) a haven or a reward to the searching protagonist” (xxii). The author concludes her argument by saying that “In Brazil, the city as a literary theme has created considerable interest among the reading public, most of whom are part of the country’s large urban population” (xxii). Regina Dalcastagné follows this stream of ideas when she states: “o espaço da narrativa brasileira atual é essencialmente urbano, isto é, é a grande cidade, deixando para trás tanto o mundo rural quanto os vilarejos interiorianos” (109-10).

With industrialization and development of transportation infrastructure, as well as with the expansion and reshaping, in the first half of twentieth century, of urban centers (particularly Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo), and increasing immigration to these centers (both from within Brazil and abroad), the city became central to Brazilian history and cultural production. Furthermore, the theme of urban space/city is crucial in the context of Latin America, because here “urban areas hold a near monopoly on centralized political and economic resources and are home to a rapidly expanding majority of the hemisphere’s population” (xi). This quotation is taken from the introduction to the volume organized in 2007 by Ann Lambright and Elisabeth Guerrero, entitled *Unfolding the City: Women Write the City in Latin America*. This volume brings together a series of articles that problematize the idea of the “lettered city,” the concept coined by Uruguayan writer and literary critic Ángel Rama, and focus on women writers who write against the lettered city of a privileged few. One major question runs through this book: how do women conceive of and map the city in modern life and its effects on its inhabitants?

Many male and female Brazilian writers have explored the disruptive aspects of urban life and its effects on subjectivity and the forms that interpersonal relationships take (through emphasis on themes like crime, violence, sexuality, overpopulation and unemployment, social mobility, gender inequality, fragmented consciousness, displacement, etc.). Acknowledging that many women’s

writings often emphasize the space within—the body, the home, the mind, and the emotions, Luiza Lobo defends that “there is a new vein in women writing which, while privileging the subjective, breaks out of the home both physically and stylistically, venturing into an epic mode and the tangled web of city streets” (163). Several authors have established the same connection. One example is Eric Prieto, who in an essay entitled “Geocriticism, Geopoetics, Geophilosophy, and Beyond”, explains that the link between feminism and geography has been evident in the exploration of concepts such as home as well as community, which includes the public space of the city (cf. 17).

I would like to explore the representation of urban space/city in female writing. In other words, my goal is to consider the role of urban space/city in the transgression of the patriarchal system, specifically regarding the roles traditionally assigned to women. Moreover, I am interested in mapping the construction of a new female subjectivity in contemporary Brazilian literature. My starting point will be the following two questions. First: can the city and urban experience promote the transgression of the rules of patriarchal society and help female characters to break with the past and gain agency? And, secondly, how are contemporary female writers conveying urban space in their fiction? I intend to employ theoretical concepts that deal with the characterization of the urban space/city, such as metropolis and megalopolis, used by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers to characterize and describe urban space. I am using the category of space here in a culturalist perspective, which defines space as a representational category intimately intertwined with social and psychological dimensions. Thus understood, space is not an immobile surface but an ongoing sphere where several human trajectories coexist and the social is constructed (Massey 9-11). Having said that, it is also important to emphasize that the literary texts create a specific geography “que nunca é apenas mimética, nunca espelha o ‘real’, mas proporciona um efeito de real—através de palavras, pois a criação se faz inteiramente dentro dos procedimentos poético-literários” (30), as Georg Wink explains.

Given the broad range of the topic at hand, I have decided to limit my reflection to seven female writers who have published in the last 70 years: Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), Lygia Fagundes Telles (1923-), Sônia Coutinho (1939-2013), Marilene Felinto (1957-), Patrícia Melo (1962-), Paloma Vidal (1975-), and Ana Paula Maia (1977-).

Openings for women’s advancement and the achievement of social conquests – such as the right to education, the right to vote, and the chance to work in jobs traditionally assigned to men began in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Brazil. As time passed, these social changes were lent greater visibility by the intensified industrialization of the country and the growth

of urban areas. Both Clarice Lispector and Lygia Fagundes Telles, following the path already blazed by Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Cecília Meireles, Patrícia Galvão, Lúcia Miguel Pereira, Raquel de Queiroz, among other female writers, convey these social and economic changes in their literary work, a shift that inevitably situated women and the female voice as subjects rather than objects. For Cristina Ferreira-Pinto (1990), both Lispector and Telles are, in this regard, examples of “écriture féminine” in the sense that they question the established discourse, which is fundamentally patriarchal and hierarchical. What is the role of the urban space in the questioning of the established discourse done by Lispector and Telles? This is the question I will now address.

In the article “What happened to the cool city? Seventy years of women’s narrative in Brazil” (2007), Lídia Santos declares that, while for Patrícia Galvão “the city is a scenario where working-class women, oppressed by social injustice circulate,” in Clarice Lispector’s literature “urban life is a theater where female social actor unlearns the melodrama of domesticity” (33). Indeed, each of the four books by Lispector I have chosen to analyze here, in one way or another, depicts the city as a space where female characters (be they from the middle class or the working class) engage in the learning of the self, and in learning to be citizens.

One of the most common criticisms on Lispector’s work has to do with the lack of social engagement of her work, as if it were a creative existentialist exercise completely disconnected from Brazilian social reality. A careful reading of her texts will suffice, however, to prove the existence of an enormous social sensitivity and a deep awareness of the oppression to which Brazilian women (and not only Brazilian) are subject within a society governed by a patriarchal mentality. In this sense, any discussion of space in Lispector’s work necessarily implies the need to understand how she deals with the domestic space, how this space relates to public/urban space, and also how both are related to the characters’ mental space. The space of the city in Lispector’s work, strikingly so in the four books selected here, is never an abstract entity. On the contrary, it plays a fundamental role in the process of self-discovery and self-empowerment. According to Lídia Santos,

In Lispector’s work, the learning of citizenship among people of all social classes takes place principally in the city. The streets are capable of bringing together persons such as the blind man or the beggar with the closely guarded women in their elegant apartments. Moving around in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Lispector’s female characters rehearse their positions as subjects in the world where they must live. . . . it is in the streets that [her] women characters are most vulnerable to male seduction and aggression. (36)

The way the city is represented in each novel by Clarice Lispector selected here – *A Cidade Sitiada* (1949), *Laços de Família* (1960), *Uma Aprendizagem ou O Livro dos Prazeres* (1969), and *A Hora da Estrela* (1977) differs, not radically, but significantly enough to be worth noting. In fact, if these novels are read chronologically, one can suppose that Lispector is somehow interested in showing the effects of the urban space on the characters' behavior over time. For instance, in *A Cidade Sitiada*, the protagonist, Lucrecia, moves from the suburb of São Geraldo to the metropolis, Rio de Janeiro, after getting married. When she returns to the suburb (a space which has also undergone some modernization in the meantime) the reader learns that she has not been touched by the urban modernity of the metropolis. Her experience in the city was not relevant for her because she did not perceive it as a space that could offer the possibility of emancipation. On the contrary, in Barbara Freitag's words: "Ela permanece presa à sua tradição social, volta alegre e intocada para perto de sua mãe (na fazenda) e para o esquema do casamento, que esta lhe havia ensinado e com o qual traz a filha de volta para espaço rural pré-urbano. A cidade estruturante ou formadora não deixou nenhum traço mnêmico em sua memória ou personalidade" ("As cidades formadoras" 87)

The same is not the case with the female characters of *Laços de Família*. For example, the protagonists' experiences in the short stories "Amor," "Laços de Família," and "Preciosidade" within different urban spaces (streets, gardens, train stations) are extremely relevant to their perception of their own body, as well as in their questioning of their identity as women. In these short stories whose setting is the city of Rio de Janeiro (generally its middle-class neighborhoods), Lispector seems to call attention to the possibility that women have of rebelling against the social system. That is, the possibility of achieving individual desires within a society that traditionally forces them to be nothing more than well-behaved wives and mothers, consequently preventing them to think and speak for themselves. Interestingly, it is in the urban space that these achievements can be made, in these three short stories published in the 1960s; it is precisely outside of the domestic space that the valorization of individual freedom is attainable. In these stories, interaction with the urban space seems to facilitate the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual revelatory experiences undergone by the three female characters.

A clearer example of a fruitful interaction with the urban space can be found in *Uma Aprendizagem ou O Livro dos Prazeres*. Lóri (Loreley), an elementary school teacher from the state of Minas Gerais, moves to Rio de Janeiro. As a financially independent young woman, she lives by herself. Far from her family, and with some previous sexual experience, she is looking for a love and stable relationship with Ulisses, a professor and philosopher who she has met in the city. According

to the sociologist Barbara Freitag, this novel recounts the efforts of the protagonist to build a love relationship that does not represent her subordination to the beloved man (cf. “As cidades formadoras”). Lóri seems to understand that the process of building her identity as a woman depends on the ability to relate to the Other, not to the annihilation of her self. The big city of Rio de Janeiro offers her the solitude and the anonymity which are necessary for her self-discovery.

Although the space of the city has the capacity to promote self-awareness and some level of liberation to female characters, for it offers them the necessary dislocation from the domestic space, what turns out to be recurrent in Lispector’s fiction is, as Beatriz Resende has commented, “[um] certo espírito opressor do espaço fechando-se em torno dos habitantes” (51). Indeed, the anonymity that characterizes the metropolis has a distinct downside. In the case of Macabéa, the protagonist of *A Hora da Estrela*, her interaction with the big city is not positive at all. As the narrator says, Rio de Janeiro is a “hostile city” to Macabéa, a poor and uneducated young woman who moves to the city from the northeast of the country. In this novel, the Rio de Janeiro of the 70s is depicted and functions as a megalopolis, a “cidade deformadora,” in Freitag’s words (“As cidades formadoras” 87). The impact of the city on Macabéa’s trajectory is detrimental; the novel concludes with her death after being hit by a car. In this narrative, gender inequality is intensified by social inequality, and interactions within an unfriendly urban space exacerbate those inequalities. As Barbara Freitag says: “O Rio permanence para Macabéa um enigma, um monstro que tirará a vida, a megalópole que tudo devora” (*Cidade dos homens* 119).

While Clarice Lispector puts a strong emphasis on the individual trajectory of her female characters, in the sense that they are, to a certain extent, trying to individually gain self-awareness and to find some meaning in their life within a restrictive and conservative society, Lygia Fagundes Telles chooses to present her female characters’ experiences within the oppressive structure of the Brazilian bourgeois family. For many critics, Telles’s literature deals with conflicted female characters whose emotional state reveals the dissolution of a family structure centered on the father figure. In depicting this dissolution in the narrative, elements abound that display the failure of the patriarchal system, such as adultery, homosexuality, alcohol, and drugs, among others. Both in *Verão no Aquário* and *As meninas*, the female characters experience some kind of imprisonment.

Urban space is barely visible in these two books. Almost everything happens inside the domestic space, a spatial limitation that reflects the lack of communication and freedom in the characters’ lives. In the case of *Verão no Aquário*, the narrative mainly takes place in a 7th floor apartment, and, in the case of *As Meninas*, the action is set in a boarding school run by nuns. In these

narratives, the city's presence in the domestic space is filtered through windows, mirrors, or other glass surfaces. In both novels, the city's streets serve as a point of connection between domestic and other confined spaces through which the city of São Paulo can only be envisioned – rooms crawling with drugs, sex, alcohol, parties, and unhealthy relationships. All these rooms end up being a disclosure of a private and internalized world. To put it in another way, the rooms can be read as a metaphor for the last refuge of female subjectivity within a truly hostile reality which the family, the repressive government and, by extension, the city, all represent.

Regarding the novel *As Meninas*, it should be acknowledged that this book, in comparison with *As Três Marias* (a novel by Raquel de Queiroz published in 1939, with which Telles's book clearly dialogues), goes further on the reflection of the female experience in Brazilian patriarchal society in the sense that it displays women's ability to exit the domestic realm and engage with exterior space. While the confinement in Telles's "pensionato" is not as explicit as in Queiroz's narrative, this does not mean that Telles's characters have achieved full agency. On the contrary, this point remains highly critical. In terms of the space of the city, it is important to notice that in Queiroz's novel, Rio de Janeiro presents the counterpoint to the high walls of the boarding school, described as a "cidadela" from whence the forbidden, seductive world of the city can only be grasped through the character's imagination. Thus, the city in *As Três Marias*, perhaps because it is not experienced fully, stands as a space where women can potentially find a measure of freedom. Neither in *O Verão do Aquário*, nor in *As Meninas*, does the city exert such fascination.

The experience within the city is a key point of reference for understanding Sônia Coutinho's literary universe. As Luiza Lobo remarks, Coutinho "offers a kaleidoscope of images and self-images of women in the urban environment. Her characters create personae in search of identities, and present their stories in fictional but also autobiographical terms. It is through this autobiographical writing that self-consciousness of her characters emerges" (164). In Coutinho's work, the city and its streets are, visibly and paradoxically, both a liberating space and an oppressive force. The author's female characters are "women of the crowd," to play on the phrase by Edgar Allan Poe, but at the same time "they oscillate between a sense of belonging to the external world of the patriarchal city and a sense of being set apart from it in a dream-like, narcissistic scenario which is usually within the confines of the home" (Lobo 164). By choosing highly educated, single or divorced middle-class women who leave their hometown behind to seek financial, sexual and emotional independence from a conservative family in the city, Coutinho emphasizes the solitude and isolation typical of the urban life of the metropolis. As Cristina Ferreira-Pinto explains, the

space of the city “favorece a promiscuidade, mas não a intimidade enquanto convívio autêntico. As ruas e as praças—o espaço público—deixam de ser o espaço de encontro que eram na Polis e, ao contrário, servem somente para reafirmar a solidão do ser humano” (“De janelas” 351). Furthermore, the emptiness that marks her characters’ trajectories arises from a strong and paradoxical tension. On one hand, the move to the big city is driven by the desire and hope of a full liberating life; on the other hand, once there, the female character suffers from a lack of emotional fulfillment. Financial independence is achieved but emotional independence is not. In the end, what prevails in Coutinho’s literature is a sense of displacement, exile, and maladjustment. Let us not forget that, in contrast with Baudelaire’s figure of the *flâneur*, Coutinho’s characters live in a phase of capitalism which has alienated individuals and their dreams much more dramatically than in the nineteenth century.

In the article mentioned above, Lídia Santos states: “In contrast to the total city designed by Brazilian modernist male writers, the women focused on specific neighborhoods within the city” (28). This idea seems to be particularly true for Sônia Coutinho. Many of Coutinho’s narratives are set in the neighborhoods of Rio’s South Zone, often in small and almost empty apartments, a place that helps the author to describe her characters’ hopes, fears, and inner thoughts. *Último Verão em Copacabana*, published in 1985, presents 14 short stories that lay bare the emptiness and anguish of the characters and the obstacles they have to face in the search for affection and emotional fulfillment. The book features characters that break through the mold of bourgeois life and pay a high price for their choices. They are independent, intelligent women, educated and sexually liberated, but living in constant identity crisis and search for completeness, as if women could not achieve emotional balance without the structure of the family and the institution of marriage. The protagonists Madalena (from “Hipólito”), Lola (from “A aventureira Lola”) and Mary Batson (who appears both in “O dia em que Mary Batson fez quarenta anos” and “Reflexões sobre a (in)existência de papai Noel”) are clear examples of this emotional emptiness, which causes them distress, loneliness and ongoing existential turmoil. In these four short stories, the protagonists live alone in Copacabana, but they are originally from rural towns, and in most cases they work as journalists, a profession traditionally occupied by men. Through a fragmentary narrative, Coutinho shows not only their repressive childhoods, but also the contradictions of being a woman split between freedom and solitude, for financial emancipation did not necessarily bring psychological and emotional independence. Ultimately, these women are unprepared to deal with the decadent patriarchal world, and therefore they search for a masculine presence as a way to protect themselves

from the chaotic world that surrounds them. But, this protection is, if not impossible, then certainly difficult to obtain because the male characters are suffering from the same emotional instability. Both women and men are victims of a conservative society, of unstable relationships, and of the solitude that prevails in the urban space where they chose to live. This feeling of imprisonment is very well described, for instance, in “Josete se matou.” In this short story, a male journalist arrives in his “apartamento deserto e sujo” after a long day of work and, while drinking a glass of whiskey, he receives a phone call announcing that, Josete (a coworker who has slept with “a redação inteira”) has committed suicide in her “solitário apartamento.” The image of the city given by the narrator is highly negative. The strongest impression is that of the loneliness of metropolitan life: very high buildings with lighted windows, a starless sky, traffic noise, and automobile fumes. Copacabana is, then, the refuge against loneliness and lack of belonging that is doomed to be attacked by external forces:

Copacabana, o sonho de todo jovem do interior, enfim realizado. O retângulo de céu amuralhado, sem estrelas, que descortino agora da minha janela. O guincho de um milhão de pneus é minha música, meu perfume, a agridoce fumaça dos canos de descarga dos automóveis.

Há uma oculta ameaça na noite de Copacabana, como se um olho gigantesco se formasse nas trevas, um olho maléfico e úmido... Copacabana, uma imponente preparação para as ruínas do ano 3000, quando será tombada como monumento ao *kitsch*. Copacabana invadida pelos ratos. Copacabana evacuada, depois de uma epidemia de peste. Uma grande tempestade, com raios e trovões, provoca um dilúvio em Copacabana. (17)

In his classic essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Georg Simmel analyzes the effects of the big city on the mind of the individual and explains that the deepest problems of modern life “flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life” (47). For Simmel, the notion of mobility is associated with the figure of the outsider/the alien, and consequently also with the interplay between proximity and distance, as well as between reservation and individual freedom. Simmel describes the metropolis as a place of liberation from the binding mentality of the small community, thus granting the individual more space and freedom to independently define himself. However, he also explains that the metropolis is dominated by objectivism (as opposed to subjectivism), and human interactions in the

urban space become short and instrumental, lacking the emotional and personal involvement of small communities. The big city is the environment in which all these contradictory dimensions are materialized.

Coutinho's Rio de Janeiro of the 80s and 90s appears to resonate with Simmel's description of the metropolis in the sense that Coutinho's characters are both positively and negatively affected by the impersonality and the anonymity typical of the big city. For example, in the short story "Hipólito," Copacabana consists of "apartamentos solitários," de "redomas," and the lack of human contact increases the narrator's loneliness: "E não tendo ninguém realmente íntimo nesta cidade de oito milhões de habitantes, o Rio de Janeiro... sozinha neste pequeno apartamento" (21-23). A similar image is repeated in different terms in "Aventureira Lola," where the neighborhood has the aridity of the desert: "Copacabana árida e poeirenta como um deserto, uma fina poeira seca e dourada a se erguer em ondas no opaco entardecer de sol ausente" (34). The idea of anonymity is also present in the irony of certain characters' names such as "Darling" or in generic titles such as "Toda Lana Turner tem seu Johnny Stompanato," reminding us that one woman is equivalent to all women. Nevertheless, in Coutinho's texts it is not rare to see characters opting for "solidão e pelo anonimato, em troca da liberdade e independência que a metrópole lhes oferece, aventurando-se pelas ruas e outras áreas públicas para fugir do isolamento de suas casas acanhadas" (Ferreira-Pinto, "De janelas" 351).

Another important idea in Simmel's essay is the idea of the city as a place of insensitive and indifferent relationships, where everything can be bought or commercialized, even love and affection. In the metropolis everyone can be an outsider, and there is little or no sense of community. In the short story "A liberdade secreta," the female narrator who has broken with her family conventions and who has moved to the city to seek independence, is visited by a female friend from her hometown. In their first interaction, the female character alludes to the lack of affection and solidarity that she feels, and shows that she is somehow disappointed with her experience in the city. Eventually, these feelings and state of mind lead her to confess that she can only truly communicate with people from her small town: "finalmente terei com quem falar, só consigo me comunicar de verdade com vocês de lá, o relacionamento entre as pessoas aqui tão frio e diferente" (126). However, what the reader comes to realize throughout the narrative is that the communication between the two friends is highly deficient, because the two women have taken such different paths and both have preconceived ideas of each other. Contrary to what the friend thinks, the woman who has moved to the city does not have so many sexual adventures, nor does she have

more money or happiness; in fact, she was not able to find long-sought-after freedom “na cidade grande” (130). Facing the friend who has remained in their hometown, who has followed social conventions and who does not seem to understand her need to break with those conventions, the narrator cannot help but feel defeated. Her frustration arises at the end of the short story in a form of an envious commentary: “merda, ela trouxe milhões só para gastar com roupas!” (132)

One important element in Coutinho’s texts is the opposition between the big city and the small town. This opposition operates on multiple levels. Firstly, it shows that the characters (mainly women) need to move to the big city to break with the oppressive and conservative family and social system in which they were raised. The small town works, thus, as a metaphor for an urban society of medium size, with a conservative castrating mentality, as the narrator of *Os seios de Pandora. Uma aventura de Dora Diamante* underlines: “havia o fato de ela não se encaixar nos modelos de Solinas, fosse como mulher ou como mãe” (35)

Moving from the small town to the big city is, therefore, as one character says, “uma obrigação de independência,” a way to refuse making concessions—in other words, a way to show that marriage and motherhood are not necessarily places of freedom for women. Secondly, it shows that the big city is not able to offer them the liberation or the emotional fulfillment that they were looking for. The characters often arrive at this conclusion when they visit or go back to their hometown. The following quotation from the same novel serves as an illustration: “Naquela praia, minha vida no Rio me pareceu, de repente, insuportavelmente dura. ...o trabalho era tudo. A única saída possível para a solidão e o desenraizamento causados pela ausência de laços de família efetivos ou de algum relacionamento amoroso profundo” (91). Lastly, in some texts, the opposition between small town/big city is overshadowed by the profound disenchantment and displacement of the characters. In the short story “Nos olhos do cão” (from *Último verão em Copacabana*), after the narrator visits his hometown he realizes that the (unnamed) small town he has left behind is as harmful as the city of Rio de Janeiro and Copacabana, the neighborhood where he has decided to live. What prevails, in the end, is a feeling of dissatisfaction and of not belonging:

a claridade da Cidade, à qual ainda não se reacostumara, violentava um pouco sua solidão, exigia uma abertura e uma entrega das quais nunca se sentira capaz. . . . sim, toda aquela claridade, pessoas com quem não tinha mais nada a conversar, nunca mais poderia morar ali outra vez . . . Quando o avião decolou, teve de relance uma última visão da linha costeira da Cidade, as brancas dunas, as casas já transformadas em brinquedinhos. Cena que ele veria na memória algumas semanas depois . . .

enquanto tudo prosseguia em redor, o trânsito engarrafado, muralhas de pedra, a solidão, Copacabana e um milhão de sonhos irrealizados. (103-07)

In her first novel, *Aíre em Sofia*, published in 1989, Coutinho explores the adverse effects of the “excitement of the mental life” (Simmel), focusing on the trajectory of Sofia, a journalist who moves to Rio de Janeiro from her hometown (which is never named but whose description points to Salvador da Bahia, due to the strong presence of religious syncretism). The narrative is a dialogue between the present and the past, built upon the voices of a group of friends who have opinions and interpretations about themselves and each other. Similarly to what happens in other texts, when returning to her hometown, the protagonist comments about her life in the city in a very negative way—showing that, paradoxically, along with freedom and liberation, living in the city entails a strong sense of imprisonment, as one reads: “ela não tinha nunca um tempinho para si mesma, o luxo de um tempinho para ler ou pensar, naquela máquina infernal que era Copacabana, que era o Rio de Janeiro” (14). Life in the city is perceived as artificial, mechanized, and above all, perennially short of gratifying, as one can see in the following excerpt: “Já sua vida no Rio, lembrada agora, nesta praia da Cidade, parece-lhe cheia de tiques perfeitamente dispensáveis Aquela obsessão com roupas, aparências, mesas de bar repletas e barulhentas, repetidos almoços e jantares em restaurantes vários, sexo feito aqui e acolá, sempre insatisfatório” (43).

The town, to which she returns, despite some changes and modernization, continues to encourage the same pattern of social behavior. After 20 years, her hometown remains oppressive: “apesar de todas as mudanças, a moleza da Cidade continua a mesma—diz Sofia.— O que há por trás do verniz de modernização ainda é um sistema patriarcal, encontro aqui cabeças claramente do século passado. Uma Cidade feita de famílias patriarcais” (109). Many of her female friends who have stayed ended up suffering some kind of stigma, for instance, Matilde develops a mental illness, and Maíra is seen as “uma viúva alegre.” Her male friends, João e Fernando, are not happier. Not accepted by the family, and unable to connect with the daughters she has left behind, Sofia’s return to the city becomes “um erro fatal” (194). She ends up being murdered. In the opinion of Rosana Patrício, Sofia’s death is symbolic because it represents the challenge that their generation faced and that the conservative society desperately wanted to eliminate: “O próprio Fernando se pergunta se também não ajudou a matar Sofia. Ele, um homem de classe média, acomodado e bem situado, jamais ousara questionar os valores convencionais. Ele sentia-se também incomodado pela protagonista que rompera, que transgredira e subvertera, com seu exemplo, a ordem estabelecida” (259).

In *O Caso de Alice*, published in 1991, the reader finds another example of a woman who moves to the big city. Once again, even with professional stability and financial independence, she cannot avoid feeling misplaced—unable to fit in, either in her hometown or in the big city. This impossibility is presented in the narrative through a split in Alice’s identity between the past and the present. This is a novel permeated by symbols and myths. The universe of fairytales (specifically the universe of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll) serves as a trigger for the character’s shuttling between childhood traumas and the harshness of her surrounding reality, both in the big city and the small town. In this novel, as well as in *Atire em Sofia*, the city of Rio de Janeiro and the small hometown are depicted through the same gaze of violence: assassination, mysterious disappearances, drug-dealings, and thievery. In sum, although often in a very paradoxical and hurtful way, female characters in Sônia Coutinho’s work break free from traditional dichotomies imposed on them and “adopt a postmodern conception of the city as a theatrical site in which forms of alterity can be enacted.” (Lobo 163)

Published in 1982, the novel *As mulheres de Tijucoapapo* by Marilene Felinto points toward a questioning of hegemonic discourse in literature, unveiling the contradictions that characterize Brazilian multiracial culture and society. The discourse of the protagonist-narrator (Rísia) moves in the direction of her origins, as she returns to Tijucoapapo, a small historical village where, in the eighteenth century, a group of women fought alone against foreign invaders. Given her northeastern identity, the protagonist knows the pain of social differences and injustices, and after a harsh experience in São Paulo, she decides to return to the site of that identity, hoping to better understand and thus liberate herself. The question of social class and racism is crucial in this narrative; the narrator feels deeply excluded, and the big city that could offer a better material life for the family turns out to be a disappointing place (“São Paulo jamais seria o paraíso dos panfletos que distribuía sobre ela lá na coitada Recife” 73).

São Paulo in Felinto’s novel is described in negative terms. This is a place of injustices, suffering, exclusion, and brutal social inequality. The poverty, lack of solidarity and communication that has characterized Rísia’s family since their time in the town of Recife is exacerbated by the difficulty to navigate in the metropolis. The idea that the narrator almost loses her voice in São Paulo is repeated throughout the novel, justifying her urgent need to leave. The vastness of the city, the indifference of its habitants, and the coldness of the buildings are constantly mentioned in Rísia’s internal monologue. São Paulo is a dehumanizing and oppressive force. Here is an example, among several meaningful passages: “essa cidade tão enorme de prédios e pessoas e carros e lixo

passando e vida de cidade, as pessoas são jeitos perdidos. As coisas acontecem, as histórias se fazem aos milhares, mas as histórias se perdem também aos milhares, morrem onde nascem. Cada pessoa é uma história perdida” (66).

Leaving the town of Recife to the big city of São Paulo seems to have been a traumatic experience in the protagonist’s life. And, by doing a reverse migration, that is, by going from the city to the countryside after a few years, the protagonist is consciously rebelling against social exclusion; but also against the suffering that resulted from being abandoned by the man she loved, and the frustration of being exploited by her family. Leaving São Paulo behind is a way of refusing to have the repressive fate of the women of her family, who were rejected and betrayed by their male family members.

While in the literary work of the authors discussed thus far (Lispector, Telles, Coutinho and Felinto), characters’ relationships with the urban space are intertwined with the questioning of the traditional social establishment and the need for female liberation in several dimensions (financial, sexual and emotional, for example), the literature produced by younger writers over the past twenty years has distanced itself from an exclusively feminist focus. Though far from finished, a long road of feminist struggle has been traversed for the benefit of these young writers. According to Beatriz Resende, contemporary literary production is marked by a multiplicity of anti-hegemonic discourses, such as:

apropriação irônica, debochada mesmo, em alguns casos, de ícones do consumo; a irreverência diante do politicamente correto; a violência explícita despida do charme hollywoodiano; a dicção bastante pessoalizada, voltada para o cotidiano privado; a memória individual traumatizada, seja por momentos anteriores da vida nacional, seja pela vida particular; a arrogância de uma juventude excessiva; a maturidade altamente intelectualizada; a escrita saída da experiência acadêmica e assim por diante. (20)

Additionally, in this volume of essays on Brazilian contemporary literature, Resende argues that the tragic has returned to the urban space, and that the tragedy and violence of the hostile metropolis necessarily invades private space. The critic also affirms that the conflicts and violence of the big cities (real or imaginary) are probably the most visible theme in contemporary Brazilian culture.

Indeed, in Patrícia Melo’s *O Matador*, published in 1995, the violence of the big city is everywhere. The city of São Paulo and its outskirts are depicted in this novel as having undergone what Barbara Freitag (2006) calls “megalopolização,” a process of the rapid transformation of one

city or metropolis into a megalopolis due to an industrial and economic development, as well as overpopulation and rising inequalities. The story of the crimes committed by Maquiél, Melo's male protagonist, is set in the suburbs of São Paulo, place that is compared to a jungle, where healthy human relationships are impossible to nurture: "A violência está cada vez pior. ...aqui está uma selva" (30). In this novel, Melo uncovers class and race prejudices, as well as appearances that characterize the behavior of the social classes in power, the institutionalized corruption in the police system, as well as the system of relationships based on individual interests. The trajectory of Maquiél, who is constantly obsessed with his physical appearance, can serve to problematize how a cycle of violence arises from the fear of being excluded. Female characters in this narrative are at the mercy of the will of men, utterly dependent in some way or another, and they end up being destroyed: Gabriela, a white female from the middle class, sinks into drug addiction; Cledir is killed, and Erika runs away. After reading this novel, it seems that there is no place for women in this highly violent urban space.

Interestingly, this lack of space for women seems to be one characteristic of Ana Paula Maia's literature produced so far. Maia's characters are predominantly men. In the novella "Entre Rinhas de Cachorros e Porcos Abatidos," published in 2009, the main character is a man who kills pigs for a living. There are only three, almost voiceless, female characters: Edgar Wilson's bride, Rosemary, who cheats on him and who he kills by quartering her; Gerson's sister, Marinéia, who is a prostitute and who is also brutally killed by her own brother with Wilson's help; and, lastly, Zé Pena's wife, who cooks and cleans for him. In several television interviews, Ana Paula Maia has confessed that, when she writes, she tries to distance herself from the situation she writes about; and, because she is a woman, it happens that she is more interested in writing about men, as well as predominantly male environments and situations.

In the trilogy "A saga dos brutos" (which includes the novella mentioned above and two others: "O trabalho sujo dos outros" e "Carvão Animal"), the writer exposes the vicissitudes of modern workers who do physical and hard work, and who bear the burden of the upper classes: garbage collectors, slaughterhouse workers, firemen, sewer drain cleaners, cremators, miners and charcoal burners. All these male characters are victims of modern society's consumerism. They form the support base of today's society, which could not exist without those who perform the dirty work; they are the ones who experience the corrosion of character most dramatically. The rude, heavy and dirty work degrades them, dehumanizes them and depersonalizes them, eroding their

personality. Only fraternal love offers them some level of humanity. Erotic or romantic love has no place in Maia's texts.

As for space, Maia chooses to go beyond the city center in order to transport the reader to the suburb. In "Entre Rinhas de Cachorros e Porcos Abatidos," Maia's narrator exits the center of the city to put the subaltern status of the suburb on display, which is inscribed in four significant adjectives repeated throughout the narrative: "quente e abafado, esquecido e ignorado" (16). Assuming the perspective of the poor urban class, the narrator embarks on a vigorous social critique, denouncing the difficulty of living with impoverished housing conditions: "Só quem vive nos confins do subúrbio abafado e sufocado, longe das praias, de ares úmidos, comendo poeira, economizando água sob quase 40 graus diariamente, pisando asfaltos fumegantes sabe o que representa uma geladeira nova e que faz gelo. Isto, por estes lados, vale mais do que ouro. . . . Aqui, dificilmente se salva uma vida. É longe" (62, 72).

The story of "O trabalho sujo dos outros" is set in an urban space, within a big city that is never named. The city is described via a less sympathetic and unusual perspective: through the routes of the garbage collectors, a job that is normally done at night. The work experience of the protagonist, Edgar Wagner, shows the dysfunction of the urban space – it becomes evident via the excess of garbage produced by the upper classes, identified with excessive consumerism; the traffic jams caused by excessive rain; and the dead bodies dumped on the sidewalks as if they were just another kind of garbage. Two fragments of Maia's text suffice by way of example:

No itinerário de Erasmo Wagner são recolhidas mais de vinte toneladas de lixo por dia. A riqueza de uma sociedade pode ser medida pela sua produção de lixo. Vinte toneladas num itinerário consideravelmente pequeno o faz pensar no tanto que se gasta. No tanto que se transforma em lixo. (92)

Esta cidade atinge a todos: aos meninos, às mulheres, aos órfãos, aos velhos. Esta cidade não faz acepção. Tudo se transforma em lixo. Os restos de comida, o colchão velho, a geladeira quebrada e um menino morto. Nesta cidade tenta-se disfarçar afastando-se para os cantos o que não é bonito de se olhar. Recolhendo os miseráveis e lançando-os às margens imundas bem distantes. (113)

The city in this novel is the place where the upper classes live, but the reader will find no trace of glamour. Instead, the vision outlined in Maia's narrative comes from those who work on the city, cleaning it and picking up the trash that the upper classes leave behind daily. This vision from

below that is, the vision of those who live in the outskirts of the city, and play an important role in keeping it functioning for the upper classes is extremely original in contemporary Brazilian literature from young female writers. Maia's preference for male characters in physically grinding and traditionally male professions gestures towards the idea that women are spared such environments.

The choice to avoid grandeur or a positive spin on the big city reappears in *Carvão animal* (2011). The narrative takes place in an invented small town called Abalurdes. The distinguishing features of the town are its crematorium and a coal mine, and it is located in a very isolated region, as the narrator says: "A região de Abalurdes está à margem do descobrimento e no imaginário de alguns visionários. Abalurdes é uma cidade encravada na face alcantilada de um penhasco. . . . A pavimentação é precária... A estrada principal é mal iluminada, sem sinalização e com curvas acentuadas que margeiam longos despenhadeiros" (70-71). This is "um lugar desolador. Uma espécie de deserto de cinzas" (94). Once again, we find no more than a scant few female characters: a wife who goes mad after her daughter dies in a car accident caused by the girl's uncle; a neighbor who raises chickens, tries to poison a dog and ends up being buried alive by the same dog; and a daughter who only responds to her father's letters after learning that he has died and he had left her several gold teeth as a bequest. All these women are extremely dehumanized when compared with the male characters with whom they interact.

As a counterpoint to Ana Paula Maia's lack of female characters, we may turn to Paloma Vidal's stories. Indeed, in her fiction, almost all the characters are women of different ages and experiences. I choose to examine two books of hers: a volume of short stories, *A Duas Mãos* (2003) and a novel, *Algum Lugar* (2009) because both approach the city through the lens of different kinds of social violence, and because both focus on the female experience within urban space. These protagonists are not fighting against a patriarchal system in the same way as Lispector, Telles and Coutinho's characters, and the author's voice no longer addresses us from a place considered to be marginal. Perhaps this is the reason that leads Beatriz Resende to read Paloma Vidal's fiction as an example of what would be a post-feminist literature. As Resende observes, Vidal "pode, sem maiores traumas ou conflitos, apossar-se de uma escrita que evidencie a voz feminina ou transite livremente do ponto de vista da mulher para o de um personagem masculino, indo e vindo no exercício da função autoral" (109). The short story "A ver navios" exemplifies these shifts in the narrative, emphasizing the narrator's voice, and ultimately, the author's position. In this text, an unnamed housewife follows her husband entering the cinema with his secretary, who is also his mistress. Contrary to what the reader expects, she does not throw a fit – instead she decides to

preserve her marriage of thirty years, putting her arm in her husband's. Both leave his mistress alone and speechless in front of the movie theater. At the end of the text, the reader listens to the female narrator's voice empathizing with the pain and tears that the betrayed wife has to repress. Globally, what is interesting in Vidal's approach to a feminist perspective is the fact that sometimes the male characters are the ones who deeply expose an acute awareness of unfairness and gender inequality.

Paloma Vidal, as well as Ana Paula Maia, is deeply engaged with denouncing and problematizing social inequalities. In some of the texts in *A Duas Mãos*, such as "Corte e costura," "Deus lhe pague," and "Vidas futuras," this concern comes intertwined with the experience of the characters within the urban space. Without needing to identify a specific city, Vidal's narrators transport the reader to any street of any big city, where beggars, homeless people sleeping on benches or driveways, babies crying, and examples of misery abound. The city in this volume of short stories is somehow deterritorialized: it can be "qualquer cidade na descrença em qualquer utopia urbana" (111), as Resende notes. Instead of a realistic identification and description of the space, Vidal opts to present here an atmosphere "carregada de eletricidade, de tensão" (111). This characteristic seems to be a common trait in contemporary literature that deals with themes such as exile, migration, capitalism, and the globalizing world.

In *Algum Lugar*, Vidal explicitly engages with the effects of a big city on her protagonists' subjectivity, in order to explore and problematize the displacement and the experience of migration within a globalized, multicultural and cosmopolitan world. The protagonist-narrator is a young Brazilian woman, with an Argentine mother (the father is not mentioned much), who moves with her partner to Los Angeles in order to write her doctoral thesis and to attend classes at the university. The immense and unconquerable city of Los Angeles ends up becoming an obstacle to her adaptation to her new life. Throughout the narrative, the character is constantly questioning why she has decided to move and live in such big and hostile city. This self-doubt increases the feeling of displacement and absurdity, and the city ultimately gives off "uma sensação de estarmos fora do tempo, de eternidade, uma sensação de onipotência que tem seu contraponto no terror de que um dia a cidade possa sumir do mapa" (56). One day, driven by the desire to conquer the city, the young woman decides to venture on a trip to the museum, a space where, in principle, one could have a sensorial and meaningful experience. When her mother calls her and gives her this suggestion, her first reaction is to distrust the possibility of finding pleasure or some sense of belonging in a city that was not made for people but for cars, arguing that "as ruas desertas intimidam, como se ao andar estivéssemos fazendo algo proibido" (36). Although skeptical of the possibility of having a

pleasurable experience, she decides to go to the museum, hoping to pass unnoticed, integrated into the logic of the city. But the result is precisely the opposite. The image of Los Angeles that shapes the narrative is the image of a megalopolis without a center, a city built for cars where people do not walk anywhere, where distances are intimidating, and where social inequalities are visible in an ordinary bus ride. The feeling of belonging that the protagonist manages to attain sometimes seems rather temporary. What prevails in the end is the idea of Los Angeles as a hostile and indifferent city, given its size. The comparison with the walkable and familiar city of Rio de Janeiro is inevitable here, and it serves to “sobrepôr uma geografia sobre a outra como para medir o grau do meu deslocamento ou forçar uma adaptação necessária. Estou aqui por que quero, repito” (29). In this novel, Los Angeles, which can be seen as a megalopolis, serves ultimately to exacerbate and expose an already conflicting female subjectivity.

Vidal’s fiction stands as an example of a growing number of female authors who focused on characters, especially women, wracked by sensations of dislocation, displacement, and a lack of belonging. The urban space is no longer a space that simply exerts oppression and/or offers liberation. The big city is a space where conflicting identities coexist. Focused in the idea of being “estrangeiro” (a relevant figure for studies in urbanism) in these contemporary texts, the big city is generally perceived as a natural phenomenon, where mobility allows for new social contacts and promotes individual action. In this sense, the individual is associated with cosmopolitanism, thought of as a positively valued lifestyle. At the same time, mobility also reveals enormous social and economic contrasts between individuals regardless of their gender.

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