

**PERTENCIMENTO ESTÉTICO: COLUNAS DE JORNAL DE CLARICE  
LISPECTOR  
AESTHETIC BELONGING: CLARICE LISPECTOR'S NEWSPAPER  
COLUMNS**

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**Resumo**

Este artigo compara as colunas semanais que Clarice Lispector escreveu para o *Jornal do Brasil* entre 1967 e 1973. Estas colunas têm diferentes dimensões e abordam diversos tópicos. A autora nelas mistura diferentes características genéricas e cria um gênero próprio. Pode-se encontrar estruturas narrativas ou características típicas de ensaios filosóficos, combinadas com imagens poéticas, formulações míticas e alusões intertextuais. Ao dominar todas estas diferentes vozes, Lispector desenvolve uma forma artística que lhe permite “pertencer a si mesma”, como ela escreve numa de suas colunas.<sup>1</sup> Este artigo sugere que estamos aqui lidando com algo mais: ao criar sua própria existência por meio do texto, e ao fazer da forma textual um assunto pessoal, Lispector está, ao mesmo tempo, escrevendo contra a ideologia da ditadura militar no Brasil, e respondendo a seu discurso monológico com uma vasta pluralidade de pensamentos.

**Palavras-chave:** Lispector, *crônicas*, Brasília, *baratas*, pertencimento.

**Abstract**

This paper compares the weekly columns Clarice Lispector composed for the *Jornal do Brasil* between 1967 and 1973. These columns have different lengths and topics. The author merged various generic characteristics, creating a genre of its own. One may encounter narrative structures, or features usually pertaining to philosophical essays, combined with poetic pictures, mythical formulations and intertextual allusions. By mastering all of these voices, Lispector develops an artistic form

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<sup>1</sup> Lispector: “Pertencer” (15.06.1968). In: (Lispector, 1984: 151-153).

enabling her to “belong to herself”—as she herself puts it in one of her columns.<sup>2</sup> The article suggests that one is dealing with more than that: by creating her own existence through the text, and by making the textual form a personal matter, Lispector is simultaneously writing against the ideology of the military dictatorship in Brazil, and answering its monological discourse with a vast plurality of thoughts.

**Keywords:** Lispector, *crônicas*, Brasília, *baratas*, belonging.

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<sup>2</sup> Lispector: “Pertencer” (15.06.1968). In: (Lispector, 1984: 151-153).

In August 2013, an anthology of Clarice Lispector's newspaper columns was published in German for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Luis Ruby translated ten of Lispector's articles for the literary magazine *Schreibheft*; the introduction was written by her recent biographer Benjamin Moser.<sup>4</sup> This late translation—almost thirty years after the first appearance of an anthology of the columns in the 1984 *A descoberta do mundo*—is but one example for the enduring interest in Lispector's works.<sup>5</sup> Still, scholarship does not seem to have fully recognized the importance of these texts; for some of her columns had been published already twenty years earlier, when Lispector edited them as “contos” in *A legiao estrangeira* (1964).<sup>6</sup>

Being married to a diplomat, Clarice Lispector had spent many years abroad.<sup>7</sup> After her return, she obtained the commission to write a weekly column for the *Jornal do Brasil* in 1967, Brazil's most widely read daily newspaper at the time.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, Lispector held back political comments in her journalistic work: the military dictatorship, which had seized power in 1964, was increasingly turning into a paranoid regime. In 1968, it declared a state of national emergency and disbanded the national assembly. Censorship, as well as the banishment of the intellectual elite, challenged the freedom of speech on a daily basis; when Emílio Garrastazu Médici came to power, even anti-Semitic discourse became daily fare in Brazil's already dire situation. In 1973, this hostile environment eventually led to Clarice Lispector's discharge from her journalistic work: the regime had arranged for all writers with Jewish descent to be dismissed from the *Jornal do Brasil*.

At a second glance, however, a political dimension of Lispector's columns may reveal itself; this corresponds to her specific aesthetics, but maybe also to Lispector's circumspection: her family's past experiences might have been reason enough for her not uttering her political opinions in an all too explicit manner.<sup>9</sup> Lispector reinvented the format, and redefined her columns as writing experiments, focusing on a wide range of different topics in these (*prima facie*) journalistic texts—contemporary journalists might be surprised. In Germany at least, the format and the

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<sup>3</sup> Lispector: “Ich bin ihr alle”. In: (Wehr, 2013: 29-43).

<sup>4</sup> *Unsterbliche Liebe, Reste vom Karneval, Intelligente Sensibilität, Bäder im Meer, Fünf Erzählungen und ein Thema, Der Schreibmaschine nach, Ich kümmere mich um die Welt, Erinnerung an das Abfassen eines Romans, In den ersten Anfängen von Brasília, Klarstellungen*. In: (Wehr, 2013: 29-43).

<sup>5</sup> (Lispector, 1984). In the following, all translations into English are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>6</sup> (Lispector, 1964a).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. (Waldman, 1993: 173-175); (Moser, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> *Jornal do Brasil*. <http://www.jb.com.br/> (10.08.2014).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. (Moser, 2009: 12-46); generally, see also (Strauss, 1941: 488-504).

number of characters are predetermined by and for the individual newspapers; moreover, subtitles regulate the subject matter of each specific column. Lispector's columns do not obey any of these rules. They vary in length, feature diverse titles, and are very flexible in content—the result being a style of writing that seems at once lucid and authentic.

By analyzing exemplary columns, this paper aims to highlight Clarice Lispector's newspaper columns as an important source for the discussion of belonging in literary texts. As regards methodology, the essay proceeds according to the columns' diversity in terms of form and content.

## **Writing the Self**

The manner in which Clarice Lispector plays with the autobiographical form is striking: articles like “Restos do carnaval” or “Banhos de mar” focus on childhood-memories; one of the most personal texts bears the title “Esclarecimentos – Explicação de uma vez por todas”.<sup>10</sup> With this column, Lispector answered the multiple letters to the editor asking whether she was Russian or Brazilian.

In a few sentences, Clarice explains that she was born in a tiny Ukrainian village named Chechelnyk, “que não figura no mapa de tão pequeno e insignificante”.<sup>11</sup> That was in December 1920; the family was forced to flee from the pogroms in Western Ukraine. Clarice – at that time her name was still Chaya – was born during the escape. Two months later, the Lispector's arrived in Brazil. She began writing early on, choosing the language of the country she grew up in: it should be a matter of course, but it seems as though she had to justify herself for writing in Portuguese; and when she marks certain experiences as explicitly “Brazilian”, this appears to convey a similar undertone. In the column, she underlines how her childhood was related to Recife, her youth to Rio—while her inclination to superstition, as well as her favorite dishes, all came from Pernambuco. In other

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<sup>10</sup>Lispector: “Restos do carnaval” (16.3.1968). In: (Lispector, 1984: 105-108). Cf. (Nascimento, 2003); Lispector: “Banhos de mar” (25.01.1969). In: (Lispector, 1984: 249-251); Lispector: “Esclarecimentos” (14.11.1970). In: (Lispector, 1984: 498-499).

<sup>11</sup> Engl.: “I was born in a village called Chechelnyk, which is too small and insignificant to appear on any map”. In: (Lispector, 1996: 163). Cf. (Lispector, 1984: 498): “Recebo de vez em quando carta perguntando-me se sou russa ou brasileira, e me rodeiam de mitos. Vou esclarecer de uma vez por todas: não há simplesmente mistério que justifique mitos, lamento muito. E a história é a seguinte: nasci na Ucrânia, terra de meus pais. Nasci numa aldeia chamada Tchechelnik, que não figura no mapa de tão pequeno e insignificante”.

words: despite her cosmopolitanism, she perceived most of her personal experiences as profoundly linked to her country—she herself did not question her “Brasileidade” (initially).<sup>12</sup> As if astonished, the column ends with an accumulation of hypothetical interrogatives stressing contingency: “Se minha família tivesse optado pelos Estados Unidos [...] Escreveria sobre o quê? O que é que amaria? Seria de que Partido?”.<sup>13</sup> As Berta Waldman underlines in her study *O estrangeiro em Clarice Lispector*: “[E]la sempre ira nos compelir a formular perguntas insistentes”—and one might add that, by continually doing precisely this, Lispector herself is the best example for this insistence.<sup>14</sup>

The first question Lispector poses in the abovequoted passage—“what would I write about?”—is central to my argument. In her texts, the author repeatedly focuses on the subject of writing: the titles “Máquina escrevendo” and “Escrever para jornal e escrever livro” render the meta-textual level explicit; likewise, a meta-poetical reference as to the writing situation and aesthetic program may be found in one of Lispector’s first columns: “Vendo, pois, para vocês com o maior prazer uma certa parte de minha alma – a parte de conversa de sábado”.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of a format one might term ‘a woman’s observations concerning herself’, the female readers—to whom the columns were particularly dedicated—might have been led into perceiving an aspect of the author’s personality. Of course, such a conclusion must be taken with a grain of salt, given the fact that one is dealing with a published literary, and therefore edited, text. Nevertheless, the distinction between the explicit narrator and the (implicit) author seems blurred, here; and, of course, Lispector is not writing without tradition, either: such formal syncretism, the colloquial openness, and the combination of genres have existed as a (literary) form

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<sup>12</sup> In: (Lispector, 1984: 152) she says: “[P]ertenço, por exemplo, a meu país, e como milhões de outras pessoas sou a ele tão pertencente a ponto de ser brasileira. [...] sinto-me no entanto feliz de pertencer à literatura brasileira”. Engl.: “I belong to my country and, like millions of others, I belong to Brazil in the sense that I am Brazilian. [...] I am happy to be associated with Brazilian literature”. In: (Lispector, 1996: 33). For further questions concerning belonging in Clarice Lispector cf. (Borinsky, 1996: 278-87); (Santos Sobral, 1998: 2681-2682); (Moser, 2009: 240-249).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. (Lispector, 1984: 499): “Se minha família tivesse optado pelos Estados Unidos [...] Escreveria sobre o quê? O que é que amaria? Seria de que Partido?”. Engl.: “If my family had decided to go to the United States [...] What would I write about? What would I love? Which party would I vote for?”.

<sup>14</sup> (Waldman, 1998: 102).

<sup>15</sup> Lispector: “Máquina escrevendo” (29.05.1971). In: (Lispector, 1984: 542-544); Lispector: “Escrever para jornal e escrever livro” (29.06.1972). In: (Lispector, 1984: 668-669); Lispector: “Amor imorredouro” (09.11.1967). In: (Lispector, 1984: 20-23). Engl.: “With the greatest pleasure, I therefore sell you part of my soul—the part that converses with you every Saturday”.

of its own—at least since Montaigne’s *essais*.<sup>16</sup> Lispector’s essays “Sensibilidade inteligente” and “Eu tomo conta do mundo” would also belong to this format; both texts disclose (apparently) private insights and innermost thoughts.<sup>17</sup>

From what she is writing in the column “Esclarecimentos”, the (implicit author-)narrator seems to anticipate her reader’s reactions, and possible conclusions about her ‘private self’. Some of the thoughts provoked by the text may, however, have a comical effect, and so reveal the speaker as the character of a (heavily) edited narration – even though the first person narrator is very present. One might read this tension between (apparent) intimacy and forms of distancing as a game of an (at least partly) unreliable narrator; or as the author’s strategy for (giving the impression of) protecting the fragility of passages so intimate that they seem to originate from a personal diary.

Lispector’s articles are imbued with different literary characteristics; some of the different registers merging into her journalistic work are presented in the following. An important example is one of her very first columns in the *Jornal do Brasil*, entitled “Amor imorredouro” and dated September 9, 1967.<sup>18</sup> Here, aesthetic fascination might be seen to arise from a complicated interplay of different narrative strategies: the female narrator is sitting in a taxi, whose driver is telling her his love story. To communicate the story to her readers, the author uses the structure of heterodiegesis with a very present narrator; between the lines appear quotes in direct speech—perhaps with a view to evoking authenticity. These are additionally highlighted by means of a specific form of punctuation: via an exclamation mark in parentheses, the narrator is present as a judging, emotionally involved authority even in sentences of direct speech. The story-within-the-story is introduced with the sentence: “E contou-me sua história”.<sup>19</sup> The narration then switches to the second level, where the driver is the speaker. This passage ends with the comment: “Bom. Minha história termina de um modo um pouco inesperado e assustador”.<sup>20</sup> With this sentence, the author switches to the first, the homo-diegetic level of narration, so continuing the story about the ride in the taxi—whose driver has meanwhile found a new home in Brazil, and suddenly invites the female listener–narrator to his house.

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<sup>16</sup> (Montaigne, 1950).

<sup>17</sup> Lispector: “Sensibilidade inteligente” (02.11.1968). In: (Lispector, 1984: 215-216); Lispector: “Eu tomo conta do mundo” (04.03.1970) In: (Lispector, 1984: 420-422).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. (Lispector, 1984: 20-23).

<sup>19</sup> Engl.: “Then he told me his story”.

<sup>20</sup> Engl.: “Well. My story has a somewhat unexpected and shocking end”.

The driver's '*carpe diem*' stance is the surprising turn for which the reader had been primed: for, a few sentences prior, he had claimed to no longer be able to love, after having lost the love of his life, a woman named Clarita.

Again, the author inserts a sentence with a meta-textual reference: "O final dessa história desilude um pouco os *corações* sentimentais".<sup>21</sup> With this consideration concerning a subjectively desirable happy end, the reader finds him- or herself on the next textual level—that is, the relationship of the individual reader to the story just heard (or rather: read), as well as to its author. It is possible to distinguish three different levels in this text—and all of them are part of the story: on level zero, the relationship between (factual/implicit) author and (factual/implicit) reader (depending on the perspective); on the first narrative level, a female narrator telling her experience of a taxi ride; finally, on the second level, this narrator turns into a listener, while the taxi-driver assumes the position of narrator.

This text—spontaneously and playfully narrated *prima facie*—turns out to be an almost symmetric composition: it commences with the author–reader relationship, continues with the narrator–cab driver scene—which, in turn, is the frame for the narrative about the relationship between the taxi driver and his lover. It turns direction at the text's center, now following this same structure inversely, so leading out of the subject and ending again with the Boothian relation between author and implicit reader (and that of reader and implicit author, respectively).

The complex narrative structure of this column is highly unusual for a journalistic context. Which may be plausible reasons for Lispector's choice to tell this story in such an untypical way? Discernibly, the reader is permitted to see the world from the taxi driver's perspective; the implicit author emphasizes her act of narrating from several points of view, providing the reader with details that may facilitate taking another's perspective, so (potentially) experiencing it vicariously. This narrative complexity enables the reader to make informed, balanced judgments concerning the particular narrated experiences—should s/he so choose. This inner diversity (tacitly) emerges as the column's theme; its narrative form may be seen as opposing a perceived uniformity (or even totality) of political discourse (at a given historical time). This first example already manifests the extent to which Lispector's columns may be described as literary explorations of the ethical dimensions narrative

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<sup>21</sup> Engl.: "The ending of my story is bound to disappoint the readers with a romantic inclination".

techniques might offer.<sup>22</sup>

### The column as form

Likewise, the column with the title “Cinco relatos e um tema” is relevant to my overall argument.<sup>23</sup> An impressive sample of the author’s artistic virtuosity, this text surpasses the article treated above in terms of formal liberty. It first appeared in the magazine *Senhor* in 1962; two years later, Lispector included it in the collection *A legião estrangeira*, and then published it again in the *Jornal do Brasil* on July 26, 1969.<sup>24</sup> The text begins with an enumeration of three possible titles this “story” could have: *The murder*, *The statues*, *How to kill cockroaches*.<sup>25</sup> Should the reader decide on seeing the column as a text about eliminating cockroaches, the article may seem an amusing piece of writing. Yet the text offers various readings: Lispector demonstrates her competence as an author, manifesting the manifold possibilities of literary writing intra-textually. Given different foci and alternate moral appraisals, the narrator suggests four exegetical variants: a pragmatic extermination, a cruel massacre, a catastrophe, and a victory against intruders. The fifth story consists of nothing more than a philosophical title and the first sentence, which is the same in all five variations: “queixei-me de baratas”.<sup>26</sup> By means of toying with different frameworks or contexts, this column—also—turns into a case study for recognizing the rhetorical strategies used in totalitarian systems, where persecuted populations are often, and notoriously, branded as ‘vermin’.

These different readings may be described as follows: the first version of the story—*How to kill cockroaches*—details the recipe for a lethal mixture (consisting of

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of narrative ethics, see (Phelan, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Lispector: “Cinco relatos e um tema” (26.07.1969). In: (Lispector, 1984: 325-327).

<sup>24</sup> (Lispector, 1964a). In this collection, the story was published under the title “A quinta historia”, while in the *Jornal do Brasil* it had the title: “Cinco relatos e um tema”. Moser shows that Lispector first published the recipe to kill cockroaches in 1952 (when writing as Teresa Quadros). As Ilka Soares she published it again in 1960; in 1962, it finally appeared as “A quinta história” in the *Senhor*. Cf. (Moser, 2009: 264). The various interpretations, now included in one text, therefore have a temporal dimension (as regards their production), as well.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. (Lispector, 1984: 325): “Esta história poderia chamar-se *As estátuas*. Outro nome possível é *O assassinato*. E também *Como matar baratas*. Farei então, pelo menos, três histórias, verdadeiras porque nenhuma delas mente a outra. Embora uma única, seriam mil e uma, se mil e uma noites me dessem”. Engl.: “This story could be called *The Statues*. Another possible name is *The Murder*. And also *How to Kill Cockroaches*. I will therefore write at least three stories[—which are all] true because none of them belies the others. Although but a single one, they would be a thousand and one[—]if a thousand and one nights were given me”.

<sup>26</sup> Engl.: “I was complaining about the cockroaches”.



sugar, flour, plaster) with a view to exterminating vermin; the short paragraph ends with two laconic sentences: “Assim fiz. Morreram”.<sup>27</sup> The second story is called *The murder*: here, a first person narrator implicitly portrays herself as a natural disaster, or as a preparer of poison: “Mas se elas, como os males secretos, dormiam de dia, ali estava eu a preparar-lhes o veneno da noite. Meticulosa, ardente, eu aviava o elixir da longa morte”.<sup>28</sup> The story ends with a cockcrow—a scene seeming like a symbolical awakening from the obsessed mind of a coldblooded murderer. The cockcrow might also be read as an allusion to *Scripture* (Jesus predicting Peter’s denial).<sup>29</sup> Yet, outdoing even the apostle’s betrayal, the crônica’s narrator actually turns into the executioner herself.

The third story is about the *Statues* evoked in the enumeration of the three possible titles at the outset of this column. The beginning is given in a shortened version; then the narrative scenario changes completely. Apart from the comical effect produced by the prosaic topic in all five stories, this third version contains some apocalyptic—and, at once, almost idyllic—images. Some of the formulations—such as: “de minha fria altura de gente olho a derrocada de um mundo”—even sound mythical. The passage is very dense—in terms of content and figurativeness, but also as regards its punctuation.<sup>30</sup> Rhetorically, the parallelism in the sentence “Sei como foi esta última noite, sei da orgia no escuro” works as the narrator’s *mea culpa*, and, simultaneously, as a dramatic prelude for the appearance of the “statues”.<sup>31</sup> This situation is suggestive to such an extent, that the narrator ‘actually’ sees herself in (a ‘cockroachian’) Pompeii, with cockroaches personified: they “tried to escape from themselves”—but they petrified in a “horrificed innocence and with reproachful gazes”.<sup>32</sup> At that point, the article changes its tone: “Elas que, usando o nome de amor

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<sup>27</sup> Engl.: “This is what I did. They died”.

<sup>28</sup> Engl.: “Thoroughly, avidly, I mixed the elixir of the long death”.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Mt* 26:34; *Mt* 26:74-75. Another effect would be the implicit comparison of the cockroaches to Jesus.

<sup>30</sup> Engl.: “From my frigid height as a human being, I watch the destruction of a world”. Transl. Pontiero, in: (Lispector, 1992b: 76).

<sup>31</sup> Engl.: “I know about this last night. I know about the orgy in the dark”.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. “Sou a primeira testemunha do alvorecer em Pompéia”. Engl.: “I am the first witness of the dawn at Pompeii”; “Em algumas o gesso terá endurecido tão lentamente como num processo vital, e elas, com movimentos cada vez mais penosos, terão sofregamente intensificado as alegrias da noite, tentando fugir de dentro de si mesmas. Até que de pedra se tornam, em espanto de inocência, e com tal, tal olhar de censura magoada. Outras — subitamente assaltadas pelo próprio âmagô, sem nem sequer ter tido a intuição de um molde interno que se petrificava! — essas de súbito se cristalizam, assim como a palavra é cortada da boca: eu te...”.

em vão, na noite de verão cantavam”.<sup>33</sup> The narrator even puts philosophical reflections in the cockroaches’ mouths: “É que olhei demais para dentro de mim! é que olhei demais para dentro de...”.<sup>34</sup> These words may (even) be a (direct) allusion to Nietzsche’s “abyss”—suddenly looking back.<sup>35</sup> Arguably, Lispector is thinking Descartes (and Montaigne) through to the end, when forcing the reader to suffer such moral uncertainty without eventual mitigation. As before, her sentence ends in an ellipsis, so illustrating the sudden death. With Nietzsche, and the second half of his aphorism on the mutuality of the actors involved—be it an abyss or a monster—we might, once again, read this short passage as a moral consideration, transferring the cockroaches’ self-observation to the narrator: by scrutinizing the massacre too long and too intensely, it might start ‘fighting back’, at least in a metaphorical sense—that is to say, the action might attack the narrator’s conscience, even though it is already too late to be undone.

Precisely when the reader begins to grasp the passage as a parable of a (multiple) homicide—and to discern its possible political content—the story-within-the-story stops abruptly. A meta-textual reference to the structure of the article leads back to the story’s fundamental irony: “Da história anterior canta o galo”.<sup>36</sup> Taking into account one of the exegetical possibilities outlined above, Jesus’ prophecy would thereby be signaled as having been fulfilled; but, since Lispector is distributing this *Scriptural* schema to different textual levels, the column may yield the impression of a mise-en-abyme (which, arguably, leads the reader back to Nietzsche’s ‘abyss’, staring back).

The fourth story does not bear a title. We might summarize it as a consideration of how to deal with cockroaches in general. Yet, at the same time, it is a self-reflection on the part of the narrator: after having eliminated the insects, she observes an evil “lust” for killing—all of a sudden deeming herself a “feiticeira”, a witch. This fourth story is very short; still, it communicates a profound observation concerning morality: was the decision to kill an entire population—despite the fact that it was not human—right or wrong? How does the murderer live with her fateful

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<sup>33</sup> Engl.: “Those, who were taking the name of love in vain, were singing in the summer night”; cf. *Ex* 20:7.

<sup>34</sup> Engl.: “It is that I looked into myself too deeply! It is that I looked too deeply into...”

<sup>35</sup> Cf. (Nietzsche, 1999: 98, §146): “Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein”.

<sup>36</sup> Engl.: “The rooster from the previous story crows”.

deed? Once again, the narrator presents the reader with more than one side of a case. In the end, she decides in favor of moral freedom:

Áspero instante de escolha entre dois caminhos que, pensava eu, se dizem adeus, e certa de que qualquer escolha seria a do sacrifício: eu ou minha alma. Escolhi. E hoje ostento secretamente no coração uma placa de virtude: “Esta casa foi dedetizada”.<sup>37</sup>

The column ends with an allusion to a possible fifth version of the same subject, this time with the title: “A quinta história chama-se *Leibnitz* [sic] e a transcendência do amor na Polinésia. Começa assim: Queixei-me de baratas”.<sup>38</sup> There is no further elaboration of this story in the column; as a result, one may read this suggestion politically—that is, as a parable of historical absurdity; or, yet another way (on a philosophical level), as a figurative escape to a place far away (Polynesia). Owing to the position of this idea at the end of the article, this may also be read in a meta-textual way—that is, as the author’s return into a private space. In this context, mentioning the German philosopher might be interpreted as a comment on one of the conceivable perspectives on the reality of this life—which Leibniz sees as the “best of all possible worlds”.<sup>39</sup>

Berta Waldman demonstrates how Lispector’s texts often give themselves to a reading in terms of philosophical questions, ethics, and particular moral judgments.<sup>40</sup> Waldman argues that, for Lispector, the best book would be the “não-livro”; for—in contrast to the discourse of law, where right and wrong is conceptualized as measurable—nothing is definitive in Lispector’s books.<sup>41</sup>

In her study, Janine Tobeck uses Lispector’s *Fifth story* as an aesthetic structure for reading the novel *O crime do professor de matemática*.<sup>42</sup> The column “‘A quinta história’ focuses more directly on story-telling as a potent but ethically complicated tool”, Tobeck observes, showing that Lispector is highly aware of how

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<sup>37</sup> Engl.: “[In this] grim moment of choosing between two paths[—]which, I thought, would part ways[—]and certain that any choice would mean sacrificing either myself or my soul[:] I chose[;]and today I secretly carry a plaque of virtue in my heart: ‘This house has been disinfected’”.

<sup>38</sup> Engl.: “*Leibnitz* [sic] and the transcendence of love in Polynesia”.

<sup>39</sup> (Leibniz, 1710), in: (Hoerster, 1979: 93).

<sup>40</sup> (Waldman, 1992); cf. (Machado, 1989: 119-130); (Moser, 2009: 261-269). He reads the cockroach in Lispector’s novel *Perto do coração selvagem* (1943) as a symbol for Joana’s amorality.

<sup>41</sup> (Waldman, 1992: 100).

<sup>42</sup> (Tobeck, 2012: 187-207).

powerful—hence how cruel and manipulative—the simple act of writing can be.<sup>43</sup> Tobeck goes as far as seeing “the idea of writing as murder, of a story as a crime”, so following the lead Lispector herself gives in this column to *The Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>44</sup> Using Tobeck’s approach, one may demonstrate how Lispector’s various narrators claim absolute subjectivity; her column “Cinco relatos e um tema” outlines the different steps by means of which such absoluteness creates a need for expulsion.<sup>45</sup> In line therewith, one might read this particular *crônica* as a critique of the structures in a despotic regime, and of the arbitrary treatment of those that do not or would not fit into the specific totalitarian system. By imitating the same strategies, the five different stories about the acts of killing cockroaches might be read as a performative comment on the genre of political discourse—with the significant difference, that Lispector’s article renders these strategies evident. To legitimize quasi-godlike decisions concerning life and death, politicians often use a certain linguistic register and rhetorical approach. By speaking of “the destruction of a world” (in the third version of the story), or of a “placa de virtude”, Lispector displays the different effects such (figurative) frames and contexts may have.<sup>46</sup>

The cockroaches are a frequent topic in Lispector’s work—often read as an allusion to Kafka’s Gregor Samsa.<sup>47</sup> In *A paixão segundo G.H.* (1964), Tace Hedrick sees the crushed insect as a symbol for the moment where human beings become aware of their being human.<sup>48</sup> She terms this moment a “collision with the ‘now’”, associating cockroaches (such as G.H.) with women—since (in Hedrick’s view) both are “esmagado pela cintura”, “beyond language”, and may be read as a symbol of the “transhistorical”.<sup>49</sup>

In the column however, there is neither a transformation of the female narrator

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<sup>43</sup> (Tobeck, 2012: 189), Tobeck quotes from (Lispector, 1964a), and thus refers to the same text as “A quinta história”.

<sup>44</sup> (Tobeck, 2012: 205). Cf. “Embora uma única, seriam mil e uma, se mil e uma noites me dessem”. Engl.: “Although they constitute one story, they could become a thousand and one, were I to be granted a thousand and one nights”. Transl. Pontiero in: (Lispector, 1992b: 75). It would seem, of course, that *Thousand and One Nights* is rather a story against murder; for Scheherazade is telling her stories night after night, in order to survive.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. (Tobeck, 2012: 195).

<sup>46</sup> See (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980); (Lakoff, Wehling, 2008); (Lakoff, Feldmann, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. (Hedrick, 1997: 49). Hedrick understands the cockroaches as a symbol for the female and deals with Lispector’s novel *A paixão segundo G. H.* as an answer to existentialism.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. (Hedrick, 1997: 49); (Diogo, 1993); (Oliveira, 1985) reads the cockroach as a chrysalis and also comments on existentialist metaphors in *A paixão segundo G. H.* (Lispector, 1964b).

<sup>49</sup> (Hedrick, 1997: 51-52); cf. (Lispector, 1964b): “Eu só a pensara como fêmea, pois o que é esmagado pela cintura é fêmea”, quoted in: (Hedrick, 1997: 42); (Hedrick, 1997: 43); Diana Fuss, quoted in (Hedrick, 1997: 43).

into an insect, nor is there any explicit consideration of the parallels between femininity and cockroaches (as is the case in *A paixão segundo G.H.*). Yet both texts were published in 1964; a comparison of the different notions of the cockroach in Lispector's work may therefore suggest itself—thereby tracing other levels of meaning as regards the confrontation between a female narrator and cockroaches. Indeed, the column includes not only one, but several changes of perspective. In the second version of the story (entitled *The murder*), the narrator, while mixing the poison, points out that the cockroaches are becoming a part of her; the next sentence begins with the words: “Em nosso nome, então, comecei a medir e pesar ingredientes”. This change of perspective suggests two subversive connotations: “In our name” sounds as if the narrator is playing ‘God’ or a king—and a decision about life and death is indeed the matter, meaning, something that (theologically, ethically) does not usually fall under the purview of one single human being. Moreover, “em nosso nome” could also be translated as “On our behalf”, which would seem to suggest that the poison has a positive aspect.

It is not without reason that *The fifth story* is one of Lispector's most widely read columns. The specific form of this column may itself be seen as a statement. The explicit variation of perspectives facilitates reading the text as a simple recipe for housekeepers with a concrete problem, and also as an essay in moral philosophy; at the same time, readers with a proclivity for figurative readings, or those who simply enjoy the *crônica*'s metatextual structure, will not be disappointed, either. Yet simultaneously, the complex narrative spaces between the text's five layers subvert the hegemonic forces of a linear narrative. This (self-)reflexive move may be read as a critique of (quasi-political) demands for textual order and linear assumptions. In opposition to the political speeches of the dictatorial regime, from which Brazil was suffering at the time, the column offers a space for various interpretations; consequently, the political reading demonstrated in the present paper is also only one reading among many other possible ones. At the very beginning, Lispector indicates that the following five stories are but one (or rather: five) example(s) of “a thousand and one” versions, which could be told about the same subject. In so doing, she opens up the text(s) for a possible continuation by each individual reader, giving his or her specific worldview a (literary) place, (perhaps) not available in the realm of social and political reality (at a given time). Readers are invited to think and to imagine for themselves—almost an act of rebellion, considering the time in which the text was

published.

The five interpretations Lispector offers in her column arguably lead to a skeptical balance; each of them focalizes the others, and each of them puts the event into perspective by providing yet another point of view (always already an implicit interpretation, here balanced by the others). The five alternatives enable each other; but, in their given form, they also depend on each other. This will remind the reader of Montaigne, once more: there is no decisive answer, no definitive reading, no authoritative interpretation. Instead of a Hegelian synthesis, Lispector offers a (perpetual) in-between, a floating or levitation—a plurality of readings.

### Architecture as Symbol

One of Lispector's most impressive columns bears the title "Nos primeiros começos de Brasília"; its images are more poetic, but also more explicit in terms of their critique, than had been the case in the texts previously discussed.<sup>50</sup> In this column, the different undertones and layers are not offset by means of irony. The first sentence is already formulated as a poetic image: "Brasília é construída na linha do horizonte".<sup>51</sup> As Sophia Beal has pointed out, this image suggests the idea of a city—"that[,] like the horizon, is visible but unreachable"—hence implying both the utopian promise of the new capital, and a complicated reality.<sup>52</sup>

At a first glance, it seems as if one were dealing only with a text about the city of Brasília and its modern architecture. Yet since the author parallels the urban landscape with her own emotional state, formulating her mythico-utopian associations accordingly, the text all of a sudden turns out to be an early critical comment on a city euphorically valued in the contemporary consensus: the text was inspired by Lispector's first visit to the city in 1962, and was published in 1964.<sup>53</sup>

Beal observes that Lispector "calls attention to the possibility of alternative

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<sup>50</sup> Lispector, Clarice: "Nos primeiros começos de Brasília" (20.06.1970). In: (Lispector, 1984: 452-456). This text was also published under different titles. In (Lispector, 1964a) it bears the title: "Brasília: cinco dias"; in the collection (Lispector, 1992a), the text has a second part inspired by Lispector's return to Brasília in 1974. Cf. (Beal, 2010: 9). I am here referring to the title as published in the *Jornal do Brasil*.

<sup>51</sup> Engl.: "Brasília is built on the horizon line".

<sup>52</sup> (Beal, 2010: 2).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. (Beal, 2010: 4). Four other studies about Lispector's view on Brazilian urban spaces may be mentioned here: (Selimović, 2007); (Santos, 2007: 27-48); (Calafell Obiol, 2009: 83-89); (Ribeiro, 2007: 109-27).

myths”.<sup>54</sup> To continue this line of thought—the story seems more than a counter-discourse to President Juscelino Kubitschek’s ideology of progress; for, at another level, it is a critique of a perceived human dependency on certain (Western) myths. In this column, Lispector seems to be asking how the world might have been, if it had been created according to the necessities of human beings.<sup>55</sup> The essay develops the idea of a possible misunderstanding between Creator and creation, and also considers conflicting ideas of humans about humans: in trying to build a perfect city, the urban planner Lúcio Costa, and the architect Oscar Niemeyer, envisioned perfect inhabitants. Yet human beings do not seem to be made for such a sterile environment. Lispector discerns the implications of such a categorization of human beings into perfect and ‘imperfect’ citizens. She writes that her nausea in this city causes insomnia—which she interprets as a sign of terror. Sentences such as “Quando morri, um dia abri os olhos e era Brasília” demonstrate the inhumanity and ‘supernaturalness’ of this world—while sketching the city as a potential hell on earth.<sup>56</sup> Yet not even this comparison is deemed a valid description for the author’s experience; for, in hell, there is life at least, and maybe the author would have thereby recognized the place, so feeling more at home—Lispector simply states: “O inferno me entende melhor”.<sup>57</sup>

This city, however, is dead. Lispector paraphrases her impressions using various images: “Em qualquer lugar onde se está de pé, criança pode cair, e para fora do mundo”.<sup>58</sup> She even mentions death explicitly when asking: “O que estará morrendo meu Deus?”.<sup>59</sup>

In a place totally geared toward the future, Lispector invents an imaginative historical horizon, claiming that: “Brasília é de um passado esplendoroso que já não existe mais”.<sup>60</sup> Building Brasília was a utopian project—also with regard to the decision to give the city the shape of an airplane. This airplane was to symbolize hope, innovation, national progress—the military government’s main agenda and

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<sup>54</sup> (Beal, 2010: 4).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. “Quando o mundo foi criado, foi preciso criar um homem especialmente para aquele mundo. Nós somos todos deformados pela adaptação à liberdade de Deus. Não sabemos como seríamos se tivéssemos sido criados em primeiro lugar, e depois o mundo deformado às nossas necessidades. Brasília ainda não tem o homem de Brasília”.

<sup>56</sup> Engl.: “When I died, I opened my eyes one day and it [sc. there] was Brasília”.

<sup>57</sup> Engl.: “Hell understands me better”.

<sup>58</sup> Engl.: “Wherever one might find oneself, children may fall[—]and [even] out of this world”.

<sup>59</sup> Engl.: “My God, what will dying be there?” [meaning: if this is life there—what will death there be like].

<sup>60</sup> Engl.: “Brasília belongs to a glorious past, which no longer exists”.

ubiquitous slogan.<sup>61</sup> Brasília is the petrified picture of futurity. As had been the case in other totalitarian regimes, this goes hand in hand with an oblivion (or manipulation) of history, and an aggression against all representatives of the past. When Lispector invents the missing historical dimension of Brasília, she actively resists these ideologies by means of her distinctive ways of writing. This invention reminds Beal of Nietzsche and his concept of “genealogy”.<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche argues that the idea of pure beginnings and origins denies historicity and should therefore not be trusted.<sup>63</sup>

As the narrative unfolds, Lispector continues her train of thought with fearless consistency, describing a pre-Christian civilization of tall and blond, but blind human beings that sparkled in the sun; she calls them “brasiliários”, ‘Brasiliarians’—the play on words (‘Aryans’) with the consequent *tertia* (ideologically ‘blond’, metaphorically ‘blind’) being evident. The Brasiliários became extinct, because (as she explains in a paradox) there was nothing they could have died for: “eles nada tinham a perder”. Thousands of years later (the narrative continues), a group of refugees finds the city; in this way, Lispector invents the missing past: “por serem fugitivos e desesperados, tinham em nome de que viver e morrer”.<sup>64</sup>

All of a sudden, historical consciousness itself turns into political resistance. The invented past not only contests the utopia of the creation of a city from nothing, but also embraces a plurality of inhabitants, which had certainly not been envisioned. In these aspects, Lispector may be linked to twentieth century thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. As demonstrated with regard to the column “Cinco relatos e um tema”, Lispector uses different techniques and offers variant interpretations concerning an incident or topic, in one and the same text—thereby creating an awareness as to different perspectives on, and assessments of, a certain subject or ‘truth’. This may be correlated with Arendt’s objective of seeking free thought, as outlined in her essay on Lessing.<sup>65</sup> In this text, Arendt further explains that there is no absolute truth, since it will always be “an opinion among [other] opinions”. Every one-sided truth is “inhumane”, because (as she states in *The Human Condition*) to live means “to be among men”—which therefore involves dealing with different

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. (Beal, 2010: 1). She also mentions democracy and Brazilian self-sufficiency.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. (Beal, 2010: 3).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. (Nietzsche, 1887).

<sup>64</sup> Engl.: “Being fugitive and desperate, they had something to live and to die for”.

<sup>65</sup> (Arendt, 1989: 11-42).



opinions.<sup>66</sup> Such constant dialog is the origin of political thinking. When Lispector inserts various opinions about one city in a single column—as she does in her description of Brasília—we might read this text as having a political connotation (according to Arendt’s account): for it includes various voices, creating a form of democratic polyphony.

Due to personal and familial experiences, Lispector was well aware of the dire realities of refugees; it will not be irrelevant to keep this in mind as regards her observations concerning Brasília. Certainly, it is not fear that enables Lispector to write sentences such as: “Aqui eu tenho medo. A construção de Brasília: é de um Estado totalitário”.<sup>67</sup> Once more, we may compare this to Hannah Arendt speaking about *Totalitarianisms*.<sup>68</sup> Beal even states that, with this sentence, Lispector is “mocking” the desire to control.<sup>69</sup>

In the construction of a perfect city, Lispector discerns the potential reversal of such perfection into a tremendous crime: “Se há algum crime que a humanidade ainda não cometeu, esse crime novo será aqui inaugurado”.<sup>70</sup> Still, she logs an ambivalence when describing the fascination she also feels at the sight of this architectural intent to represent eternity: “Essa beleza assustadora, esta cidade traçada no ar”.<sup>71</sup> Yet the narrator still misses some indispensable qualities, and relates them by means of poetic images: “A alma aqui não faz sombra no chão”.<sup>72</sup>

In Lispector’s text, one may find many metaphors projecting an alternative picture of a livable and humane world—opposing the ideological setting described above. For reasons of space, this paper can only focus on exemplary passages, in order to highlight the text’s various dimensions, and to demonstrate to what extent the author stretches her genre: “Fazem tanta falta cavalos brancos soltos em Brasília. De noite eles seriam verdes ao luar”.<sup>73</sup> By means of such metaphors for the (terrible) “awe”—which the architects “erected” but left “unexplained”—Lispector transgresses and fissures the usual generic limits of journalism; rather than obeying the rules of a

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<sup>66</sup> (Arendt, 1998: 7).

<sup>67</sup> Engl.: “Here I am afraid. The construction of Brasília: it is that of a totalitarian state”.

<sup>68</sup> (Arendt, 2003).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. (Beal, 2010: 4).

<sup>70</sup> Engl.: “If there is a crime that humanity has not committed yet, this new crime will be inaugurated here”.

<sup>71</sup> Engl.: “This amazing [also: shocking] beauty, this city, painted in the air”. (Beal, 2010: 2): “Lispector resists the strong temptation [...] to simplistically commend or condemn Brasília as a success or a failure”.

<sup>72</sup> Engl.: “The soul does not cast a shadow on this soil”.

<sup>73</sup> Engl.: “Free white horses are missing in Brasília. At night they would look green in the moonshine”.

specific genre, she invents her own mode of writing.<sup>74</sup> This, however, may be something the (post-Romanticist) reader may expect every (‘original’) author to do; still, by combining essayistic reasoning with poetic pictures, Lispector transforms her journalistic columns into literary texts, hence into works of art. This may have a critical impetus even in the very artistic liberty taken.

The dates she mentions in the invented past (for example, the “fourth century before Christ”), the mythical descriptions, as well as her own astonishment may be seen as means to dissimulate the text’s political impulse.<sup>75</sup> In this way, the column passes censorship, while simultaneously facilitating the reader’s experience of the text’s uncanny implications.

### ***Pertencer***

In conclusion, one may note that it was neither national belonging nor geographical borders Lispector was interested in. A revealing column may be quoted in this context: it explicitly bears the title “Pertencer”, “Belonging”.<sup>76</sup> At the end thereof, Lispector expresses its gist: “*pertencer é viver*”.<sup>77</sup> This is why she states that her first desire had been to belong—only to find out that: “escrevendo, pelo menos eu pertencia um pouco a mim mesma”.<sup>78</sup> No generic restrictions could keep Lispector from finding her own literary voice: simply by writing, she exceeds any strict (generic) distinctions—freely including landscapes, imaginations and pictures. Each and all of Lispector’s sentences show that she develops an aesthetic belonging—and that she creates it anew every time she writes.

Arguably, the multiple modes of focalization employed in Lispector’s columns represent a distinct concern for the power and function of storytelling. By positioning belonging as an explicit theme, by introducing multiple perspectives on an event, and by retrieving (or rather, inventing) a historical and plural dimension with regard to a project like Brasília, where any pluralism was to be concealed, Lispector,

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. “Os dois arquitetos não pensaram em construir beleza, seria fácil; eles ergueram o espanto deles, e deixaram o espanto inexplicado”.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. “No século IV a.C. era habitada por homens e mulheres louros e altíssimos, que não eram americanos nem suecos, e que faiscavam ao sol. Eram todos cegos. É por isso que em Brasília não há onde esbarrar. Os brasiliários vestiam-se de ouro branco. A raça se extinguiu porque nasciam poucos filhos. Quanto mais belos os brasiliários, mais cegos e mais puros e mais faiscantes, e menos filhos”.

<sup>76</sup> (Lispector, 1984: 151-153).

<sup>77</sup> Italics original. Engl.: “*To belong is to live*”.

<sup>78</sup> “[B]y writing, I at least belonged to myself to some extent”. In: (Lispector, 1996, 32-34).

among other things, reclaims the form of the column as site for political, for social, for ethical reflection.

As demonstrated above, the critical content one may derive from her journalistic work is—in its consequence—more political than many historical, non-literary comments on the actual government had been. With her writing, she creates spaces of artistic autonomy, thereby (to apply Adorno's statement) "resisting the course of the world, which permanently holds a gun to men's heads".<sup>79</sup> The poetic images are precisely the point where her work turns into literature—and into an involved critique at the same time. *Lispector* allows or even demands plural interpretations and active considerations on the part of the reader. This essay suggests that we may understand *Lispector's* form of writing as a contribution to a pluralistic, democratic form of politics, where each individual human being is permitted—not to be the same, but—to have the same right to live, to have a voice, and to interpret a text, or any other given fact, freely.

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<sup>79</sup> (Adorno, 1974: 413): "Kunst heißt nicht: Alternativen zu pointieren, sondern, durch nichts anderes als ihre Gestalt, dem Weltlauf widerstehen, der den Menschen immerzu die Pistole auf die Brust setzt".

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