Cruel Optimism in Suburban Change: Politics of Affect in Clarice Lispector's *A cidade sitiada*

LINGCHEN HUANG
University of Oxford

Abstract: This article focuses on Clarice Lispector's novel *A cidade sitiada* at the micropolitical level and discusses how the author represents environment and mood, and the individual's location in an assemblage of material conditions such as the process of modernization and the involvement in an ephemeral social grouping. By analyzing the politics of affect manifested in the circulation of collective optimism, the production of shared promises and desires, and the individual's homogenized gesture of affirming the institutional tenets, the article examines the subject's never-ending process of emerging out of the preindividual and becoming conscious. Through the juxtaposition of the individual's material entanglement in an evolving geographical space with her condition of being interlocked in the contingent collective ambience, Lispector theorizes about the materiality of affect resisting the distinction between social relations and the meshwork of nonhuman objects.

Keywords: Environment, mood, infrastructure, positivism, modernity

Set in 1920s Brazil, Clarice Lispector's third novel, *A cidade sitiada* (1949), portrays the suburban transformations of the fictional township, São Geraldo, as seen through the fractured perspective of Lucrécia, the protagonist. She witnesses and inhabits the expanding cityscape, while going through adolescence, marriage, and widowhood. The novel narrates Lucrécia's relationships with her suitors, Lieutenant Felipe and a medical student, Perseu, before she marries Mateus, a

wealthy businessman, and moves to a larger city with him. It ends with Mateus's sudden death, after which Lucrécia moves back to São Geraldo, and plans to marry another man who owns a farm. *A cidade sitiada* (hereafter *Sitiada*) foregrounds nonhuman characters that contribute to the suburban change, such as wire mesh, pipelines, and viaducts. These material elements converge with sociopolitical constructs, unraveling the town's modernization project. While the portrayal of the human characters seems to be overshadowed by the evolution of São Geraldo, through representing the shifts in Lucrécia's life, Lispector highlights marriage and moving to the city as two kinds of collective fantasies for upward social mobility fermented in the ambience of hope and progress during the period of major urbanization in Brazil.

Scholars have discussed the novel's illustration of individuals' identification with their place. Carlos Mendes de Sousa stresses Lucrécia's state of incomprehension and "blindness" in relation to her environment (224). Commenting on the title of the novel, Lúcia Villares emphasizes that Lucrécia perceives modern construction as "an impenetrable fortress of commodified objects," a view stemming from the imposition of the modernization ideology in Brazil (476–77). Taking these observations into account, this article, will go further to analyze the circulation of this ideology, which, in my opinion, functions not in the shape of an impermeable siege external to the subject but rather affectively: it seeps through everyday feelings and emotions of individuals who immediately embrace it with optimism and hope. Unable to understand what the new existences in her surroundings mean to her and how the various promises of the good life cohere, Lucrécia cheerfully acquiesces to her assigned role. The dominant ideology does not appear to be a static imposition upon Lucrécia. Rather, she herself is constituted by the ideology, an evolving process that gradually solidifies into regularities. Paralleling the urbanization of São Geraldo, the politics of optimism, which spreads in tandem with signs of development and progress, can be regarded not as a fixed, solid structure but a dynamic, open-ended event that continually undergoes variations.

In theorizing the politics of affect, Brian Massumi stresses the processual, emergent nature of what is often considered grounded, structured ideology. Massumi argues that through preconscious feeling, the "reigning rationality" is transmitted in "occulted, hidden, distorted" ways (85). This idea facilitates the interpretation of how individuals in the novel are induced by the general

atmosphere of progress to invest in the very power structure that oppresses and constrains them. The regularities clustered around modernization are "*acted out* in the everyday" by São Geraldo's residents (Massumi 85; italics in original), especially middle-class women like Lucrécia who are deceived into willingly submitting to it, thereby reinforcing its power. This article examines the location of the human subject enmeshed in the affective atmosphere of progress and explores how the subject mediates the everchanging milieu through mimetic gesture and attunement.

This article does not intend to focus on defining or identifying the ideology. Employing Sara Ahmed's argument on the futurity of happiness and Lauren Berlant's study on the formalism and interrelation of desire, fantasy, and optimism, it rather pays analytical attention to the affective materiality generated by the propagation of ideology associated with the country's modernization. By "materiality," I refer to material objects and energy, which encompasses impersonal and noncognitive forces. I use the expression "affective materiality" to describe an assemblage of material conditions, such as the environment (the collective ambience, geographical space, etc.), along with its constitutive interrelations, including unstable social groups and relational actions between human and nonhuman entities.

By attending to an individual's interactions with their surroundings that are organized according to a certain prospect, this article addresses how the progressive ideology discloses itself and is perceived affectively by the subject alongside the material flow implicated by this experience of encounter. Given the novel's frequent use of political terms like "citizen," "society," and "association," I read *Sitiada* as a political novel in a weak form. It touches on political themes on a minute scale, creating "a mood, an atmosphere" that defies easy categorization (Apter 12), so the ideology is connoted in an individual's thinking patterns and microgestures.

The dynamism between the body, subjectivity, and the urban space has long been studied. Elizabeth Grosz regards the city as "an active force in constituting bodies," which "always leaves its traces on the subject's corporeality" (250–51). Indeed, with ongoing changes in both geographical space and social relations, the subject, who inscribes this transformative power into its affective experience, can no longer occupy the role of the sole agent of its environment in the process of co-constitution. Given Lispector's depiction of an unpredictable future for the

township and its inhabitants, it is befitting to examine the fusion between the urban space and its dwellers, often illustrated through Lucrécia's gesture of vigorously reigniting her hope and pretension while striving to synchronize herself with new circumstances. Drawing on Berlant's observation of the individual's optimistic gesture of constant adjustment as indicative of a precarious environment, this article also aims to offer a new reading of Lispector's representation of infrastructure and interpret the notion of suburbs as not only a peripheral setting of modern experience but also a transitional stage featured by uneven development and distribution.

The Environment of Progress

The novel begins by charting the brief life of the "Associação de Juventude Feminina de S. Geraldo," a new establishment celebrating social progress. The Associação was founded at an indecisive moment when the still deserted township had yet to develop into a city and its residents were unsure about the way forward (17). It soon acquires its anthem of hope and vague objectives about progress and extolling beautiful things (18). The notion of progress, occasionally proposed by their leader Cristina, ignites ardor among young women in São Geraldo, who rally under the banner of the slogan, "[a] alma deve progredir" (18). The Associação serves as a sociopolitical device that indoctrinates its members with a set of symbolic signs (flowers, beautiful objects, etc.) and ideological codes (notions of progress and happiness). It calls upon young female residents to do things in conformity (e.g., to sing in unison). This movement can be seen as an attempt to conquer collective fear and uncertainty in the face of incipient signs of change in the suburb. Lispector depicts the members of the Associação as a group of ignorant, unreflective young women who are easily deluded into a cult of personality and vainly celebrating an idealized way toward goodness:

> Bastava sua presença para agitar o agrupamento e, em pouco, entre projetos de pureza e amor à alma, sem que na sombria sala de reunião uma palavra mais clara pudesse ser pronunciada, todas estavam excitadas para o caminho do bem: Cristina é a nossa vanguardista, diziam sorridentes. (18–19)

Members of the Associação attend meetings and singing sessions, the meanings of which are confusing and obscure. In doing so, they create a sort of patterned happiness described as "alegria das flores" (19). While they have no other engagements and even linger for a while before leaving the meeting room, unsure of what to do, the Associação, through slogans such as "the idea" and "progress," presents them a promise of a good life in the future tense. Even though the residents cannot truly experience the ideal as they sing it in the anthem, this future-oriented propaganda offers them a virtual image of happiness and beauty that exceeds reality: they intuitively shape their perception of the collective ambience and its potential, modulating their own situations accordingly as if they would make themselves an effective ingredient to the event of progress. This gesture is like what Massumi calls affective attunement: the way in which members of the Associação perceive happiness is to make themselves become the flowers they sing of:

> De tanto se exteriorizar haviam terminado como as flores cantadas, tomando um sentido que ultrapassava a existência de cada uma, agitando-se como as ruas já inquietas de S. Geraldo. Tinha enfim formado o tipo de pessoa *adequada* a viver naquele tempo num subúrbio. (19; emphasis mine)

The happiness that women at the Associação manifest in singing the anthem exceeds their individual existence and thus forms a unanimous happy atmosphere that overflows into the streets of São Geraldo. In this way, a kind of *adequate* people of the time appears. The adjective *adequada* suggests that they willingly enact their servitude to what Massumi calls "abstract principle" (107). This act also justifies their imposition of the vague principle on other people like Lucrécia, who is unfamiliar with "the ideal" when she joins the Associação. Their complete advocacy for Cristina's domination fuels the power move.

Emily Apter defines milieu as "an atmospheric halo that, instead of foregrounding the individual it surrounds, becomes the evidence of a parallel, semi-visible world existing alongside the subject" (192). Akin to Apter's idea, Charles Altieri proposes the notion of mood as a vocabulary of affect, which "absorbs agency rather than helping it orient its energies toward the practical world" (64). In other words, mood unfolds through scenes and instances of

maneuvers that evoke a perceptible but loosely structured ambience, diffusely influencing society and rendering individual's decision-making ability insignificant. Altieri's emphasis on the independence of states of mind from one's intentionality can help explain Lucrécia's position of "modulating between a sense of [her] own participation" in São Geraldo's urbanizing process and "a sense of being taken up into" the collective and transpersonal mood in which her auxiliary function is of no significance (Altieri 54).

Upon observing the prospect of change that optimism entails, Berlant posits that "one of optimism's ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality" (*Cruel Optimism* 2). In line with this claim, the Associação's tenet of celebrating the hope for progress becomes an integral component of São Geraldo's citizenship and is thus exempt from rational explication or calculation. It provides reassurance for the present that is ground in the promises of the future. What sustains this loop is the collective immersion in optimism embodied by the "happiness of the flowers," which can be seen as impersonal, distanced, describable only when applied to flowers as a correlative. The *alegria das flores* exemplifies a new normative mode of shared expectation that unifies the individual's way of living. Through mythologization that complicates the relation between the symbolic and the palpable, this political rhetoric encumbers an active individual undertaking and consequently organizes around it an inert collectivity described in the novel as "povo," "raça," or "cidadão."

Flowers as a symbol of happiness may also connote the transience and vulnerability of promises. The shared fantasy within the local community fails to carry out any change with regards to the individual's self-realization and is ultimately destined for futile zest. This ephemeral organization adumbrates the banality of future that is in store for the protagonist.

Optimism as a collective structure, however, lives on and is embodied by residents of the town. Throughout her life, Lucrécia carries with her the tenets instilled by the Associação—learning to appreciate the beauty of things and experiencing her joy through flowers, the symbol that connects individual feeling with communal ideals. She becomes adept at rendering herself coherent within the collective atmosphere while maintaining a distance from the emotion she demonstrates: "Experimentando alegria tão exterior que já era a alegria dos outros que ela sentia.… A alegria da moça era assim: As flores no jarro" (100–01). As an impersonal and transpersonal feeling demonstrated through symbols, happiness

external to her engenders mimetic mode of feeling so that Lucrécia herself becomes a vehicle of its transmission.

The Associação seems to be a site of education that serves to occupy the leisure time of still unmarried women. The celebration of conformity and progress echoes the motto of "ordem e progresso" that prevailed in the First Brazilian Republic, endorsed by Auguste Comte's notion of positivism that prioritizes science over metaphysics and aims at harmonizing order. In her analysis of early twentieth-century socioeconomic conditions in Brazil, Maria Inez Turazzi accentuates the interdependency of positivism and liberalism as the most entrenched ideological trends. Positivism reinforces the social order by means of justifying the "consolidação de determinadas relações sociais no país," while liberalism underscores the necessity of industrial growth for the burgeoning urban middle class (Turazzi 25). The Associação delivers to its members precisely these ideas. Cristina, the authority figure, is worshiped by other members as the vanguard. Considered alongside other military terms in the novel such as "Fortaleza," as well as its interwar setting, this depiction readily evokes the image of a trailblazer fighting in warfare. With its rigidity of discipline and conformity masked by the euphoria of progress, the Associação is not unlike a military unit. It unifies individuals through artificial codes such as happiness and beauty, and thus vividly exemplifies a transitional society in which the ungrounded, dogmatic notion of progress serves as a euphemism for the imposition of order.

In his reflection upon the notion of progress, Zygmunt Bauman aptly puts it that, in the process whereby a new order replaces the old, one has to relocate oneself in a set of seemingly "new and improved" patterns that "interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions," and these patterns, which one comes to confirm, can be "as stiff and indomitable as ever" (6–7). Aligned with Bauman's observation, the seekers of happiness in the Associação are always prone to be reshaped by and temporarily resettled in a rather contingent configuration on the one hand and burdened by the efforts of constantly coping with and weaving together new patterns of living on the other hand. The malleable nature of citizens in São Geraldo is evident in the ways they alter their modes of existence as the township itself changes, feeling obliged to adhere to the ambiguous doctrine, as the commentary voice in the novel puts it in the second chapter, "O cidadão": "Era essa a natureza de uma raça de homem" (29). Their

adaptability also mirrors the volatility of policy in this spacetime characterized by the celebration of modernity.

Drawn to the Associação solely by the prospect of attending the ball, Lucrécia soon leaves and makes no effort to participate in the initiative of progress. She is thus not directly motivated by the ideology per se but instead by the general promises of a good life. The third chapter, "A caçada," depicts Lucrécia's preparation for the ball. She adorns herself with heavy ornaments that cloak the shape of her body, striving to become a discreet object that can fit seamlessly into what she envisions as the perfect layout:

> disfarçando-se com uma futilidade que não procurava salientar o corpo mas os enfeites—sua figura se ocultaria sob emblemas e símbolos, e na sua graça intensa a moça pareceria um retrato ideal de si mesma … quando ela estivesse pronta pareceria um objeto, um objeto de S. Geraldo. Era isso que ela trabalhava ferozmente com calma. (34)

While she appears as a portrait of herself, the characteristics of her humanity become less conspicuous. Her sense of belonging to São Geraldo constitutes her only emblem. Lucrécia's inclination toward being represented by symbols reflects her allegiance to the doctrine of the Associação. She finds herself comfortably ensconced within an undifferentiated group with whom she identifies, safeguarded by anonymity, as the narrative voice describes her as someone who would say, "no meu país é assim! ela parecia protegida por uma raça de pessoas iguais" (42). This phrase, "protegida por uma raça de pessoas iguais," reappears in a later chapter, "No jardim," where Lucrécia peers idly at a modern building and telegraph wires from her house in the town. The repetition stresses how Lucrécia counts on the sense of security provided by adhering to a patterned way of life and showcases the continuity in her self-cultivation: her gesture of self-annihilation gradually becomes her mode of being while confirming to others serves as the justification for her pretensions.

The Formalism of Desire

I have analyzed the protagonist's embedded position within an environment of progress and highlighted the affective register as the medium through which individuals engage with collective intentionality and identify with an impersonal and amorphous group. In this section, I focus on how the author envisions the formalism of collectively produced desires through the parallel between personal relationships and social structures.

In the novel, Lispector exposes how national and regional identities operate as problematic attachments that link personal feelings with institutional pressures. Upon observing "the physical and psychological necessity for the safety of domestic enclosure," Stacy Alaimo argues that "this seemingly benign dream of protection has morphed into a national delusion" (20–21). The ideas of enclosure and protection are well pronounced in *Sitiada*. Lucrécia's tendency to align herself with her country and warm to the idea of a national border as a fortress of self-defense dovetails with her deep admiration for the army, as she longs to be bound to Felipe, the lieutenant:

> a moça aproveitava com sono brando a companhia de um tenente. Se o militar tivesse desejado, Lucrécia Neves se prenderia a ele, senão pelo amor, ao menos por uma admiração sem limites em que era capaz de cair, aprofundando-se o que nela havia de doçura e de escuta—pois esta era a sua natureza … a moça nunca o olhara verdadeiramente, temendo turvar superfície tão nítida. (50–51)

Lucrécia avoids looking too closely at Felipe for fear that his alluring exterior will be enfeebled —an affective quality bolstered by his military uniform, which serves as a synecdoche for the lieutenant, much like the ring later in the novel through which she glimpses Mateus for the first time. Lucrécia's perception of the armed forces and her country reflects the extent to which the ideology of positivism—the foundational doctrine of the Brazilian Army in the 1920s—circulates and gains acceptance across multiple sectors of society, evolving into nationalism. With this ingrained bigotry, she would be willing to let herself be passively carried away by the current of sweet indulgence had the unfettered soldier desired her. Lispector thus gives an account of how individuals experience intimacy in ways that resonate

with Berlant's notion of desire. Berlant suggests that desire visits individuals "as an impact from the outside," which, by "inducing an encounter with [their] affects," is felt "as though it comes from within" (*Desire/Love* 6).

Sitiada illustrates shared desires as products of group-identification and the subject's affective interaction with the environment. This formulation captures the complexity of what it means to feel and act as an individual within the experience of social participation. Lucrécia's ambition to achieve upward mobility through marriage, which would allow her to leave the township, is in fact a collective and normative desire inculcated in the inhabitants, as revealed in the passage where she prepares to marry Mateus: "Lucrécia Neves desejava ser rica, possuir coisas e subir de ambiente. Como as ambiciosas moças de S. Geraldo, esperando que o dia de núpcias as libertasse do subúrbio" (113). Female residents internalize social expectations as their personal desires, unaware of the symbolic values of consolidating the patriarchal order and promoting the urbanization that these desires implicate. Holding onto such expectations, they consciously position themselves in the condition of happiness. Lucrécia's fantasy of urban life is partly inherited from her mother, Ana, a widow who nostalgically and fondly recounts her early years living in a city before she met her husband:

> Abandonada a si mesma, aos poucos Ana Rocha Neves falava de sua juventude, com detalhes que a sufocariam se não os transmitisse com exatidão.… E pensando falar sobre si mesma, descrevia apenas o lugar onde vivera quando saíra da fazenda até encontrar marido: —Aquilo sim, é que era cidade, menina, e não esse buraco: até cavalo tinha guizo, *e igreja era igreja, casa era casa, rua era rua*—não esse buraco com sobrados que a gente nem entende. (61; emphasis mine)

Ana indulges in the memory of her youth, which, based on her tediously long yet hollow description, is likely half-invented and self-deceptive. Ahmed points out that happiness often takes either nostalgic or promissory form, since individuals "imagine happiness as somewhere other than where [they] are in the present" (*Promise* 161). The intensity in the affirmation of the past or in the hope for the future reveals the sterility of the present. The parallel structure in Ana's expression, as emphasized in the quotation, seems to be an act of inculcation toward Lucrécia,

which conveys only the message that a city is something different from São Geraldo—an impalpable *alguma coisa*—a deferred future to which the residents invest their hope. But how? Lucrécia is confused by this vague picture of a lost city portrayed by her mother, yet she still follows in Ana's footsteps. Such a lingering and void hope "reproduce[s] the constraining mandate of futurism" (*Promise* 161). Ana sees hope in Lucrécia's hypothetically marrying Perseu, a young student in São Geraldo, because she will no longer need to buy clothes for her daughter:

> Ana agora quase sorria às esperanças que Lucrécia lhe dera; e com os olhos perturbados, já mergulhados no futuro, quase concordava.
> —E a senhora podia casar com o pai de Perseu…, prosseguiu dessa vez horrorizada em imaginar aquele homem sanguíneo desprezando sua mãezinha. Nunca ousara tanto e ambas se olharam surpreendidas. A mulher mexeu-se afinal na cadeira, ruborizada:
> —Ora menina!… disse com coqueteria. (64)

Ana is intrigued by the idea of marrying Perseu's father—a notion randomly and mindlessly concocted by Lucrécia in order to console her mother, though it strikes even the daughter herself as nonsensical. Ana blushes at the fantasy of marriage and her way of speaking to her daughter already shows the same coquetry as Lucrécia displays with Perseu, which betrays Ana's satisfaction with this unrooted, imagined future and her easily manipulated nature. This reiterative pattern in the enactment of desire between mother and daughter manifests in the ritualistic scene in which they repeatedly perform their roles (62). They swing between cheerful mood and negative feelings such as disappointment toward life while taking turns to console each other through the mindless, dramatic performance that constantly repairs their shaky fantasy, built on scarce resources:

> Se fossem despertadas, talvez se surpreendessem de que, usando meios tão precários, pudessem cair tão plenamente no jogo. Mas já não precisavam de grandes preparações para entrar nos dois

> personagens, e os inícios eram cada vez mais rápidos agora, quase impacientes. (63)

The mother-daughter interaction elucidates how the social expectations they internalize organize the patterns of their daily lives through an affective cycle of mutual persuasion. Berlant unravels the formalism of desire that compels individuals to recognize their aspiration through repetition, generating "anxiety, fantasy, and discipline" (*Desire/Love* 20). Lucrécia and Ana become adept in gestures of feigning and faking (e.g., conversing as if reciting theatrical scripts) to maintain their intimate bond. Their performance serves to uphold their hope in resistance to an anxiety their desires provoke, which is described in the novel as "medo que não era medo, apenas arrepiar o dorso diante de uma coisa" (61). This anxiety emerges from the dissonance between aspiration and reality, yet it fuels the drive to sustain the intensity of desire, as depicted in the scene where Lucrécia meets Mateus.

Despite Lucrécia's social spontaneity within São Geraldo, an ineffable fear surfaces during her encounter with Mateus. She stands in the state museum, discreetly clutching her wet umbrella, and her body stiffens at the sight of the diamond ring on Mateus's finger:

> Uma vez ela for ao museu estadual e tivera medo de estar de guarda-chuva molhado num museu. Assim sucedera. Tinha medo de ver, num mesmo olhar, um trem e um passarinho. E de um homem com anel de brilhantes no dedo médio: Mateus. Seria imobilizada se esse dedo a apontasse. (61)

Lispector portrays the affective impact of desire by highlighting Lucrécia's anxious reaction to the possibility ignited by the tension between the ring, a specific object, and the "needs and promises projected onto it" (Berlant, *Desire/Love* 6). Mateus, a man from the city, when he first appears in the novel, is associated with a cluster of promises: "Com ele, ela teria um futuro luxuoso e violento.… A moça bem que ansiava por casar" (57). While the tantalizing ring suggests the intensity and assertion of Lucrécia's yearning, it stands as the only tangible clue about Mateus that Lucrécia and the reader have at this point in the novel. It thus seems to be a precarious anchor for her attachment to Mateus and

her longing for marriage. Through the ring, this contrast is foregrounded, eliciting fear in the face of desire.

As Lucrécia anxiously awaits confirmation from Mateus that he will take her with him to the city, she finds herself guarded by her house, which grants her a sense of comfort and permission to indulge her fantasies: "A sala estava íntima, fantástica, o interior sufocado de sonho.… Por todo o aposento coisas inocentes se haviam espalhado em guarda" (72). Within this space of comforting familiarity, she rekindles her hope by inventing the news that she expects.

It is important to note that, despite the "early spurt of urban expansion" in early twentieth-century Latin America, specifically Brazil (Gilbert 215), suburbia remains inhabited by less advantaged groups and is therefore associated with marginalization. This contrasts with the United States, where suburbs typically connote stability and privilege. The house in São Geraldo where Lucrécia and Ana live—as a physical bonding between the two—constitutes a space of performance and fantasy. On the one hand, the house is decorated in an exaggerated manner with the remnants of a metropolis (59). On the other, electricity failures typical of a suburban area betray the lack of foundational material for this urban fantasy ("A má eletricidade do subúrbio") (59). Given this incongruity, their house appears as an enclave that, in line with Berlant's description of fantasy, offers them "affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory," thereby providing Lucrécia with a sense of reliable continuity in her faith and optimism about her imagined future (*Desire/Love* 75). Unlike her usual discreet glances into the cityscape, she gazes at things directly in her uninterrupted dream from within the safety fence of the house that is described in the novel as her *fortaleza*: "a sonhadora moça examinava com prazer sua fortaleza, não a espreitando mas olhando-a diretamente" (66). Adorned with her cherished household objects, Lucrécia's room creates a sense of stability, like a fortress, even as she contends with unmet desires.

The mechanism of desire, evident in the homogenized *alegria das flores*, functions to "stabilise the subject" and enable the protagonist to assume a disciplined group identity (Berlant, *Desire/Love* 76). Lucrécia's longing, identical to that of other women, feels intimate and visceral to her through her contacts with specific objects and scenes laden with affects. These affective scenes compel her to visit them repeatedly so that her personal fantasy is sustained by collective desires. The general and normative desires prevailing in São Geraldo are, for instance, concretized and materialized in affective moments surrounding the ball.

Lucrécia's fantasy of a good life manifests as an occasional desire to attend the ball. Hence, her imagination of excelling against other women in winning the favor of social elites intertwines with the legacies of marriage and beauty bequeathed from previous generations and local communities like the Associação.

Lispector consciously reveals how women become victims of fantasies' make-believe effect. They are dominated by Cinderella fairy tales that feed them with an idealized and unreal conception, as she discloses in her *crônica* (journalistic writing) "Faz de conta" (1968): "Faz de conta que ela era uma princesa azul pelo crepúsculo que viria, faz de conta que a infância era hoje e prateada de brinquedos … faz de conta que tudo o que tinha não era de faz-de-conta" (*A descoberta* 208). Writing about an anonymous female figure, the author underscores the cruelty of make-believe, which becomes a daily gesture and constant state for women.

Lispector's journalistic voice intertwines with her fiction, both showcasing her intervention in public life. Her feminist critique of how women are institutionalized through fantasies in "Faz de conta" is already exemplified through Lucrécia in *Sitiada*. Lucrécia dwells on the memory of the ball, which, despite its crude setting on a disappointingly rainy night and the fact that she has to leave the ball with her feet dusty, still fills her with passion that overrides her negative feelings such as nausea and the sudden reflection upon her own reason for festivity (36). It seems that her positive feelings actually "*come from without and move inward*" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 9; italics in original). In other words, she is drawn into and participates in a joyful social atmosphere that she experiences as her own. While she dances, São Geraldo is evolving into a city: "chovia, as gotas escorrendo sob a luz, ela dançando, e a cidade erguida em torno" (36–37).

This affective participation sutures the gap between Lucrécia's private yearning for a change in her monotonous quotidian routine and the conditions for realizing the institutional promises of a good life. Lucrécia is thus brought into a collective life where, as described by Berlant, "social conventions of power and value play themselves out" in the form of individual fulfillment (*Desire/Love* 14). This political dimension of desire reduces the disjunction between the collective and the personal, legacy and reality. The portrayal of private space and public space as projected onto each other alludes to this merging. The scene where Lucrécia's living room is inundated by the rain not only highlights the cleavage between the imagined completeness of the modernized construction and the

belatedness of development in reality but also implies the encroachment of the public sphere upon the domestic space.

Infrastructure and the Liminal Experience

In the previous sections, I analyzed Lispector's representation of the subject's position in relation to the pressures of urbanization as a collective project. I examined how optimism operates as a form of regulation through the preindividual dimension of desires and social networks. In this section, my focus is on the novel's representation of infrastructure, which I argue not only embodies a combination of material conditions and collective intentionality but also functions as a work of institutional polishing intertwined with optimism.

In her reading of Lispector's delineation of Brasília's standardized, harmonic architectural design in her *crônica* "Brasília: Cinco dias" (1962), which pressures its inhabitants to "feel good" (82), albeit resistantly, Sophia Beal suggests that Lispector problematizes the rhetoric of national progress as a "utopian project" that "push[es] out what was imperfect and marginal in the name of progress" (83). This critical rendition of the ideological dynamics between public works and national project is explicitly echoed in *Sitiada*. Following Beal's argument, engaging with references to infrastructure is conducive to probing the peripheral modernity of suburbia and the protagonist's marginalized perception. The novel's notable portrayals of public works, such as the sewer system, cables, the railway and the viaduct, materialize the interconnectedness of the physical spaces and recalibrate the individual's place in tangible networks.

Beal advances the symbolic values in infrastructure construction projects: a sense of nationhood and collective hope is cultivated among Brazilian citizens provided that the previously disparate regions become integrated into "a cohesive whole" by virtue of the "facilitated communication" in the course of the twentieth century (1). This observation is reflected in Lucrécia's allegiance to national identity. Alongside the material success in São Geraldo, propaganda celebrating beautification and cohesion emerges within social groups exemplified by the Associação. In her study on developmentalism in *Sitiada*, Victoria Saramago explores "the intersection between the agency of things and the social relations implicated" in the circulation of policies (125). I argue that the two categories proposed by Saramago are fundamentally indivisible, in that the nonhuman bodies

are represented as relational while the social networks are material given their collectivity and impersonality. Alternatively, I use the notion of environment or materiality in order to avoid this discrimination. The wire mesh and pipelines as nonhuman actors exhibit their active forces that reveal the country's modernizing progression, bridging private life with the public sphere. This concrete form of relationality converges with abstract networks sociopolitically. Limited social occasions for women, such as the female association and the ball, emblematize the burgeoning sign of women's civic participation on the one hand and deliver the message of asserting individual's embeddedness in the collective project on the other, considering their embrace of shared values and promises.

Building upon Gilbert Simondon's notion of provisional unity, which reveals the "transitional structure as a loose convergence that lets a collectivity stay bound to the ordinary even as some of its forms of life are fraying," Berlant redefines infrastructure as what binds individuals "to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself" ("The Commons" 394). It is the collectivity that leaves the glitches in a transitional space unscrutinized. In the novel, the infrastructure that sustains the everyday life of São Geraldo's residents is foregrounded in the detailed depiction of the layout of drainpipes on the walls and the power-plant towers. Scenes of flooding and traffic failures during rain expose São Geraldo's liminal position between the rural and urban, the natural and modern landscape. However, the perfection and equilibrium of the external features increasingly dominate the landscape of São Geraldo. Under this façade, chaos, dysfunction, and material scarcity in individual lives are concealed and pushed aside.

Lucrécia is often confined to the balcony, a doubly liminal space from which she observes the outside without setting her feet on the ground, avoiding direct exposure to the chaos of the town's daily scenes: "A vida tumultuosa da rua do Mercado estava deslocada naquele ambiente onde um gosto passado reinava nas varandas de ferro forjado" (14). From this deceptively comfortable position, she is content with an illusory view, distanced from the immediate happening in the public space.

The chapter "Esboço da cidade" delineates a dramatic episode in São Geraldo, when someone is struck by lightning while Lucrécia remains intact and unaware of the incident. Even though her house is trembling, from outside the premonition

in the air cannot reach her; neither is the vibrating sound able to alert her. Her detached position and obtuseness seem almost a blessing:

> Foi assim que ela escapou de saber. A moça tinha sorte: por um segundo sempre escapava. Verdade era que, pela diferença deste segundo, outra pessoa de súbito compreenderia. Mas era verdade também que pelo mesmo segundo outra pessoa seria fulminada. S. Geraldo estava cheio de pessoas *fulguradas* que se sacolejavam plenas de alegria no carro de socorro do Hospício Pedro II. (91–92; emphasis mine)

This farcical scene unfolds the hopeful sketch of the new São Geraldo, replete with residents who, despite being injured by the lightning and taken to the hospital by ambulances, still absurdly yield to a sort of incontestable happiness. The adjective *fulgurado* refers either to the state of being dazzled by intense light or being hit by a flash. Through this double-entendre expression, the author satirizes the link between the atmosphere of ecstasy and its perilous effects on individuals. The narrative voice ironically comments that incomprehension is the primary foundation of a sort of happiness that is itself incomprehensible. The hazards that expose the menacing flaws in the ongoing construction of the new city are thus neutralized and varnished by the surplus of happiness among the masses. This grim depiction of sufferings in ordinary lives, quickly effaced without trace, points to the violence that the alluring yet paralyzing collective atmosphere exerts on individuals by promoting normative and consensual promises.

Lucrécia's liminal position, from which she leisurely observes and half-comprehends what is happening on the outside from the shelter of the inside, also implies her inability to directly experience the real changes taking place in São Geraldo. Instead, she apprehends them only through intermediaries. Much like in the Associação where she learned to sense a sort of happiness framed by pattern through the "flowers," it is through the bits and pieces of industrial construction that she perceives the modernity of a city that seems stirring and daunting with all the unnameable things that constitute it. For Lucrécia, São Geraldo grows silently like an organic being: "As coisas cresciam com profunda tranquilidade. S. Geraldo se mostrava" (52). It appears that no one decides to make the transformation in São

Geraldo happen; rather, it unfolds seamlessly and spontaneously in a collective environment bloated with a longing for change.

Curiously, in the passage that first depicts the urban space expanding with dazzling vivacity, what catches Lucrécia's attention is an inanimate and innocuous object: a discarded screw on the ground:

> Coisas terríveis e delicadas jaziam no chão. O parafuso perfeito. A moça respirava o odor de chumbo da claridade. E virando-se— lá estava S. Geraldo: anunciado, inexplicável, pousado com a dureza de um pé. Cada objeto hiperfísico. Os sinais. (53)

Apparently, a single screw only appears as a redundant byproduct of industrialization. Lucrécia's appreciation of it as a perfect being may suggest her willingness to approach the state of a screw—to become an adequate and featureless part of a mechanical existence that contributes to "progress" rather than pursuing an independent life.

With its irreducible and indivisible structure, the screw, as a synecdoche for city construction, serves as the key that she grasps to access the inconceivable world of modernity. She is able to get a flavor of this world through breathing its odor of lead. Provided its linkage to other objects that concretize the physical process of urbanization, the screw is perceived as a sign emmeshed in the whole system of signification still alien to Lucrécia. It can also be regarded as an imagined leverage through which she gains a sense of agency to reach out and participate in city planning.

Composed of incredibly delicate parts, the new cityscape of São Geraldo, as seen through the screw, strikes Lucrécia as "uma fortaleza inconquistável" (46). The same adjective is used to describe Lucrécia's room, as a "quarto inconquistável" (35). In both cases, the unconquerable fortress can be interpreted as both protection and hindrance. For one thing, the city's seeming impregnability reflects Lucrécia's liminal position as a spectator and her tendency to see only the surface, selectively embracing the positive side of things as taught by her mother. For another, as seen through the Associação, which illustrates the idealistic political environment, the pledge of progress and happiness for São Geraldo in the suburban construction campaign functions like a fortress besieged for residents like Lucrécia. This pledge is interwoven with the promises of institutions such as

marriage and family, figured in Lucrécia's room, another form of fortification on the private level.

I have discussed how Lucrécia's room represents a secure and predictable future delineated by Ana. Lucrécia is ensnared by this blueprint of an impermeable and perfect system that arranges a fateful cycle—to become Mateus's wife, move to the city, and lead a lavish life: "Lucrécia mesmo fora apanhada por alguma roda do sistema perfeito" (20). Lispector playfully repeats this expression when it comes to Lucrécia's attempt to approach a male dancer in the city theater soon after her marriage, but this time it refers to the fact that she is physically and perfectly stuck in space in the theater box, which prevents her from leaving her seat and illogically offers her the "guarantee" of this marriage:

> Se ele lhe despertava o compromisso antigo, ela estava agora sem tempo, as saias presas por *alguma roda do sistema perfeito*. Ao mesmo tempo ninguém a tiraria dali, tinha direito de estar num camarote: esta era a sua época. A extraordinária garantia. (122; emphasis mine)

Here, the *roda do sistema perfeito* stands out as squeezing and constraining but is taken by Lucrécia as reassurance. In line with what Berlant illustrates as the workings of cruel optimism, Lucrécia finds herself "bound to a situation of profound threat"; although her marriage of convenience with Mateus is completely devoid of affection, it is still "profoundly confirming" so that she feels inclined to sustain it "regardless of the content of the relation" (*Cruel Optimism* 2). Since at the Associação, Lucrécia not only prompts herself to feel the happiness that she anticipates marriage to offer but also transmits a performative surplus of happiness to her surroundings, as she expresses her satisfaction with married life in a letter to her mother: "Alcancei o ideal de minha vida" (125). She continues to hold faith in the predictable comforts that the life promises to formulate: "Sim! mas tudo isso era mais alegre, os dias passavam, meses e meses passavam, perdiam-se horas […] uma geração garantindo …" (126).

However, the author ruthlessly exposes the cruelty of being hooked on the future through Mateus's death from a heart attack before he can carry out his solid plans for progress. For Lucrécia, the perfect story of a good life is dismantled by her widowhood, which is followed by a fleeting moment of wakening. Casting a

gaze on the rise of power plants in São Geraldo, she realizes that, apart from her own house, nothing is steadfast since the outside world is constantly changing, as she asks herself: "Como se limitar à própria história se lá estava a torre da usina?" (189).

Through her fractured view, she becomes aware that the whole reality is flimsy and ungraspable so that any reliance on a single version of a story seems unreasonable. Nevertheless, upon receiving a letter from Ana about another marriage prospect—a man who owns a farm has seen her portrait and likes it—Lucrécia feels heartened and any misgiving about her life is dispelled:

> É o segundo marido, espantava-se como se não tivesse direito a tanta sorte.[…] Ah, a viúva, interrompia-se ela emocionada relendo mil vezes a carta. "Tem aqui um homem"…, cantava de cor. Olhava o retrato pendurado na parede do corredor para adivinhar o que a esperava, à viúva alegre. Terminava rindo de novo. (191)

Lucrécia is refilled with expectation, her momentary wakefulness only serving as a foil to the inextricable wheel of promise and optimism that returns to function. While her city fantasy has already dissipated, she happily loops back to a farm, which seems to replicate her mother's life. Having regained her sense of security, she abandons everything in São Geraldo including her much treasured trinkets that she used to consider as "[s]eu sistema de defesa" (191). They all become useless as she optimistically assumes that her second marriage will provide the most reliable protection against unpredictable changes. With delight, she resumes her role as a portrait, much like at the ball—a perfect and purchasable commodity. This abrupt adjustment to the present exemplifies the cruelty of optimism in that it makes the conventionality indubitably confirming. For women like Lucrécia, institutions such as marriage and property relations seem to be the only viable responses to the precarious environment. While the imaginary siege of São Geraldo is lifted, Lucrécia prepares herself to enter another fortress. The impasse on the individual level contrasts with the dominant ideology of progress and development, in which Lucrécia is half-knowingly informed and of which she attempts to keep track but ends up only playing the role as an outsider and spectator.

Conclusion

A cidade sitiada portrays the 1920s Brazil dominated by the doctrine of positivism that celebrates order, unanimism, and progress. I emphasized Lispector's political commitment in *Sitiada* and highlighted how her reflection on individuals' relationship with the public sphere engages in conversation with contemporary activist theorists like Berlant and Ahmed. Lispector demonstrates the ways in which optimism functions as a form of affective politics engendered by urbanization, a spacetime exemplified by the ideology of development. Individuals' desires and emotions are produced through their affective encounters with the collective notion of progress circulating via the evolving, dynamic relationality between the subject and its environment. In the portrayal of Lucrécia and her constant gestures of negotiation and adaptation to the overarching atmosphere of optimism, Lispector reveals the structure of desire in the ambience of hope and change, through which individuals are persuaded to uphold the legacies of institutions that paradoxically resist change.

By indicating Lucrécia's fractured perspective from a sheltered position, Lispector also brings to light uneven distribution as the counterculture to development obscured by the tendentious unfolding of modernization. Dovetailing the analysis of São Geraldo's peripheral location of modernity with Lucrécia's exemplary borderline experience of spectatorship—comfortably positioned on the half-open balcony yet confined to the household—this article stressed the layered liminality associated with the role of suburban women, whose hope mirrors their vulnerability.

Through the blending of the pledge of progress for the suburb and the promise of happiness ascribed to marriage, Lispector demonstrates how the individual's private life is interlocked within the broader narrative of order and progress during the First Brazilian Republic. In doing so, Lispector reveals these collectively assured promises as both beguiling and stifling, constitutive of an impasse in individual life. Furthermore, she underscores that individuals who seek protection by confirming to others, through the practices of attunement and adaptation to the collective atmosphere, will only reinforce an insidious conventionality. Through the juxtaposition of infrastructure with middle-class women's attunement to the idea of fulfillment within intertwined orders of patriarchy and the modernizing state, Lispector exposes how individual subjects are fundamentally implicated in

the Brazilian ideals of nationhood, thereby using fiction as a medium for political reflection and public critique.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

———. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.

Alaimo, Stacy. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. U of Minnesota P, 2016.

Altieri, Charles. *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Cornell UP, 2004.

Apter, Emily. *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse, and the Impolitics*. Verso, 2018.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity, 2012.

Beal, Sophia. *Brazil under Construction: Fiction and Public Works*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Berlant, Lauren. "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, pp. 393–419.

———. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

———. *Desire/Love*. Punctum Books, 2012.

Gilbert, Alan. "Latin America: The Suburb Is the City." *The Suburban Land Question: A Global Survey*, edited by Richard Harris and Ute Lehrer, U of Toronto P, 2018, pp. 214–39.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Bodies-Cities." *Sexuality & Space*, edited by Beatriz Colomina, Jennifer Bloomer, et al., Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 241–53.

Lispector, Clarice. *A cidade sitiada*. Rocco, 2019.

———. *A descoberta do mundo*. Nova Fronteira, 1984.

Massumi, Brian. *Politics of Affect*. Polity, 2015.

Saramago, Victoria. *Fictional Environment: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America*. Northwestern UP, 2021.

Sousa, Carlos Mendes de. *Clarice Lispector: Figuras da escrita*. Universidade do Minho, 2000.

Turazzi, Maria Inez. *A euforia do progresso e a imposição da ordem: A engenharia, a indústria e a organização do trabalho na virada do século XIX ao XX*. Núcleo de Publicações COPPE; Editora Marco Zero, 1989.

Villares, Lúcia. "Modernization and the Phantasmogoria of Commodities in Clarice Lispector's *A Cidade Sitiada*." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2010, pp. 473–87.