LALR **Latin American Literary Review**
Volume 48 / Number 97 2021
Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University • Ithaca, NY 14853 • 607-255-4155
E-mail: latamlitrevpress@gmail.com • Website: www.lalrp.net

Running Water in Clarice Lispector's *The Besieged City*

Johnny Lorenz
Montclair State University

ABSTRACT: When, in Clarice Lispector's *The Besieged City* (1949), our protagonist, Lucrécia, contemplates her relationship with the city of São Geraldo, she pays special attention to water and water infrastructure. Pipes and embankments and viaducts, even the humble faucet—all of this technology of controlling and delivering water becomes a way of conceptualizing the city, but waterworks, I argue, is also an integral part of the text's experiment with vision. Can one see what is there? Can one see the "thing" liberated from our vocabularies? In Chapter 6, in which, supposedly, nothing is happening, Lucrécia is at the faucet, doing the dishes, losing her sense of self as she communes with the city. Later, when she notices a broken faucet in the storeroom, she confronts the thingness of this piece of equipment. To realize the thingness of herself is her most powerful desire. My analysis attempts to complicate feminist readings of *The Besieged City* by arguing that the text imagines objectification not as a problem, but as a paradoxical attempt at agency. Previous readings approach Lispector's novel as a condemnation of the city; my analysis understands *The Besieged City* as a representation of the modern sublime.

KEYWORDS: Clarice Lispector, water, infrastructure, Heidegger, Didion, city

> Lucrécia herself made up that she'd sometimes hear a voice. But in fact it would be easier for her to see the supernatural: touching reality is what would make her fingers tremble.
>
> (*The Besieged City*,[1] 16)

When we arrive at Chapter 6 of Clarice Lispector's enigmatic, astonishing early novel *The Besieged City* (*A cidade sitiada*, 1949), set in Brazil in the 1920s, our protagonist, a young woman named Lucrécia, is still living with her mother. Anxious to marry, Lucrécia cannot decide between her various suitors. Chapter 6, entitled "Sketch of the City," sets itself up as a pivotal moment for Lucrécia; the first page teases us with possibility: "What happened that afternoon..." (93). Even the physical environment seems breathless with anticipation, for "the house was trembling all over" (93). Meanwhile, Lucrécia is busy with her small, domestic chore: "Water was pouring from the tap and she was running the soapy rag over the silverware" (94). As we read on, preparing ourselves for what is about to happen, we encounter this abrupt shift: "nothing was happening though" (95). We find Lucrécia standing, "the plate in her hand" (95), looking around her kitchen, then gazing at the city from her balcony, and, indeed, nothing seems to happen—but, of course, something is always happening. Water, for instance, has traveled great distances to arrive at a particular address, where Lucrécia controls the amount and force of the stream with the slightest movement of her hand on the tap. Lispector's *The Besieged City* offers us an opportunity to contemplate the ways in which waterworks is simultaneously visible and invisible, overlooked through its very ubiquity. However, the conceptual work that this novel performs with water infrastructure does not stop there, for it is a vital part of the book's ambitious narrative experiment: the reinvention of looking. *The Besieged City* interrogates the gaze itself; it explores not only what Lucrécia sees, but how. Lucrécia comes to see the ordinary faucet beyond the purpose that would define it: it is a faucet, yes, but it is also a "thing"—and, for Lispector, the "thing" is the great mystery.

Let us begin this analysis by examining the peculiar way in which *The Besieged City* represents the domestic scene of a young woman washing the dishes:

> Scrubbing the teeth of the fork, Lucrécia was a small gear spinning quickly while the larger one was spinning slowly—the slow gear of brightness, and inside it a girl working like an ant. Being an ant in the light, was absorbing her completely and soon, like a true worker, she no longer knew who was washing and what was being washed—so great was her efficiency. (94)

To contemplate infrastructure is to make precisely this shift in scope: a shift from observing human individuals to contemplating entire systems. We must conceptualize the gears (both literal and metaphoric) that, as Lispector suggests above, differ tremendously in scale. Through its representation of waterworks, *The Besieged City* undermines the distinction between where the self ends and the other begins. Lucrécia becomes fully integrated into a larger process, and so she "no longer knew who was washing and what

was being washed." This provocative confusion between subject and object occurs once more in Chapter 6, just after Lucrécia has finished washing the dishes. She enters the living room and studies her mother's kitschy trinkets arrayed on the shelves: "Then Lucrécia, she herself independent, beheld them. So anonymously that the rules could be upended without a problem, and she'd be the thing seen by the objects" (103). This dynamic—between the one who sees and the thing seen—is reimagined by the text, undermining, if briefly, the hierarchy of the room.

Lispector's novel identifies, in situations of modern tedium, dangerous and destabilizing possibilities. It's a strange sort of story the text is fashioning:

> A story that could be seen in such different ways that the best way not to make a mistake would be just to enumerate the girl's steps and see her acting the way you'd just say: city. (97)

The text does not do this, of course: it does not actually count her steps. The text is imagining a narrative so reductive that syntax would be transformed into a single, efficient, but hopelessly encrypted number. Earl Fitz reminds us of a problem that informs much of Lispector's work—the struggle to "reconcile language and reality" (36). We never discover the number that would most accurately represent Lucrécia's story, but we are, in fact, given an encrypted word: "city." The dream of the text here is an impossible precision, or an impossible comprehensiveness. As often happens in Lispector's fiction, language seems entirely too self-reflexive to represent anything outside of itself, and, therefore, a true portrait of the city is impossible; perhaps this explains why Chapter 6 is entitled "Sketch of the City." The problem is not only the limitations of language; the city itself is too dynamic to be captured by any attempt at representation. The narrative voice wonders: "Where could the center of a township be?" (5). Lucrécia can only see São Geraldo—sometimes referred to as a "city," other times as a "township"[2]—when she removes herself, when she walks away and looks back at it from a distance, but then she cannot see in any detail the buildings and streets. On the other hand, when Lucrécia penetrates the city, she is too much "in" it to really see it. Where, then, should she stand in order to see the city in its entirety? There's no clear answer. Vision is also a form of blindness.

The critic Lúcia Villares offers a useful approach to Lucrécia's complex attempt to lay siege to her rapidly-expanding city: "There is a central paradox in this process: how to besiege, and see herself as separate, from within the city? How to contain, control, objectify modernization if she is simultaneously constructed by it?" (135). In some sense, the city swallows her, while, in another sense, the city fits in her eye. São Geraldo inspires feelings of love and loyalty in our protagonist, but the city appears as a threat, too, or an enemy to be conquered. When the text asks its rhetorical question—where is the center of São Geraldo?—it introduces the possibility that a city has no center, and for this reason, and for as long as she lays siege to it, Lucrécia will never be able to conquer the labyrinth of its streets. The city is very much like language, for a language, too, has no center. Lucrécia seems incapable of mapping the city, a critical aspect of conquest, because such mapping would require a fixed point of view. She sees the city from so many angles and vantage points that the openness of the city, paradoxically, becomes a form of impenetrability. Every surface is part of the city's "perfect system of defense" (96). Lucrécia gazes outside at the city beyond her window, but the city manages to get inside; when Lucrécia inspects her apartment, she realizes that the city has infiltrated the domestic sphere. Glancing at various objects tucked away in the storeroom, she discovers: "The materials of the city!" (99) São Geraldo has penetrated the kitchen, too, where Lucrécia identifies a "wall with pipe" (99) linking up to the city's waterworks. In a letter to one of her critics (included as an appendix in my translation of *The Besieged City*), Clarice Lispector makes this relevant point: "A house is not only constructed with stones, cement etc. A man's way of looking constructs it too" (210). The act of looking is Lucrécia's most powerful ability, but it limits and undermines her. As we shall see, the only way she'll get closer to the city—the only way she can cross that void—is by becoming fully integrated into the body of the city. Lucrécia must become a thing.

The Besieged City gives to the most quotidian activities, such as washing dishes, much more time and consideration than, for example, Lucrécia's longed-for wedding, which, when it happens, is something of a non-event. There is no depiction of a wedding ceremony; the marriage is a purely bureaucratic affair, handled in the novel's shortest chapter. This strikes us as a rather surprising aspect of a book that sets itself up as a courtship novel. In the hands of Lispector, a courtship novel can only end up undermining itself; she is not particularly, or not convincingly, interested in weddings. The modern tedium of doing the dishes, however—this earns the text's full attention. Indeed, Lispector's novel seems most interested in moments when nothing seems to be happening. In *Public Works*, a study of urban infrastructure and literary modernism, Michael Rubenstein analyzes the representation of waterworks in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Rubenstein borrows Christopher Bollas's psychoanalytic concept of the "unthought known" (9), using it to describe the social condition undergirding our relationship with the state through its infrastructure projects, through the numerous daily tasks we perform without quite paying attention. Rubenstein's approach to infrastructure as an experience of the "unthought known" is useful to our discussion of *The Besieged City*—a novel in which Lucrécia, at the sink, is repeatedly described as someone "unthinking." Lucrécia is "a person to some extent stupid" (94), who "didn't possess the futilities of the imagination" (94). The narrative voice of *The Besieged City* establishes that it will do all the thinking required. Our protagonist will not, or cannot, do the heavy lifting, and this failure is actually quite necessary, for in this secular form of communion with the city, Lucrécia's experience would be undermined by too much

awareness. The book's narrator and the reader, too, are outside of this moment; unlike Lucrécia, we intellectualize what is happening in this chapter. It's crucial, if I might put it this way, that Lucrécia does not know what she does not know. Understanding would ruin the experience: "What happened that afternoon went beyond Lucrécia Neves in a vibration of sound that would blend into the air and not be heard. That's how she escaped finding out" (93).

It is never made clear, exactly, what Lucrécia (or the reader, for that matter) is charged with "finding out," but notice this odd assertion on the next page: "The main thing really was not to understand. Not even joy itself" (94). There are several ways to think about this rather ambiguous assertion, but I'd like to argue for the vaguest, or the most open-ended, reading: whether we are talking about joy or, indeed, anything else, the main thing really was not to understand—*at all*. Lucrécia's experience of communion with the city, a communion real or imagined (although I'm not quite sure what the difference would be)—this experience of communion relies on "not thinking," on a profound lack of awareness, a kind of forgetting that allows Lucrécia to lose herself—or lose her "self"—within the big-gear operations of the city's waterworks. Furthermore, the text suggests that understanding is itself a problem; it is, paradoxically, a kind of limitation. The text reveals that understanding is an approach, and *The Besieged City* consequently leaves open the possibility that there are other approaches, other engagements with the world that fall short of (or perhaps go beyond) understanding. When Lucrécia is doing the dishes, her lack of imaginative faculties means that she does not understand what is happening to her, but this lack allows for an entirely different experience of her "self" and the city—one that is no less important than the analysis we are performing here at this very moment, no less important than the astonishing but rather condescending intellectualizing performed by the narrative voice, juxtaposed to Lucrécia's own way of thinking and being.

Villares argues that *The Besieged City* draws attention to "a feature of modernity that would become explicit in Brazil at a later date… modernization as a form of domination" (128). While my analysis doesn't exactly disagree with this point, here Villares's reading of the novel sits rather uneasily next to my own—because my analysis is contemplating the book's provocative representation of a modern sublime. Yes, the city can be oppressive, or a form of domination, but domination and pleasure are not mutually exclusive. Take, for example, the following passage in which Lucrécia is "spying" on the materials of São Geraldo:

> What a city. The invincible city was the ultimate reality. Beyond it there would be only dying, as a conquest.
>
> But in the name of what king was she a spy? her patience was horrible. Her fear was that of surpassing whatever she was seeing. She was spying on the pipes, the coat and the electrical cords: they had the beauty of an airplane. Beautiful as eyeglasses—she blinked. (100)

This is not a text particularly interested in condemning the brutal lines of metal surfaces or the dehumanizing effects of technology. In fact, one might describe the passage above as a kind of ecstatic trembling before the beauty and power of the city's materials. The text is not referring to the natural landscape or to heaven when it contemplates an "ultimate reality" reigning over what would have to be, logically, a series of lesser realities. The text is not conjuring mountain ranges or the daunting sea to transmit a feeling of the sublime; the text is looking at the "invincible city"—the artificial, technological city. My analysis, therefore, does not read *The Besieged City* as a condemnation of modernity, even if such a reading is, of course, available to us. Villares argues that, in the novel, modernization is "depicted paradoxically as something extremely concrete and visible, but at the same time as a force that works in a surreptitious way; a process that disrupts and disturbs the relationship between individuals, social groups and physical environment" (133). Again, such a reading is entirely valid and useful, but my analysis wishes to trouble the argument that modernity "disturbs" social relationships—when modernity, in fact, *makes possible* a whole array of social relationships. We might recollect, for example, a chapter of *The Besieged City* devoted to the modern, voyeuristic and very particular delight of looking at strangers on trains. We might return to Chapter 6, too, and recollect its inclusion of the modern luxury of commanding water to manifest itself in one's kitchen. The text delights in the modern city; by the same token, it conjures a somewhat uncanny experience of the city, a city at once strange and familiar: "the city was an unconquerable fortress!" (43). While the text often pits Lucrécia against São Geraldo, her desire to conquer it figures as a doomed expression of love. We might describe Lucrécia's relationship to the city as a contest of wills, rich with erotic suggestion. Lucrécia drops Felipe, a brash suitor, not for another man, really—but for the city itself: "Why don't you kiss your grandmother, she's not from São Geraldo!" (54)

Lucrécia's dream, in fact, is to integrate herself completely into the body of the city. She attempts to objectify herself, not in the sense of submitting to the patriarchal order but to free herself—to free herself from consciousness and become "an object of the room" (115), or even "an object of São Geraldo" (30). Maria José Somerlate Barbosa, in *Clarice Lispector: Spinning the Webs of Passion*, argues for a very different reading of the text: "The narrator depicts Lucrécia as a woman who learns to repress her own sensuality and wild dreams to conform to her position as an object, constantly on display" (18). While my analysis is interested, of course, in the larger, feminist concerns of Barbosa's argument, *The Besieged City* does not seem to me terribly bothered by Lucrécia's position as an object; in fact, I am arguing quite the opposite here. Lispector's representation of objects and "objectification" does something much more surprising—and, quite frankly, weirder—than criticize patriarchy for its objectification of a woman's body. In *The Besieged City*, Lucrécia's attempt to make herself into an object is actually a strange form of agency, a breaking of the bonds with her own kind. In her

discussion of Lucrécia, Barbosa argues that the novel's fourth chapter, "The Public Statue," is a chapter that "emphasizes her immobility (as she waits for a wealthy suitor), also establishing comparisons with her collection of bibelots" (18). Barbosa's point here is certainly worth contemplating, and under more normal circumstances we might consider a woman's bizarre desire to turn into a statue to be a symbolic indication of her social immobility and her dehumanization, but (to continue our friendly disagreement here) does Lispector's text really share, in these moments, Barbosa's anxieties about "objectification," a term that academic discourse often uses as a short-hand for patriarchal oppression? When Lucrécia looks at herself as a "statue" or as an "object," I would argue that this is not the familiar sort of objectification associated with the subjugation of women through interpersonal or structural misogyny. Lucrécia's transformation into "object" is actually an escape from the patriarchal order, an escape even from her own ego; it's a turning away from humanity—and, as we shall see, it's doomed to fail.

My approach here is more or less consistent with Victoria Saramago's approach to *The Besieged City* in her book *Fictional Environments*, in which Saramago argues that Lucrécia "becomes, just like the things that surround her, a complete exteriority… Rather than constituting an inferior condition, this seems to be the very state Lispector herself wished to achieve" (134). In the city, where we find ourselves surrounded by the things we've created, Lucrécia's most fervent wish is to turn her back on us, in order to join the things. In another novel by Lispector, *The Passion According to G.H.*, the narrator comes to the realization that "the world is not human" (65). This realization explains, to some extent, Lispector's enduring obsession with "things" across her body of work. These "things" surround her, unspeaking and unknowable—so close and yet somehow out of reach. It's as though language itself were responsible, at least in part, for the unbridgeable distance. We feel this frustration throughout *The Besieged City*: "So what would she say if she could go, from seeing objects, to saying them… The hard thing is that appearance was reality" (68). Lispector's novel offers us the city as the most powerful expression of the "thingness" of things, precisely because the city is simultaneously an artificial world of our own design and yet it exists beyond us, beyond the meanings we would ascribe to it, beyond our intention. Even the small objects perched around Lucrécia's home, the coffee cups and the tablecloth—these things we've made exist independently of us, and they are, according to the text, "unconquerable" (64).

When Georg Simmel describes the modern city in terms of its "objective spirit" overtaking the "subjective spirit" (183) of the human individual, he works with some assumptions that Lispector's text resists and complicates. Simmel describes modern life in this way:

> life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides. They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself. On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings that tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual's summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal core. (184)

While we might accept, in general terms, this tension that Simmel describes, Lispector's *The Besieged City* deploys the figure of Lucrécia to offer a paradoxical approach to this tension between personality and the overwhelming "stream" (to borrow Simmel's water metaphor) of the objective life of the city. In this tension between the objective and the subjective, Lucrécia's most profound moments of transformation do not occur when she resists the city and asserts her individuality, but rather the opposite: her most astonishing action is when she attempts to transform herself into an object of the city. Is this surrender—or an almost incomprehensible bravery? Or is it, perhaps, madness?

We find Lucrécia practicing absurd poses in the novel, contorting her body in uncomfortable ways, in an attempt to become statuesque, on a decidedly more literal level. She attempts to transform herself into an object—but why (if I might return to my disagreement with Barbosa) would such a bizarre "display" be visually enticing to her suitors? Lucrécia's poses would be rather shocking, even grotesque, in the eyes of these men. Here is Lucrécia, stretching out her hand:

> She stretched it out and suddenly twisted it showing her palm. In the movement her shoulder lifted crippled…
>
> But that's really how it was. She stuck out her left foot. Sliding it across the floor, the tips of her toes diagonal to her ankle. She was somehow so twisted that she wouldn't return to her normal position without wreaking havoc on her whole body. (74)

The text, I would argue, is not presenting us with a woman who is particularly "repressed," as Barbosa argues (or at least, not in any way that would distinguish Lucrécia from the rest of us). More to the point, Lucrécia's imitation of—or transformation into—an object is actually an assault on the dictates of feminine beauty. *The Besieged City* offers a radically different version of objectification, for this objectification is something Lucrécia chooses for herself, and while it is a form of intimacy with the manmade city, it's a betrayal of mankind. This self-objectification, however, is never quite successful, or (in our most generous reading) its success is fleeting, for Lucrécia's transformation into a "thing" is constantly undermined by her own interpretive gaze. The irresistible urge to find meaning—trying to understand, now matter how "stupid" she is—this stubborn, human urge keeps getting in her way. As we shall discover, too, the comfort of material pleasures and the thrill of romance turn out to be, ultimately, all too enticing.

We began this analysis with a discussion of tap water and Lucrécia's domestic chore of washing dishes; we also discover in *The Besieged City* references to sustained attempts by urban engineers to harness water, distribute it, buttress against it or allow for human traffic over it. At the end of the novel, on the very last page, Lucrécia abandons the city when it modernizes so much that it begins construction of "an embankment and a viaduct, all the way to the slope of nameless horses" (201). In Marilia Librandi's study of Lispector's body of work, *Writing by Ear*, Librandi concludes by paying close attention to the horses in *The Besieged City*, arguing that the text "operates at the wide intersection between the surreal and the technological, between the wildness of the horse and the domesticity of the urban environment… [T]he temporality of the horse does not coincide with that of the suburb under development, with its cars, radio lines, trains, and the power plant pushing horses from the horizon" (167). Lucrécia imagines huge technological leaps in the near future when São Geraldo might come to possess the infrastructure project of a major city: "one day São Geraldo would have underground rail lines" (201). Believing she must choose between the city (civilization) and the band of wild horses (the primitive), Lucrécia chooses neither A nor B, but a third option: she makes an "escape" (201). The last page reveals that a war has ended: "The siege of São Geraldo had been lifted" (201). Here I'd like to return to Saramago's analysis of *The Besieged City*, in which she refers directly to the "siege" being lifted: "That is to say, the town has surrendered to modernizing forces from outside, it no longer belongs to anyone, and its former inhabitants—horses, widows, and others—have no option but to desert the conquered city" (131). My analysis here would like to advance a different interpretive reading of this final page, one in which the town has not actually "surrendered." São Geraldo has been described by the text as "an unconquerable fortress" (43), and so it remains. Here, my analysis might actually be more consistent with Villares's understanding of the siege as a quixotic assault from "within" (135)—it was Lucrécia herself who had been laying siege.

Lucrécia is identifying two kinds of public works projects as the urgent sign that it's time to leave: an embankment (a wall used to keep a river from overflowing) and a viaduct (a bridge of arches spanning over rivers or valleys, a nineteenth-century term that borrows from the concept of the Roman "aqueduct"). As this analysis hopes to make clear, one way *The Besieged City* conceptualizes "city" is precisely through the way it manages, diverts, conquers and regulates water. The last page of the book would suggest that the city has gone too far, that a delicate balance has been undermined. In "The Feminine Identity as an Urban Exploration: *A Cidade Sitiada* and the Case of Lucrécia Neves," Chris T. Schulenberg argues the following: "It is not surprising, however, that Lucrécia is obliged to flee from this urban nucleus in the end. Only a new city will be able to boast of the blank page necessary for writing a truly multiple and revolutionary feminine identity" (64). Again, it's not that my analysis disagrees that *The Besieged City* is a feminist novel, but I suppose I'm approaching the text rather differently. Patricia Martinho-Ferreira, in her article "Urban Space and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Brazilian Literature," borrows from Simmel's conceptualization of the city to make a point quite relevant to our discussion here; she reminds us that the city figures "as a place of liberation from the binding mentality of the small community, thus granting the individual more space and freedom to independently define himself" (118). To return to Schulenberg's argument about the conclusion of *The Besieged City*, and to respectfully disagree with Schulenberg: it doesn't seem convincing that only in a backcountry town in rural Brazil would Lucrécia realize a new and "revolutionary feminine identity." In fact, one reason why, at the end of the book, Lucrécia, now a financially stable widow, is leaving São Geraldo is that her mother has identified a second husband for her daughter; her decision hardly seems so revolutionary. *The Besieged City* is a feminist text, but it's a peculiar example—one in which the protagonist's radical break from her society cannot be explained by her romantic relationships, her understanding of "woman's work," etc.—those familiar struggles. Lucrécia's meditation on "things" hardly affects, in any demonstrable way, her life choices; she falls back into the routines of daily life, albeit with an ironic look, perhaps, in her eye. We might notice here a similarity with Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.*, in which, after a deeply disturbing, world-view-shifting encounter with a cockroach in her apartment, the narrator concludes her report from the edge of madness by explaining her plans for later that evening: "I'll definitely wear my new blue dress that flatters me… I need to forget, like everyone" (170). The narrator of *The Passion* decides, in the end, to go clubbing at the ridiculously named establishment "Top-Bambino"—this is what we are left with? *The Besieged City* concludes with the same surprising frivolity on the part of our protagonist. Lucrécia has entered states of secular communion with the world of things, and she has even begun—if only for brief moments—to join those wild horses on the periphery of civilization. In the end, however, what do we find Lucrécia doing? Regressing to her younger self, she moves back in with her mother, and she dreams of a husband. She even takes a line from one of her mother's letters and turns it into a triumphant, heteronormative chant: "'There's a man here…,' she'd sing by heart" (200). Lispector's protagonists seem incapable of incorporating epiphany into radical action—unless, of course, we think of the interior realm of the mind as a theater of action, as a realm of rupture.

When Lucrécia notices waterworks infrastructure—pipes and gutters and embankments and viaducts—she stares at the city's materials with a peculiar intensity, an intensity that, in novels by other writers, would be reserved for human subjects. In Chapter 6, as Lucrécia looks out from her back balcony at the lots and alleys of the city, the narrator states: "nobody could savor a deserted city like Lucrécia Neves" (101). Why would the narrator say that the city is deserted, when clearly it is not? Perhaps the city inhabitants are indoors or not in view, but that doesn't make a city, in a literal sense, deserted. The text's contemplation of infrastructure does

not actually *people* the city of São Geraldo. When we see Lucrécia amongst the multitude—for instance, in the book's first chapter, during a public festival—when we see people gathering *en masse*, the vision of people "crammed" and "elbowing one another" (4) is not, for Lucrécia, one of carnivalesque incorporation. The chapter offers this suggestive detail about Lucrécia at the festival: "she herself couldn't fully dive into the center of the jubilation" (5). On the one hand, the festival represents an opportunity for communal celebration, but on the other, it can produce (as it does, clearly, for Lucrécia) an uncomfortable anxiety, a threatening feeling. "Things breaking in disaster" (7)—this suggestive phrase is how the text describes, rather strangely, the festival's celebratory fireworks. Lucrécia removes herself, dashing back to the safety of her home. While alone and washing dishes, Lucrécia is able to commune with the city. It seems that the main impediment to communion with a city is, somewhat paradoxically, the presence of the city's inhabitants.

The text's inclination to imagine a deserted city, or to look away from people and toward the "materials" of the city, has an interesting counterpart in Joan Didion's remarkable essay "At the Dam." This essay, from her book *The White Album*, culminates with a scene in which Didion finds herself communing with waterworks, experiencing her own version of the modern sublime. Didion is visiting the Hoover Dam, and at the dam she imagines a hypothetical future:

> we were all gone and the dam was left... the wind whining and the sun dropping behind a mesa with the finality of a sunset in space. Of course that was the image I had seen always, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is. (201)

Both of these texts, Lispector's *The Besieged City* and Didion's "At the Dam," conjure infrastructure in weirdly unpeopled cities. Elizabeth Lowe says of Lispector's representations of the city: "The city has no past, but lives intensely in the present with the foreboding sense of an apocalyptic future" (148). We find in Didion's imagined future not a ruin of grandiose infrastructure, but, instead, a dam that is eerily and fully realized, a dam "free" of human beings, as she puts it. Didion's fantasy is a troubling futurism, a seductive, rather problematic celebration of machines. It is apocalyptic—but without the anxiety one would assume this nightmarish vision should produce in her. Rather than being nightmarish, this future without people seems rather peaceful; our machines appear to hum along quite nicely without us. Didion's essay foresees Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, a book that imagines a world in which suddenly every human being vanishes—and the world goes on, of course, ungrieving. Can we imagine the world without us, a world no longer symbolic, a world beyond human meaning?

Although it complicates Didion's apocalyptic fantasy, let's keep in mind that while the Hoover Dam might still be around for another 10,000 years, without humans it would stop working (its turbines would quit) in the very near future—after just a couple of years. Didion's essay imagines something quite paradoxical: public works without a public. In *The Besieged City*, the text's somewhat agoraphobic anxiety leads to the quiet contemplation of a city in which people often do not appear. Lowe mentions how Lispector's work includes protagonists who gaze across the urban streets: "The points that contain Lispector's city are towers, which, as windows to the city, intensify a feeling of possession and identification between character and city" (122-23). In Chapter 6, when Lucrécia looks out from her back balcony, she gazes upon the lots spreading out below her in the supposedly deserted city: "Among the ruins she saw the lizard running off and kicking up dust!" (101) Now, why use the word "ruins" here, when Lucrécia is looking at her own vibrant city of São Geraldo? Like Didion's essay, Lispector's novel is conjuring a deserted city, despite evidence to the contrary. Instead of focusing on human activity, Lucrécia sees dust and the tracks of a scurrying lizard—an apocalyptic scene superimposed on a bustling, up-and-coming city. Like Didion's essay, Lispector's novel is imagining a simultaneous present and future, a strange chronotope in which the city was, is and will be: we, the humans, are the variable. Lispector's *The Besieged City* and Didion's "At the Dam" push us to ask: what will these systems of pipe and streets and track mean, or what will they be, when we are no longer around? What happens when infrastructure exists for no "purpose," when the masters of these systems are no longer there? Louis Daguerre's "Boulevard du Temple" (c. 1838) is an early daguerreotype of a modern street and is widely believed to be the first photograph to include the image of a human. However, it took so long to develop that, although the daguerreotype captures a street in Paris, the people circulating do not appear. We can make out a bootblack and his customer; they appear because they were the rare figures not in transit. Where is everyone else? We are left with a rather uncanny image: a city bustling with invisible pedestrians. We are left with the singular and somewhat troubling impression that the city does not need us; human beings come and go, but the street itself endures.

When, in *The Besieged City*, Lucrécia enters her storeroom and finds a series of random objects—a broken faucet, an unplugged iron and a piece of tubing—her vision of these things cannot be integrated into an experience of communion with the city, precisely because the scene in the storeroom emphasizes interruption and nonutility. The void between her and the "things" appears. How will she cross this void? Unlike the working faucet in the kitchen, the broken faucet in the storeroom draws attention to itself—precisely because it is broken. Heidegger would refer to the broken faucet as equipment that is "unready-to-hand" (103), a very useful concept in our approach to Lispector's text. William Blattner helps us understand this Heideggerian concept when he asserts the following: "The unready-to-hand is whatever challenges our abilities and forces us to bear down on it, rather than on the work to be accomplished...

A broken coffee maker is present, indeed, so aggravatingly present that it becomes the focus of our attention and activity" (58). By contrast, "ready-to-hand" (99) describes equipment that blurs the distinction between self and other because the tool in question—let's say a hammer—is not conceptualized during the work; one does not think about the hammer while one is actually hammering. To think about the hammer would interrupt the work and possibly cause injury. When Lispector's narrator states that Lucrécia at her sink "no longer knew who was washing and what was being washed," the faucet and the dishrag are incorporated into a single act of working; Lucrécia herself becomes "a small gear" within the "larger one." When she enters the storeroom, however, she cannot use that broken faucet sitting in front of her; instead, she must confront it.

We are considering here a subtle problem in how we name the things around us. A standard definition of "faucet" (let's consult the American Heritage Dictionary) would be the following: "A device for regulating the flow of a liquid from a reservoir such as a pipe or drum." But is the nature of an object—even when we are talking about technology—explained by its service to us? A faucet is also a piece of metal, hollowed through its center. To look at a faucet and to say that it is right-side up or upside down, or even to say that it is broken or useless—all of this language assumes the aspect of service to human beings. But what is a faucet if never attached to pipe? Is it still a faucet, based entirely on its never-realized service to us? To borrow from Weisman's premise, if we were to imagine the human race disappearing, wouldn't the faucet continue to exist as a "thing" in the world, a world in which no one is around to do the dishes? Is it possible to see the faucet as a thing beyond our intention? Didion's depiction of the Hoover Dam regulating water even when humans are no longer around is, we might argue, pure fantasy—because the delivery of water is dictated, logically, by the needs of households and the unrelenting demands of big agriculture. To deliver water without human subjects to actually receive this water means, of course, that water is no longer being delivered. Didion's essay, however, is forcing us to imagine the Hoover Dam as a "thing," a thing independent of its use to human beings.

One could say that the problem of the "thing"—the thing that is beyond our imagining of it, our conceptualization of it—is an overarching concern of Lispector's *The Besieged City* (and perhaps her entire body of work): "That was the question, 'the thing that's there'" (96). Lispector's posthumous book, *A Breath of Life*, offers a rather revealing passage; written toward the very end of Lispector's life, the book takes a surprising, self-referential turn:

> The object—the thing—always fascinated me and in a certain sense destroyed me. In my book *The Besieged City* I speak indirectly about the mystery of the thing. The thing is a specialized and immobilized animal... It's a timid approach of mine to subverting the living world and the threatening world of the dead. (101-2)

In Lispector's fiction, "dead" things strike us with a radical intensity. According to Regina Lúcia Pontieri, in her book-length study *Clarice Lispector: Uma Poética do Olhar*, the blurring between human and non-human in *The Besieged City* is the text's attempt to undermine the dichotomy between subject and visual object, favoring a way of looking that captures the visible through its own particular reality (147-148). In *Fictional Environments*, Saramago discusses *The Besieged City* as Lispector's unique strategy

> of relativizing human agency on both grammatical and narrative levels. By constantly placing objects, machines, streets, animals, and the weather in the position of subjects in the sentences of the novel, Lispector makes evident a broader web of nonhuman agents whose insistent presence throughout the narrative questions the very centrality of a human-led plot. (126)

In Lispector's novel *The Passion According to G.H.*, not only does the narrator come to realize that "the world is not human," she takes another astonishing step: "we are not human... the inhuman part is the best part of us, it's the thing, the thing-part of us... the thing-part, matter of the God" (65). God is to be found in the thing because the thing is "purely neutral" (66). This attempt to enter the neutrality of things is the attempt to get closer to God—or what, in *The Besieged City*, is the "ultimate reality" of a city.

Lucrécia's exhausting experiment with seeing leads to fleeting moments of epiphanic transformation—when, it would seem, she initiates her own equine metamorphosis:

> she was looking at the things that cannot be said... a rubber tube connected to a broken faucet, the coat hanging behind it, the electrical cord wrapping around an iron. Seeing things is what things were. She was stomping her hoof, patient. (99)

Lucrécia begins to look at the things around her with the eyes of a horse—it's a way of crossing the void. It's part of her grand experiment in seeing, another tactic: to see as a horse sees. In Chapter 6, when she's in the storeroom, Lucrécia sees, for a moment, what is there. She will try to repeat this experiment with vision—with varying degrees of success. If Lucrécia cannot successfully transform herself, through her strange contortions, into a statue with eyes of stone, then she will try to see with the eyes of those wild horses galloping on the periphery of the city.

Lucrécia most resembles a horse when she enters into a profoundly different engagement with the world: "In her and in a horse the impression was the expression" (15). In that open letter to one of her critics, included in the English edition of *The Besieged City*, Lispector explains her interest in horses:

> What did I mean to say through Lucrécia—a character without the weapons of intelligence, who aspires, nonetheless, to that kind of spiritual integrity a horse has, who doesn't "share" what it sees, who has no mental or "vocabular vision" of things, who feels no need to complete impression with expression—the horse in which there is the miracle that the impression is total—so *real*—that in it impression already is expression. (209-210)

Because horses have no language, things are not represented, not conditioned by one's vocabulary—they are simply "there." This is Lucrécia's ambition: "she'd see things as a horse sees them" (20), because this is our fundamental problem—we do not see what is there: "Everything was real but as if seen through a mirror" (37). When Lucrécia happens to notice a screw lying on the ground, something entirely random and out of its appropriate context, she seizes on the moment and attempts to see the thingness of it:

> In this new universe, an abyss away, there on the ground was the screw. Lucrécia Neves was looking from her own height at the horror of the object. Terrible and delicate things were resting on the ground. The perfect screw… The girl softly moved her hooves. (50)

It seems to be working: when Lucrécia sees what is there, the metamorphosis begins; she begins transforming into a horse. Lucrécia is able to see this screw—isolated from a screwdriver, devoid of any project—as a thing no longer defined by its human design. The text is asking us to stay on the surface of things, as though this were, and perhaps it is, the most difficult way of seeing. Can we see the thing without exceeding it, without falling short of it? The experiment Lucrécia initiates in that crucial chapter, Chapter 6, in which nothing is happening and yet something extraordinary happens, is to look at a working faucet as equipment, as an extension of oneself, to look at it without quite seeing it—and then to look at another faucet, this one broken and useless, thereby creating a conceptual shift, so that the faucet now appears as a "thing" apart, a thing liberated from its purpose. It's the shift here that is crucial, making the thingness of the thing more palpable, more visible, perhaps (fleetingly?) more present.

This same sort of exercise applies to Lucrécia as she attempts to approach the thingness of herself: she thinks of herself as a daughter, as a wife, as a widow, as a woman named "Lucrécia"—but the challenge she accepts (and here she draws dangerously close to madness) is to know herself as a thing, to realize the neutral part of herself. Is it possible? How does one even look at oneself without some sort of mirror? How can anyone see the thing?—"'the thing that's there.' You couldn't do anything but: go beyond it" (96). Ultimately, Lucrécia cannot endure the vision, because she is one of us. She looks at the world with human eyes, clouded by imagination and corrupted by language—because Lucrécia is not a horse.

NOTES

[1.] I shall refer to my own English translation of Clarice Lispector's *A cidade sitiada* (*The Besieged City*). I'll also be referring to my translation of Lispector's *Um sopro de vida* (*A Breath of Life*)—and to Idra Novey's translation of Lispector's *A paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*). These novels were published in English by New Directions (series editor: Benjamin Moser). I am grateful to my graduate assistant, Kimberly Plaksin, for her assistance with the research for this article.

[2.] The novel vacillates between referring to the fictional São Geraldo as a full-fledged "city" ("*cidade*" in the Portuguese language) or as a burgeoning "township" ("*subúrbio*," the Brazilian word for "suburb," but without the precious front lawns that the American suburb has come to conjure). In her book *Brazil under Construction*, Sophia Beal defines "*subúrbio*" a bit more narrowly as "low-income neighborhoods on the outskirts of a city" (5).

WORKS CITED

Barbosa, Maria José Somerlate. *Clarice Lispector: Spinning the Webs of Passion*. University Press of the South, 1997.

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

Blattner, William. *Heidegger's* Being and Time: *A Reader's Guide.* Bloomsbury, 2006.

Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. Simon and Schuster, 1979.

Fitz, Earl E. *Sexuality and Being in the Poststructuralist Universe of Clarice Lispector*. University of Texas Press, 2001.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Harper & Row, 1962.

Librandi, Marília. *Writing by Ear: Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel*. University of Toronto Press, 2018.

Lispector, Clarice. *The Besieged City*. Translated by Johnny Lorenz. New Directions, 2019.

_____. *A Breath of Life*. Translated by Johnny Lorenz. New Directions, 2012.

_____. *The Passion According to G.H.* Translated by Idra Novey. New Directions, 2012.

Lowe, Elizabeth. *The City in Brazilian Literature*. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982.

Martinho-Ferreira, Patricia. "Urban Space and Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Brazilian Literature." *Transmodernity*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2016, pp. 110-130.

Pontieri, Regina Lúcia. *Clarice Lispector: Uma Poética do Olhar*. Ateliê Editorial, 2010.

Rubenstein, Michael. *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

Saramago, Victoria. *Fictional Environments: Mimesis, Deforestation, and Development in Latin America*. Northwestern University Press, 2020.

Schulenberg, Chris T. "The Feminine Identity as an Urban Exploration: *A Cidade Sitiada* and the Case of Lucrécia Neves." *Chasqui,* vol. 33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 56-65.

Simmel, Georg. *Simmel on Culture*. Edited by David Patrick Frisby and Mike Featherstone. SAGE Publications, 1998.

Villares, Lúcia. *Examining Whiteness: Reading Clarice Lispector through Bessie Head and Toni Morrison*. Routledge, 2011.

Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. Picador, 2007.