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Between Subjectivity and Materiality

Affective Mechanism, Atmosphere, and Matter-Energy Dynamics in *O Lustre* by Clarice Lispector

Lingchen Huang

This article addresses Clarice Lispector's conception of the relationship between subjectivity and materiality in her second novel, O Lustre (1946), by examining the affective mechanism at work in the protagonist's development as a subject. Focusing on bodily tensions and their potential evident in scenes of the protagonist's visceral experiences and material entanglements, it highlights the author's writing strategy of prioritizing the physical realm and impersonal forces to expand the spectrum of how experience can be registered. The article emphasizes Lispector's practice of a non-anthropocentric perspective, which posits a way of understanding the position of the human subject in the material world by attending to their interaction and coevolution. Considering the parallel between the matter-energy dynamics and the pre-individual dimension of the subject's capacity and experience in the novel, this article argues that Lispector formulates a mode of subjectivity that is seamlessly connected with material objects and processes.

O presente artigo explora a concepção de Clarice Lispector sobre a relação entre a subjetividade e a materialidade no seu segundo romance, O lustre (1946), ao examinar o mecanismo afetivo que opera no desenvolvimento da protagonista como sujeito. Focalizando as tensões corporais e o seu potencial, evidentes nas cenas das experiências viscerais e dos entrelaçamentos materiais da protagonista, destaca a estratégia de escrita da autora em priorizar a esfera física e as forças impessoais, o que expande o espectro de como a experiência pode ser registrada. O artigo enfatiza a adoção de uma perspectiva não antropocêntrica por Lispector, que sugere uma forma de entender a posição do sujeito humano num mundo material. Dado o paralelo entre o dinamismo matéria-energia e a dimensão da capacidade e experiência do sujeito no romance, o artigo argumenta que Lispector formula um modo de subjetividade que está conectado sem interrupções com objetos e processos materiais.

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Introduction

In *O Lustre* (1946), the young protagonist Virgínia enjoys making dolls from clay, a material that is “maleável, pastoso, frio” (Lispector 2019, 46). Since she can de-form and recreate the objects she makes into new figurines, there is no defined shape or meaning to her creation. The malleable clay figurines, formed through contact—an affective happening—embody passivity imbued with creative potential, evident in their capacity for self-organization and reconfiguration. The figurines can thus be seen as affective bodies constituting the Lispectorian universe, a space marked by constant shifts in resistance to definition, certainty and closure. Clarice Lispector thereby reveals her interest in the human subject’s entanglements within not only social but also material networks.

Lispector’s second and least-studied novel, *O Lustre* stands out within her oeuvre as a transitional work. Lispector consciously undertakes an apprenticeship in writing from a non-anthropocentric perspective through her sketching of characters. The novel traces Virgínia’s life from her solitary childhood in the countryside with her abusive brother, Daniel, through young adulthood in the city, where she has brief relationships with Vicente and later Adriano, and finally to her sudden death in a car accident. Written in a fragmentary form, the novel foregrounds moods, atmospheres, and material processes. As suggested by the title, the focus of the novel is not cast directly on Virgínia the protagonist, but on an object (the chandelier) that serves as an index of a stagnant environment, contrasting with the transience of individual life.

This article will explore how Lispector envisions the relationship between subjectivity and materiality in the novel by examining the protagonist’s formation as a subject, drawing on theories that have not yet played a role in the study of *O Lustre*. Brian Massumi describes affect as a not-fully-grasped reaction or tendency engendered by contacts between entities. This article draws on Massumi’s theory to scrutinize the affective mechanisms at play in Virgínia’s experience and mentality. My approach will facilitate an understanding of Lispector’s strategy in portraying the pre-individual aspect of human activities and capacities, an aspect that constitutes a state of material forces. In line with this conception, it is befitting to analyze Lispector’s description of seemingly discrete objects, which preserve matter-energy when enmeshed in a certain constellation. I therefore propose that Bill Brown’s thing theory (2001, 7)—which holds that “inanimate objects constitute human subjects” and either “facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects”—provides an instructive framework for interpreting the novel’s portrayal of the everchanging relations between individuals and their surrounding physical realm, particularly in terms of their mutually constitutive effects.

Scholars have read *O Lustre* through the lenses of post-structuralism and phenomenology. Earl E. Fitz highlights “the role of language” in constituting

the “essential fluidity of Virgínia’s conception of life” indicative of a “post-structural sense of existence” (2001, 24–25). Attending to the protagonist’s fluid existence and implementing a psychoanalytical approach, Mariângela Alonso reveals the connection between water elements and the dynamics of drives in life and death depicted in Virgínia’s trajectory (2019, 139), emphasizing how the subconscious flows of interiority inform the shape of the narrative discourse. This article, however, will interpret impulses and drives not as instinctual or isolated internal states, but as products of relational, affective events which register through the impingement of human and nonhuman bodies.

Recent theoretical developments that shift attention to the nonhuman beings have underscored the symbiosis between human beings and the environment (Grusin 2015, 8–31). Affect, with its transpersonal nature, defined by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth as “intensities that pass body to body” (2010, 1), shows its transformative capacity in the linkage between entities. Lispector’s works often decenter the human characters in favor of their environments. This theme is reflected in Carlos Mendes de Sousa’s work, in which he probes the depiction of atmospheres in Lispector’s fiction and highlights the aesthetics of shadow as a device of organizing the interrelations among characters in *O Lustre* (2000, 171). This article will further elucidate how the subject is produced through the interplay of connections and how it mediates and coevolves with its affective atmosphere, which I consider to be key questions that Lispector grapples with throughout her lifetime arc of writing.

Bodily Tensions and Affect

In the opening sequence, Virgínia and Daniel catch sight of a hat in the river, and they think it must belong to a drowned man: “O rio correndo arrastava-o com brutalidade e ele resistia. Até que perdendo a última força foi levado pela correnteza ligeira e em saltos sumiu entre espumas quase alegre” (Lispector 2019, 8). This episode happens to Virgínia and her brother during their childhood in Granja Quieta, which marks the beginning of the story.¹ The hat as an omen of death reappears in the ending, when Virgínia, wearing a hat, is killed in a car accident.²

The sodden hat can be seen as a trace of life but is at the same time depicted as passive and fragile in comparison to the power of nature represented by the running river. However, this scene—a hat in the water—constitutes a space of events. It exerts a matter-energy upon Virgínia in the form of pressing, emergent tendencies to which she is exposed but cannot fully process. Lispector represents this liminal realm of experience in her depiction of Virgínia’s immediate, intense bodily responses: “De súbito imobilizara-se tensa e leve” (7). Before Virgínia can figure out what the object in the water really is, her body suddenly stiffens and appears to be weightless at the mere sight of the hat.

Her half-actualized expression in the aftermath of the scene also indicates her situatedness within this assemblage of material agency, like a wave on the river.

Massumi defines affect as intensity, that is, incipient bodily reactions and responses which are “purely autonomic” and “directly manifested” (2002, 25). He further distinguishes affect from emotion, a “subjective content” fixed by personal experience (28), and thus underscores the asignifying, preconscious side of affect. Massumi aptly describes the experience of affect as immediate “visceral perception” that precedes cognition and awareness (61). Following this observation on the autonomy and openness of body that absorbs impulses more quickly “than they can be perceived” (29), I map bodies in *O Lustre* as sites where pastness links with futurity and the actual coexists with the potential.

Lispector emphasizes the visceral quality in the siblings’ affective exposure in their brief conversation before a long period of silence:

- Não podemos contar a ninguém, sussurrou finalmente Virgínia, a voz distante e vertiginosa.
- Sim. . . – mesmo Daniel se assustara e concordava. . . as águas continuavam correndo. – Nem que nos perguntem sobre o afog. . .
- Sim! quase gritou Virgínia. . . calaram-se com força, os olhos engrandecidos e ferozes. (2019, 8)

In this conversation, Virgínia interrupts Daniel’s attempt to articulate the word “afogado” that he concludes from what he has seen. Her gesture seems to be a rejection of the intrusion of language and affirmation, which, as Massumi proposes, is “matter-of-factness” that “dampens intensity” (2002, 25). Their comprehension of the scene at the riverside is inhibited from fully actualizing, allowing the scene to retain its affective tendency to unfold upon them. Massumi describes this unresolved tendency as the realm of potential, or the virtual dimension of affect. As an experience that is not fully articulated for Virgínia and Daniel, the scene they witness resists being rigidified by language and reserves a virtual space for future reactivation that they cannot anticipate. I will discuss this disrupted affective temporality in the next section.

In the following paragraphs of the novel, Virgínia still follows this intense and vague sensation without drawing on clear awareness. She is thrown into convulsion, with increased heartbeats in her body:

- O coração batendo num corpo subitamente vazio de sangue, o coração jogando, caindo furiosamente, as águas correndo, ela tentou entreabrir os lábios, soprara uma palavra pálida que fosse. Como o grito impossível num pesadelo, nenhum som se ouviu e as nuvens deslizavam rápidas no céu para um destino. (2019, 8)

Not being able to move or emit sound, Virgínia is caught in a state of suspension, which represents “a spasmodic passivity” as a symptom of a visceral

sensorial experience (Massumi 2002, 61): her body is filled with what Massumi describes as “vibratory motion” that is “not yet activity,” since these bodily reactions are unintentional and do not help orient the subject’s energy toward “practical ends” (26). Virgínia can no longer maintain control of her own body. On the one hand, her body resembles a hat drifting in a river that can be conceived as something rejected. This affectively charged moment can be interpreted as what Julia Kristeva terms abjection, a state where one’s coherent sense of subjecthood is disturbed due to an intense sensational exposure and feeling of disgust and fear. Virgínia cannot protect herself from receding to the position of an object. The hat, associated with an unseen corpse, renders death palpable to her. On the other hand, her body forms an autonomous entity free from the manipulation of consciousness in response to the situation: her heartbeats are overwhelmed by the sound of water rushing beneath her feet and, at the same time, resonating and accompanying the tempo of the flow.

Fear permeates her, leaving her in a state of abjection, a “choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside” (Kristeva 1982, 25). Virgínia seems to be engulfed by the unceasing river and the imagined drowned man as she becomes part of the scene that shows her the menacing condition of living: “Sob os seus pés rumorejavam as águas—numa clara alucinação ela pensava: ah sim, então ia cair e afogar-se” (Lispector 2019, 9). This intrusion of awareness forces her to consider the status of death as not only an impending future but also a permanent being. Serving as a *memento mori*, the hat positions her on the hallucinatory edge between the actual event and the virtual tendency. Aligned with what Bill Brown names “thingness,” which denotes the material agency of specified objects, the suddenness of Virgínia’s encounter with the scene asserts the object’s force as a “sensuous presence” (Brown 2001, 5).

In this intense and momentous stimulation toward both self-preservation and death, her horror is mingled with excitement: “Alguma coisa intensa e lívida como o terror mas triunfante, certa alegria doida e atenta enchia-lhe agora o corpo e ela esperava para morrer” (Lispector 2019, 9). Like a resonating vessel, her body even equates fear with pleasure at the moment of exaltation with magnified bodily capacity. Holding on to the bridge that marks the border between death and living, Virgínia is inclined to deny her fear and resolve or eliminate this tension by letting go.

In this tendency toward death, she is reduced to a moribund state: “Virgínia sentiria no corpo o toque de sua presença, levantar-se-ia da cama vagorosamente, sábia e cega como uma sonâmbula, e dentro de seu coração um ponto pulsaria fraco, quase desfalecido” (9). Her feeling of the drowned man creeping upon her concretizes a promised future of death. Here, the realm of virtual brushes her shoulders while she still does not comprehend the powerful presence of the sodden hat. As Massumi points out, this edge of virtual “where it leaks into actual” marks the space of potential (2002, 43). In other words,

the potential of affect lies in the intrinsic connection between what has been registered cognitively by the body and what has eluded it and operates at a pre-individual level. I read Virgínia's inclination to death as an autonomous unfolding of potential tendencies in actual circumstances, which differs significantly from the Freudian notion of sequential stages of drive development. Virgínia's body not only conserves the unresolved intensities but possesses simultaneously the capacity to participate in the tendency toward reactivating them. As the potential of Virgínia's affective experience with the hat, her self-destructive impulse escapes confinement in her individual body and the actual temporal structure.

Virgínia becomes involuntarily appropriated by her half-perception of the scene, through which she can experience the death again and again. With a haunting effect, the disappearance and reemergence of the imagined drowned man, as well as the emphasis on the water flowing ("o rio rolava"), reiterate Virgínia's traumatic witnessing "in repeated *possession*" by an image (Caruth 1995, 4; italics in the original), which even foreshadows the reenactment of the experience of death in her future.

Bereft of the ability to speak and the right to tell, the secret wound remains inside her and prolongs its capacity to emerge as a reenactment of the scene. This becomes explicit in her numbed, motionless position due to Daniel's refusal to walk with her when they meet each other again in Granja Quieta in their adult life: "como no dia do afogado, de novo ela não saberia como chamá-lo, como gritar que não a deixasse nesse momento sozinha [...] o coração batendo calmo, seco, sem sangue" (Lispector 2019, 264–265). Virgínia's heart beating without blood constitutes an echo of her previous bodily reaction upon being abandoned by Daniel on the day they witnessed the drowning, which implies that her bond with him based on their shared memory is too entrenched to be left behind.

The convergence of the actual event and the virtual realm of unactualized possibilities and tendencies equips Virgínia with the capacity to live on the threshold—while she cannot clearly tell the boundaries between being alive and dead, self and other, she transforms into a ghostlike shadow: "ela parecia poder penetrar e fugir das coisas em silêncio como uma sombra" (11). This sign of ghostliness demonstrates her ability to penetrate the world of material things through her experience of death and annihilation.

Unable to reflect on her memory of the childhood episode with clear consciousness, Virgínia inclines toward preserving the potential of her experience and continuing to live with her secret, as the author states in the novel's opening:

Nunca saberia pensar nele em termos claros temendo invadir e dissolver a sua imagem. Porém o que dominara seus contornos e os atraía a um centro, o que a iluminara contra o mundo e lhe dera íntimo poder fora o segredo. (7)

Virgínia shies away from cognitively processing or parsing the event for fear of dissolving the sensory image as a braid of ineffable intensities and bodily tensions. As a bewildering construct that lacks clear reference to reality, this affective scenario is followed by a series of repetitions and variations at certain points later in her life. In order to better explain Lispector's illustration of the aftermath of Virgínia's witnessing, it is helpful to introduce Niklaus Largier's concept of "figuration," which refers to a practice of sensually and affectively partaking in which individuals modulate their senses in resistance to understanding the preestablished mode of meaning (2022, 2–3). Virgínia's acts of revisiting the not-completely-understood scene resonate with the visceral moment that forms the secret, mystic center, around which her world reconstitutes itself. The indeterminacy and instability of the hat episode make Virgínia unable to assimilate and move on from the event. Nevertheless, it opens the possibility of shaping her perception of the experience. This episode not only enriches her imagination but invites her to participate in a world beyond her understanding, a world she herself gradually becomes a part of.

In Virgínia's process of figuration after experiencing the hat episode, she and Daniel create the game *A Sociedade das Sombras*, not as the sum of previous affective experiences but rather through absorption of "differential intensities that precede and resist all mimetic assimilation" of feelings and thought (Largier 2022, 6): The *Sociedade* is not only established upon her bodily history to disrupt her former space of living, but also upon the new possibilities promised by the practice of figuration. This game between the siblings creates a sense of belonging that Virgínia strives to grow, and which I will analyze in the next section.

Lispector portrays the secret episode as a rebeginning of Virgínia's life and the world she inhabits. In this way, the author demonstrates the potential for objects or an assemblage of material agency to be regarded as a source of individual identity, given their role in shaping the subject's perception of their own capacity and their relation to other subjects.

Playing, Affective Atmosphere, and Micropolitics

In the previous section, through the analysis of an affectively charged event and Virgínia's bodily tensions, I examined how the mechanism of affect serves to inform the subject formation by enabling the unfolding potential to perform through the body's autonomous reaction beyond the grasp of consciousness. By doing so, I have underscored Lispector's portrayal of the instability of the

body's boundaries, manifested at its immediate absorption of external stimuli, as well as the varied spectrum of reenactments of the affective scenario due to its indeterminate potential. In this section I will discuss how the subject-body mediates and contributes to its atmosphere and power relations, focusing on how affect is transmitted and communicated in Lispector's depiction of atmosphere and playing.

Virgínia's encounter with the sodden hat can be seen as an onset of shock, which is described by Massumi as an immeasurable "instant of affective hit" that "takes over life" (2015, 54). This moment is followed by an instant when Virgínia is able to recognize the object of her fright as one of the contents of her subjective experience and register it as a narrativizable emotion within her personal history. However, as I have argued in the previous section, an affective experience always involves a virtual dimension that escapes an individual's awareness, meaning that the subject's belated perception, as a result of the modulation of affect, can be variable. Massumi's notion of micropolitics developed upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's studies, can be instrumental for our understanding of how Virgínia becomes what she becomes through her social entanglements exemplified by *A Sociedade das Sombras*, a game that follows the sibling's traumatic witnessing at the riverside. According to Massumi, micropolitics is a dynamic process in which power operates through the modulation of affective states. In other words, the formation of power is achieved through articulating changes in terms of interrelation, so that micropolitics functions on togetherness rather than on individuals separately and results in a collective change (18).

Jane F. Thraikill underscores the potency of play as it "engenders a home-liner set of affects" in her investigation of the childlike playing space between William, Alice, and Henry James (2021, 253). Through the analysis of Henry James's writings as well as that of his siblings William and Alice James collectively, Thraikill represents playing as a relational activity involving affective and bodily experience, through which children come to perceive the world and unleash their vitality and creativity. Thraikill's conclusion can be transferable to the characters in *O Lustre*, as their childhood game constitutes a space of interaction and apprenticeship.

I read *A Sociedade* as an atmosphere, characterized by what Ben Anderson defines as an indefinite or even "ill-defined" situation that "exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration" (2014, 140). The Sociedade has unclear principles invented by Daniel, and the siblings are the only two members: "A Sociedade das Sombras tinha objetivos estranhos e indefinidos. Eles mesmos não os conheciam e misturavam seus mandamentos a uma ignorância quase desesperada" (Lispector 2019, 58). Nevertheless, similar to the arresting image of the hat, Daniel's idea of creating the Sociedade exerts ineffable affective qualities on Virgínia, expressed through her bodily response that precedes

her cognitive functioning: “Antes mesmo de saber do que se tratava Virgínia já compreendera confusamente com o corpo e acedera” (58).

We can interpret Daniel’s invention of rules and principles in the Sociedade as a form of micropolitics, which deploys an inductive art of “triggering the cues” (Massumi 2015, 56), rendering bodies attuned to a certain affective atmosphere. Daniel’s inculcations are not the only factor determining the way Virgínia behaves in order to be inducted into the uncanny configuration of the Sociedade: “Fora por causa do afogado que nascera a Sociedade das Sombras? Eles haviam pressentido o encantado e perigoso começo do desconhecido, o impulso que vinha do medo” (Lispector 2019, 58). When Daniel first mentions the Sociedade, their bodies already carry tendencies to restage their traumatic witnessing and to revive their fascination with mystery. Because the scenario of (false) drowning has not been fully actualized, Daniel uses it to modulate the Sociedade in a manner that intensifies the sense of fear and solitude for them both, as Virgínia is persuaded to experience or imagine situations of danger, suffering, and impending death. Like what Massumi posits as an “alter-accomplishment” of micropolitics, the establishment of the Sociedade after the siblings’ encounter with the mystery “amplifies a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility” (2015, 58). The unresolved affective intensities of the past episode are now consciously celebrated yet exploited, continuously being manifested by Daniel and Virgínia in this newly found community. The Sociedade is thus both manipulative and liberating for its members.

There is no definite causality between the hat episode and the invention of the Sociedade, the latter is in fact built on the bond between the siblings, as Virgínia admits that “A Sociedade das Sombras aproximava-a tanto de Daniel!” (Lispector 2019, 59). Virgínia’s enthusiasm for the Sociedade lies in her yearning for intimacy and togetherness with her brother, who constantly threatens her with the punishment of exclusion.

Because Virgínia and Daniel are the only two members of the Sociedade, their partaking and modulation are the fundamental conditions that constitute the game. Given their sense of belonging to this community and their cohesion to each other, I interpret the Sociedade as a relational undertaking that fosters an atmosphere of collusion, secret, and menace. Massumi proposes that, when politics operates on the level of affect, it constitutes an abductive “politics of belonging” (2015, 58). Taking advantage of Virgínia’s desire for their togetherness, Daniel presides over the game by creating a resonance pattern between Virgínia and himself. He threatens to do away with both her and the game (“Não se atreva a me interromper ou eu acabo com a Sociedade e com você”), along with his speech referring to the Sociedade as a warning against Virgínia’s interruption (“A Sociedade das Sombras falava sempre por último e a fórmula empregada por Daniel significava o fim da reunião”) (Lispector 2019, 66). This maneuver constitutes a process of iteration. Meanwhile, their

bodies are to some extent already interwoven in this pattern of repetition, given their abilities to reactivate past experience.

Virgínia's fear of losing Daniel through disobeying him is manifested through her automatic bodily reaction ("um temor que não era pensamento") (62). While neither of them fully understands the principles of the Sociedade, Virgínia's fear partly stems from her anticipation of a nonexistent reality in which this community is dissolved, and partly from a more habitual unease, reinforced by the iterative negotiations with Daniel. Nonetheless, given the relational nature of their atmosphere and activity, it is evident that Daniel enacts the politics of affect not on Virgínia alone but on the dynamics of their togetherness. In this sense, the Sociedade can effectively be seen as a symbiosis. Although Daniel strives to maintain his dominion, Virgínia is never enslaved by him or by the Sociedade, for there she can always experience a degree of freedom to access her potential to reflect and intervene:

O temor de desobedecer a Daniel—um temor que não era pensamento nem o perturbava—assaltava-a e também uma curiosidade de prosseguir sem interrupções, que a fazia mover-se acima de seus próprios conhecimentos. (62)

Thrailkill emphasizes the relationality that playing entails "when it is exploratory and open-ended" (2019, 213). Virgínia and Daniel's play-sense invention of the Sociedade is an event consisting of interactions shared between them and only them, the secret of the game adding to its appeal. As a play space created collectively by the siblings themselves, the Sociedade not only shows the vitality constitutive of their interest and engagement, but also involves the growth and transition seen in their power relation: "Daniel, no seu comando, crescia em força. Virgínia aprofundava-se perigosamente na sua natureza fraca e enlevada" (Lispector 2019, 60). For Virgínia, the game stirs up a tension between terror of and discomfort with Daniel's dominion, and the curiosity and delight of exploring the world and her own consciousness through bodily contacts.

Virgínia's sensuous navigation of the world through affects becomes explicit in her shifting bodily capacities, evidenced by corporeal signs such as palpitations ("pulsar," "latejar") and stiffness ("imobilidade"). Stiffness is regarded by Thrailkill as a quality in play that "signifies the capacity of something to receive or resist shaping" (2021, 213). Virgínia is receptive to impressions while her resistance and steadfastness are manifest in the way she preserves an interior zone for herself that remains intact and unchangeable: "Obediente a Daniel, no entanto, ela cerrava o coração sem raiva e sem glória, como num trabalho sincero, escondendo-o intato em zona escura e quieta" (Lispector 2019, 61). Virgínia's experience of the embodied affects occasioned by their play serves as a form of sensuous education. Initially more impressionable and susceptible,

she gradually becomes, as a consequence of this education, more fluent in her practices of navigating the external and discovering the self: “Tendo experimentado a doçura da fascinação e da obediência ardente a Daniel, sua natureza maleável e fraca ansiava agora por entregar-se à força de outro destino” (75).

It is in this secret play space that the normative behavioral codes prevailing in the family are disrupted or suspended, since no one else in their family engages in this space. Daniel’s cruel and sadistic behavior toward Virgínia constitutes an ethical transgression in a Bakhtinian carnival sense, which appears to be “eccentric and inappropriate,” creating “a new mode of interrelationship” other than siblinghood (Bakhtin 1984, 123).³ These abusive acts are only actualized within the Sociedade: “Daniel encolerizava-se, empurrava-a apertando-lhe o braço, chamando-a de ignorante, ameaçando dissolver a Sociedade das Sombras, o que a aterrorizava mais do que sua brutalidade física” (Lispector 2019, 74). By formulating the ambiguous and random principles of the Sociedade in a “half-real and half-play-acted form,” which supersedes the “structure and order of the ordinary” (Bakhtin 1984, 122–123), Daniel also invites Virgínia into a carnival sense of the world: “—Virgínia, todos os dias você vendo café com leite gosto de café com leite. Vendo pai você respeita pai. Arranhando a perna você sente dor na perna” (Lispector 2019, 60). Virgínia then follows Daniel’s exhortation to embrace a subversive way of thinking and approaching the world, and this might also explain why she later betrays her sister Esmeralda.⁴ Navigating the space constituted by their play where the norms and etiquette she once respected are swept away, Virgínia also perceives the plasticity of the physical environment, marked by its inversions of normalcy in an array of relations. This will be further analyzed in the next section.

Daniel utilizes the Sociedade to justify and legitimize his mandates by performing the ritual of gathering and repeating the incantatory phrase “A Sociedade das Sombras falou” (61, 65). However, his practice can only exert affective impacts within this limited, temporary playing space. Aware of that, Virgínia is inclined to prolong the time for playing with Daniel in an attempt to extend her joy: “No fundo o que a tornava contente era não ter êxito a experiência. Decerto Daniel a obrigava a voltar no dia seguinte e de novo férias” (65). She anticipates that completing tasks in playing will dampen her enthusiasm and her curiosity for surprise, so that her transitory liberating power vested by the vitality she acquires in playing thereupon disappears: “depois da realização de algum ato impossível de se conter, fatal e misterioso, de repente ela só poderia dagora em diante isto ou aquilo e cessara o seu poder” (74). The intrusion of her father’s voice calling to her from the mansion marks the undeniable boundary between the Sociedade and the rest of the world, in that the father’s subsequent interrogation of her about Esmeralda’s illicit meeting with a boy makes it impossible for Virgínia to be completely excluded from her family.

Nevertheless, even after Virgínia moves to the city, this playing scene in their childhood, tinted with the color of mystery, still exerts an indelible impact on her and oddly stands out against all the other vague memories that are stripped from her: “A Sociedade das Sombras . . . Lembrava-se de que ela e Daniel viviam em segredinhos, assustados; segredinhos . . . era isso? não, não. Sobretudo ela sempre possuía uma memória extraordinária para inventar fatos” (158–159). She carries the legacies of the Sociedade with her, where memory blends with invention, rules and ritual mix with imagination and spontaneity. While the Sociedade is composed of indeterminate affects emanating from its members’ acts of playing, this game also constitutes the process of their own becoming.

As I have examined with Massumi’s notion of the virtual in the mechanism of affect, what happens to the body prior to cognition is not simply conserved in the body to be reactivated but instead constitutes “tendencies” toward the future, since they have been inhibited in the past “from actualizing themselves completely” (Massumi 2002, 30). Although Virgínia claims to have lost her memory of her connection to the past (“[d]esmemoriada”) (Lispector 2019, 170), this impression arises because her perception, which emerges with a certain belatedness, is only linked to the incipience of affective experience in an unmediated way—she has vivid recollection only of those secrets and frights, which allows her to enter the state of invention and fantasy. Massumi posits that the affected body undergoes “its serial unfolding” “before it catches up with its past” (2002, 103). For Virgínia, what has already happened immediately informs the tendencies toward the future, while a concrete, stable present is not locatable. This missing link between the actual and potential is also associated with the incompleteness of the Sociedade as a micropolitical event, as what Virgínia expects to take place in the game does not actually occur. This incompleteness compels her to create varied environments of potential. The Sociedade coevolves with Virgínia, morphing into other ambiances of togetherness as she grows and becomes entangled in more complex relational webs, which is evident in her relationships with other male figures when she moves to the city. She restages Daniel’s abuse and continues her apprenticeship in micropolitical intervention that she started in childhood, as if the Sociedade is being reinvented. Through practicing improvisation, she constantly attunes herself to the transient surroundings.

After Daniel’s marriage, Virgínia no longer lives with him. On the day when she is going to visit her lover Vicente in his flat, the feeling of death from the hat episode comes to her again, as an extreme exposure to freedom is somehow coalesced with suffering and threat: “E se Vicente assustado viesse procurá-la—nunca ele o faria—ela avisaria de olhos cerrados, intensa: morri, morri, morri” (Lispector 2019, 116). Virgínia’s momentary longing for death upon imagining a worried Vicente coming to find her satisfies her desire for

intimacy, which echoes her childhood attempt to approach Daniel. Her body portends itself to be abandoned by Vicente and feels the momentum of leaning onto a precarious bridge as if she were once again positioned in the drowning scene from her childhood:

mesmo que seu corpo subitamente se pressentisse abandonado, perplexo, tudo. isso seria um prelúdio suportável porque . . . por quê? . . . Um puro impulso para a frente como inclinar-se na ponte úmida e magra cheirando a madeira podre e olhar a água que se equilibrava sob o sol incolor (117–118)

The definite article before “ponte” serves to remind the reader of the bridge on the river that appears at the opening of the novel. The not-fully-experienced or -comprehended past is already bestowed with the tendencies toward a certain, albeit invented, future, even if Virgínia does not think she has access to the memory of her childhood.

Marta Figlerowicz emphasizes the intersubjective aspect in affective mechanism, positing that one’s experience of transforming their affects into conscious awareness entails negotiating discrepancies in bodily responsiveness with others. Figlerowicz argues further that this process leads individuals to better “appreciate [their] cognitive debts to, and needs from, [their] communities and environments” (2017, 9). For Virgínia, the ongoing process of becoming conscious of her imponderable past with Daniel is parallel to her reparative act of recalibrating her ties to fragments of memory, both of which depend on her interaction with others and her surroundings.

Material Objects, Energy, and Nonhuman Agency

In previous sections, I have illustrated the siblings’ childhood game, a situation where they contribute to and are informed by an affective atmosphere, as a situation where their symbiotic power relation takes shape. In doing so, I proposed that Lispector represents the subject as incoherent, porous, and unstable, inflected by its interaction and negotiation with others. I have stressed the significance of atmosphere, constituted by interrelation and contact, in shaping the subject’s cognitive and sensuous capacities. In this section, more attention will be paid to the role of material objects and processes in constituting the human subject.

Virgínia’s act of making clay figurines, a recurring scenario in the novel, reads as Lispector’s imagery of the dissolution of subject-object dialectics. As Virgínia shapes the clay by the riverside, her heart softens like the clay, melting at the touch of the amorphous segments which seem to come alive. The gestures of the river wetting her feet heighten her sense of excitement, enhancing her connection to the physical environment:

Só em pegá-lo, em sentir sua delicadeza alegrezinha e cega, aqueles pedaços timidamente vivos, o coração da pessoa se enternecia úmido, quase ridículo. [. . .] O rio em pequenos gestos molhava-lhe os pés descalços e ela mexia os dedos miúdos com excitação e clareza. [. . .] Conseguia uma matéria clara e tenra de onde se poderia modelar um mundo. (Lispector 2019, 46)

In her interaction with matter and physical environment, the transmission of energy through contact and interchange concretizes what Jane Bennett posits as a “sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity” (2004, 367). Virgínia mixes mud with water from the river, and obtains an ideal plastic material, something between solid and liquid. Here, she is situated in an environment where the boundary between the self and the physical realm becomes nebulous, given that she absorbs material energy from the river to invent another world that bridges her interiority with the external. Virgínia transfuses vitality to the material objects, yet the figurines, once completed, are no longer attached to her, nor are they entirely detached from her. On the one hand, the figurines are traces of Virgínia’s experience and engagement which she holds in her power. They are fragile, evanescent and never completely solid (“delicado, evanescente e úmido”), always prone to dissolution. On the other hand, these objects she made form independent, ephemeral entities with their own shapes and mysterious and calm aura (“misteriosas e calmas”) (Lispector 2019, 47). Therefore, they cannot be reduced to mere inanimate objects but are rather autonomous affective bodies infused with energy, as Virgínia observes their tendency to move: “As figurinhas assim pareciam rápidas quase como se fossem se movimentar” (48). Virgínia finds the clay bodies difficult to define, describing them as something “como um riozinho correndo, mas não eram rio” (47). In this sense, Lispector illustrates what she considers to be a fluid boundary between matter (material objects) and energy (material processes) and showcases her attempt to convey a distributed form of agency.

Virgínia is amazed at the miracle of shaping a world with clay, but her fascination is mingled with an ineffable fear and alertness that render her mute and humble. A fleeting impulse that urges her toward gazing at the immobile figurine runs through her “corpo aberto e fino” (47), making it tremble (“tremie”) without reason while positioning her at the tension between power and surrender (“entregando”), productivity and receptivity: “concentrava-se numa força viva e luminosa da qualidade do perigo e da esperança, numa força de seda que lhe percorria o corpo celeremente com um impulso que se destinava à figura” (48). Virgínia is affected by the force destined for the figurines and the boundaries between them become destabilized.

In her demiurgic act, Virgínia controls her creation by kneading the clay, while she sees the threat of becoming overpowered by her creation when faced with the animation of objects. She consecrates the collection of figurines as

if they are saints, bewitched and enchanted by these static and mute objects: “Mesmo suas figurinhas mais suaves tinham uma imobilidade vigilante como a de um santo. E pareciam inclinar-se para quem as olhava como os santos. Virgínia podia fitá-las uma manhã inteira e seu amor e sua surpresa não diminuiriam” (48–49). Virgínia carries the clay figurines with her when she moves to the city. They not only form a part of her secret, personal life but also record a narrative of her existence and her contacts with her surroundings: “ela comunicava silenciosa com os objetos ao redor numa certa mania tenaz e despercebida que no entanto estava sendo o seu modo mais interior e verdadeiro de existir” (154). Nevertheless, even this seemingly enclosed, private space, where she is surrounded by familiar objects she has created cannot be fully grasped. It remains a part of the physical world, opaque and impenetrable, where the things she calls “suas coisas” are independent of her thought and their existence is not confined to the order and logic of human society, even though she is often tied to sensorial memory elicited by her contact with them:

Sentia profundamente que estava rodeada de coisas vivas e mortas e que as mortas haviam sido vivas—apalpava-as com olhos cuidadosos . . . sentia que o esforço delas não estava em terem núcleo humano porém em se conservarem num puro plano extra-humano . . . os pensamentos sobre as coisas sem se prenderem a quem as observa (155–156)

Virgínia develops such intimacy with her *things* that they become the reification of her experience. Brown observes the active role of physical objects in shaping an individual’s social relation exemplified by Henry James’s fiction, positing that “the way that objects [. . .] mediate the relations between characters, who are *characters* precisely in their relations” (2003, 141). I have examined how the hat in the river informs Virgínia’s relationship with her brother and later with other figures and how this material assemblage contributes to what she keeps becoming as an individual subject. While she uses the clay to temporarily materialize her contacts into “bonecos,” the shaping, dissolving, and reshaping of these figures embody the ephemeral network in which she is trapped. Yet, she is aware that the clay goes beyond merely insinuating contacts between subjects. Through her engagement with them, Virgínia recognizes that the objects have lives and deaths of their own within an extra-human realm, exerting their forces upon her. This illustration of nonhuman agency complicates the reader’s understanding of the protagonist’s act of consecrating figurines, which cannot be dismissed as mere fetishism. In light of this observation, Virgínia’s tendency of being absorbed within the domain of objects can be interpreted as an attempt to calibrate herself in a world where, together with other-than-human beings, humans no longer occupy the center.

When Virgínia beholds the familiar, ordinary setting as if she were placed in a still-life painting, she figures herself as an upholstered item, which allows her to approach the state of an object:

vejo uma cadeira, uma caixa de pó, uma tesoura aberta, uma gaveta negra . . . A grande *natureza morta* em que vivia. Mesmo assim parecia-lhe estar se misturando às coisas, dispondo-as ao seu agrado e perturbando-as . . . Era preciso entrecerrar os olhos. Ocorria-lhe em raros e rápidos segundos de visão que sua comunicação com o mundo, aquela secreta atmosfera que ela cultivava ao redor de si como um *escuro*, era o seu último existir—depois dessa fronteira ela própria era silenciosa como uma coisa. (Lispector 2019, 156–157; italics are mine)

The household objects attain aesthetic value as art objects and bestow upon her the pleasure of interacting with them. From her childhood, Virgínia is conscious of the fact that she is tied to the world of matter (“ela vivia à beira das coisas”) (14–15). Her vitality exists at the very frontier where she engages with material existence and communicates her sensuality. She otherwise remains mute and inanimate. In this sense, Virgínia herself resembles a still life object, which is often depicted on the brink of motion, exhibiting vibrating energy upon contact with other objects in an unbalanced, precarious configuration.

Virgínia’s perception of her position within a still life may also suggest that she views everyday objects as an anchoring existence standing against the passage of time. Throughout the novel, the spider-like, incandescent “lustre,” the “lanterna de festa” in Brejo Alto with “lembrança imóvel” attached to it (114), the “velas” with fragile flame shedding warmth on her and Vicente (201), are centers that emanate light which mark the events related to them, denoting the division of various worlds in which Virgínia lives. These radiating objects morph into different nuclei, creating circles of light that spread and diminish, their circumferences overlapping and intercepting. The pronounced representation of these nuclei showcases Lispector’s conception of materiality that combines the solidity embodied by steadfast objects with the fluidity of the flowing energy of light that also reflects Virgínia’s shifting networks.

Ambiences, rendered as spaces illuminated by these radiating centers, reflect the relationships Virgínia deals with at different stages of life. Yet the nuclei of these spaces retain the sturdiness vested by the material objects that constitute sources of light, delineating the boundaries between them. It seems that certain events and affective happenings are anchored by these luminous objects. The chandelier marks Virgínia’s childhood experience shared with Daniel. The intensity of heat and the energy of irradiation of the chandelier which dominates the empty lounge with its plain decoration accentuate Virgínia’s scorching curiosity about the outside and the world of secrets and conspiracy, as well as the fear of enclosure and imprisonment that urges her

to escape home: “A sala cheia de pontos neutros. O cheiro de casa vazia. Mas o lustre! Havia o lustre. A grande aranha incandescia. Olhava-o imóvel, inquieta, parecia pressentir uma vida terrível . . . o lustre se espargia em crisântemos e alegria” (15).

In the city, she is exposed to more blazing sources of light at the dinner party organized by her friend Irene: “Um halo de pálida excitação brilhava em torno das luzes ferozmente acesas, as lâmpadas queimando-se de prazer, exangues” (89). The brightness of the hall highlights the “superfícies brilhantes” of things with which Virgínia is fascinated, forming a prison-like space for which she longs and from which she wants to escape (89). As I have discussed in the first section, Virgínia’s fleeting stimulus-response is manifested through the sound of the river. Lispector employs a strategy of turning outward to represent the subject’s experience and capacity. Here, Virgínia is fully enveloped by matter-energy: her sensations are lit up in the pool of light that creates an intense and bewildering atmosphere where she nervously observes her own behaviors and those of unacquainted guests at the party. Blending human movement and interaction with matter-energy, the author draws a parallel between the light emitted by the lamps in the living room that gradually dwindles away from the center, and guests’ laughter encircling Irene in a vortex-like structure (“voragem”) (90).

Lispector often presents Virgínia at such moments of intense affective exposure to material energy that is parallel to her fluid entanglements within flimsy social grouping, as suggested by the first sentence of the novel: “[e]la seria fluida durante toda a vida” (7). While Lispector demonstrates the protagonist’s ability to unrestrictedly fade into flows of affect during her brief encounters, this model of subjectivity is further complicated by the author’s emphasis on the recalcitrance of material action held against human body. The episode following the party well illustrates the interaction and conflict between the human subject and material objects. As Virgínia falls asleep, she reflects upon the comfort and protection she derives from her involvement with her two lovers, Vicente and Adriano (“Entre os dois homens o conforto a aprofundava”) (113). Comfortably sheltered but unconstrained, she feels her human form dissolving into plain matter, blending with the darkness of the night, yet exhibiting vitality of movement, like a fish wagging its tail: “Como se ela se dissolvesse e mergulhasse na própria matéria dissolvida e na leitosa e translúcida obscuridade ela mesma deslizasse em peixe puro voltando a cauda serenamente resplandecente” (113). She finds herself in a free state of flux until being intercepted by another object that impinges upon her fluidity:

O relógio do vizinho repentinamente tocado bateu três notas transparentes em três planos de sons, o primeiro alto e assustado quase solidificando-a num começo de vigília, o segundo contendo-se entre o primeiro e o que viria, o

último mais baixo apaziguando, apaziguando, cada um separado do outro e brilhantes como diamantes separados uns dos outros e brilhantes—só que as três notas eram líquidas e diamantes jamais temiam quebrar-se numa só confusão. (113–114)

Virgínia's oneiric stage is interrupted by the clock as a marker of physical time that plunges her back into childhood memory in the countryside. As an object, the clock is impenetrable to her, but the potent energy it exerts on her takes a form somewhere between liquid and solid: the chimes are akin to the light of a lamp that defies the edges imposed by its solid structure. In different pitches they communicate to Virgínia the nuance of affects as if they are a language spoken by the clock, asserting its agency. The interplay between physical existence and psychological interiority is expressed through the light and sounds emitted by the focal parts of solid objects. Through this tension, Lispector illustrates the matter-energy continuum, blurring the boundaries between entities and the processes and movements that connect them.

Conclusion

This article probes Lispector's portrayal of subject formation in relation to material objects and processes in *O Lustre*. Reading the novel through the lens of affect theories highlights the author's awareness of pre-individual bodily tensions and the role of matter-energy in shaping an individual's behaviors and cognition. By doing so, the article reveals the decentering of the humanistic focalization in Lispector's writing, which features an externalized depiction of the individual's experience and capacity through privileging physical environment and impersonal forces. It proposes that this form of writing enables the recuperation of the subject's preconscious experience and its potential, which often escape the human-centered narrative characterized by the assumed duality of external and internal, physical and psychological. This interpretation of Lispector's fiction can help foster an understanding of human subjectivity beyond the limits of consciousness and the perceived boundaries of the body. It thus offers a potential reading strategy for approaching experimental writing like *O Lustre*, which prioritizes moods and atmospheres from a non-anthropocentric perspective.

Lispector represents the human subject as shaped by and contributing to the material force of affect, which is concretized in the novel through the subject's conscious or nonconscious action and its relations to human and nonhuman others. By tracing Virgínia's development through scenes of visceral experience and her entanglements within certain environments, Lispector highlights the potential of affective events to freely circulate between human subjects and material things. The human subject always grapples with but can never become

conscious of this unfolding potential, while material objects are represented as narrative agents, capturing and reenacting the subject's elusive experience.

This article argues that the novel demonstrates a paradoxical unity between subjectivity and materiality. On the one hand, the subject's experience and capacity are portrayed as seamlessly connected to the physical realm. I emphasize Lispector's perception of the interconnectedness of matter and energy. Material objects in the novel are not static reservoirs that merely conserve energy; rather, they themselves carry the tendency toward movement and association with others, mirroring the depiction of Virginia's relation to her bodily capacity. On the other hand, Lispector amplifies the sturdiness and recalcitrance of matter that composes a vibrant reality intractable to human-beings.

Notes

1. Although their ages are never specified, they are young: Virginia is still a child, while Daniel is on the verge of puberty. They come from a traditional family, once wealthy and now in decline. This may justify the significance of "play" as a revolt against the strictness of family in the next section.

2. A mass of pages is devoted to this episode which is crucial to Virginia's development as a subject. *O Lustre* focuses on intense, formative moments in Virginia's life with enormous attention to sensory perception. Virginia's childhood is the subject of the first quarter of the novel which then jumps to her life as a young lady in the city.

3. By "carnival" I mean Bakhtin's notion of a temporary reversal of hierarchies and order.

4. Esmeralda is older than Virginia and Daniel and already consorting with boys, bringing a potential disgrace to the family.

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