



Reading Hunger and Exhaustion in Clarice Lispector's *A Hora de Estrela* Exploring the Ecology of Women's Work and Literary Production

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Abstract

Coined by Karl Marx in *Capital* (1867), the “metabolic rift” or “ecological rift” model describes the cycle of extraction, exportation and exhaustion present in agricultural production and, in particular, highlights the unsustainability of this ecologically-unequal exchange. This article integrates world-literary theory, Social Reproduction Theory, and the model of the metabolic rift to explore how Clarice Lispector's *Hour of the Star* (1977) illuminates the peripheralization of women within the capitalist mode of production. The increasing pressure on women to be producers causes contradictions in the protagonist's materiality and exposes the pressures placed on writing—especially women's writing—to meet the expectations of literary production. The novel's commodity consumption, crisis of social reproduction, and meta-narrational features become windows to view the women's work and women's narratives which simultaneously sustain and are exploited by the capitalist mode of production. By connecting these various threads, I suggest the ignored labor of social reproduction under capitalism signals a crisis of consumption and a loss of capitalistic futurity, alerting readers to the unsustainable nature of the current capitalist mode of production.

Keywords: Metabolic Rift, Literary Production, Social Reproduction Theory, World-Literature



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In advocating for a reading of literature that registers its form and narrative in the context of the capitalist world-system, the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) formation of "world-literature" becomes a useful framework for making visible the peripheralized labor, bodies, voices, and writing that exists beyond the core. In this paper, I examine how Clarice Lispector's *A Hora de Estrela* (2015), or *Hour of the Star*, can be revisited as a world-literary object that illustrates the ways women sustain the capitalist mode of production while being simultaneously exploited by it. In particular, an ecological reading of the world-system is useful for exploring combined unevenness beyond the macropolitical and macroeconomic. When considering women's peripheralized labor, bodies, and writing, applying social reproduction theory to the world-system will make visible the peripheralized women's work that supports and is obscured by the capitalist mode of production and facilitate an analysis of Lispector's novel that registers the political and social exchanges between the core and the periphery of the modern world-system. Set in the semi-peripheral Rio de Janeiro, Lispector's *Hour of the Star* offers us a literary registration of women's peripheralized bodies, voices, labor, and writing. Specifically, the meta-narrational devices in Lispector's novel are important for this task. The novel is framed by the narration of a male author—Rodrigo S.M—as he writes of the protagonist's migration from the rural northeast region of Brazil to the city. Macabéa is absent from the first pages of the story while Rodrigo agonizes over how to tell her story: a girl slowly starving to death as she navigates a fleeting relationship, commodity obsession, and the threat of unemployment. After a fortune teller predicts a hopeful life for Macabéa, the narrator reveals at the end of the novel that Macabéa is struck down in the street by a yellow Mercedes and dies on the side of the road. This paper will use the theoretical foundation laid by the Warwick Research Collective to examine Clarice Lispector's novel. I argue that when we read the novel through Karl Marx's concept of "metabolic rift," our attention is drawn to tensions in the gendered chain of production, from energy and fertility to exhaustion, and in so doing makes visible the hidden (and immaterial) women's work present in the world-system that heretofore has been widely neglected in world-literary scholarship.

World Systems and World-Literature

In the field of world-literature, world-systems analysis is applied to literature with increasing frequency. Originally popularized by Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch in "The World Republic of Letters" (1999), "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), and "What is World Literature?" (2003), "world-literature" began to take prominence in the early twenty-first century as a framework to which comparative literature could move beyond the confines of national literature. Franco Moretti's (2000: 58) "Conjectures on World Literature" was a transformative work in world-literary studies, invoking Wallerstein's world-systems theory to describe the problem of world literature as "one and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semiperiphery)," where an unequal relationship connects the core and periphery. In literature, Moretti states this relationship produces "compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" (Moretti 2000: 58). Identifying in "Conjectures on World

Literature” the influence of Leon Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development alongside Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) (2015: 15), in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, extend Moretti’s conception of a “one and unequal” relationship between the capitalist core and periphery or semi-periphery to assert that the capitalist modernity in which we live will determine the subject and form of literature. Unlike other deployments of the term “world-literature,” the WReC (2015: 7) suggests world-literature as a hyphenate term describes “neither a canon of masterworks nor a mode of reading,” but rather an interconnected, mostly autonomous, singular, and simultaneous system of literature formed through its “mediation by and registration of the modern world-system” (WReC 2015: 9). At the center of the WReC’s (2015: 72) argument is the suggestion that “in the work of writers from peripheral and semi-peripheral formations, the registration of combined and uneven development through the deployment of aesthetics of anamorphosis is characteristically pronounced and intensified.” These “irrealist characteristics”¹ become “the determinate formal registers of (semi-)peripherality in the world-literary system, discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)” (WReC 2015: 51).

Despite noting that “modernity is both what world-literature indexes or is ‘about’ and what gives world-literature its distinguishing formal characteristics” (WReC 2015: 15), the WReC do not attempt to identify literature’s capacity to register its place as a product in the literary market. When exploring their decision to use the novel form “as a literary form in which combined and uneven development is manifested with particular salience” (WReC 2015: 16), the WReC describes the novel’s “fundamental association with the rise of capitalism and its status in peripheral and semi-peripheral societies as an *import*” (WReC 2015: 16, italics added). The WReC’s use of the word “import” figures literature as a product exported from the core to the periphery, yet the relationship literature has to literary production remains largely absent in their work, despite the analytical potential to uncover how literature that explores life in the periphery (and semi-periphery) is later “exported” to the core for commercial and academic consumption. In “First Responses,” Sarah Brouillette and David Thomas (Harlow et al. 2016: 511) critique the WReC’s critical framework for not acknowledging “that literary reading is itself one of those social forms that arises with and accompanies a certain stage of capitalist modernization” and is “geographically and socially unevenly distributed.”² This paper intends to deepen the WReC’s

¹ The WReC (2015: 51) suggest irrealist characteristics include, but are not limited to, “anti-linear plot lines, meta-narrational devices, un-rounded characters, unreliable narrators and contradictory points of view.”

² It is worth noting that literature markets have previously been used to criticize the concept of world literature. The editors (The Editors 2013) of *n+1*, in an article entitled “World Lite,” condemn the commercial classification and academic study of world literature for leaving authors “[b]ereft of both a native and a general metropolitan audience” and left “with a readership geographically broad but socioeconomically thin.” The editors additionally claim world-literary authors are “floated in the wake of the academic boat steaming ahead of them,” giving them “an authority that no longer emanate[s] from themselves.” The semi-autonomy of authorship, therefore, is denied in their critique of world literature as the frame authorship as a form of victimhood. Sarah Brouillette (2017) critiques this perspective

strong theoretical foundation by exploring the often peripheralized work of women and literary creation achieved by women.

Additionally, whilst the WReC's (2015) comprehensive assessment of world-literary theory is useful in reading irrealist characteristics and the process of peripheralization in Lispector's novel—both of which I will explore later in this essay—it is important to acknowledge the limitations of *Combined and Uneven Development* (Moretti 2000) in this analytical context; the WReC do not examine the ways irrealist characteristics are produced in works *written by women* in (semi-)peripheral locations. Where the WReC explore the formal/literary consequences of the world-system's shift to financialization, however, there is space to connect their theory to social reproduction theory and, ultimately, women's work. The WReC (2015: 69) suggest the “current crisis of the world-system was preceded (and indeed heralded) by a shift in the core capitalist zones, from material production to credit and speculation (financialisation).” The subsequent preference for an irrealist aesthetic, the WReC (2015) considers a result of:

The simultaneity of material and immaterial regimes of production- of spilled blood and evanescent credit, [which] does not readily lend itself to representation through the relativity factivity of realist forms of the “ideal-type”. The in-mixing of the imaginary and the factual that characterises “irrealist” writing is arguably more sensitive to this simultaneity, to the seemingly incongruous conjunction of “abstract” and “scarring” modes of capitalisation. Irrealist aesthetics might then be presented as corresponding not to any depreciation of realism, but to a refinement of it, under the specific circumstances of combined and uneven development. (P.70)

The “incongruous conjunction” of the material and immaterial that defines irrealist aesthetics and, simultaneously, literature from the (semi-)periphery is crucial for understanding how world-literary systems can accommodate social reproduction theory (SRT). If SRT's framework “seeks to make visible labor and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and policy denied by policy makers” (Bhattacharya 2017: 2), we can consider the presence of an irrealist aesthetic in literature written by women as a response to the “incongruous conjunction” of visible and invisible labor—the material and the immaterial. Unseen, Macabéa is “subterranean and [has] never flowered” (Bhattacharya 2017: 22). Where social structures have attempted to diminish social reproduction by assigning no material value to women's work, Macabéa's corporeality becomes a lens for viewing labor the world-system hides, destroying its sustainability.

The concealed source of renewed labor power and social reproduction in capitalist history has been a well-documented claim of world-ecological thought. Jason W. Moore (2016) proposes naturalization as one mode of making peripheral labor invisible:

and suggests their “position fails to acknowledge that the production of literature is itself fundamentally determined by capitalist social relations” and “that literature's production is fundamentally unavailable for any sort of redemptive reform while those relations persist.” Whilst “World Lite” rightly critiques the broad generalization of literary fiction as world literature in a commercial context, renouncing world literary criticism will not change the state of literary markets and literary production. Oppositely, world-literary theory becomes an analytical tool to examine the capitalist social relations of literature's production and explore the structural inequality of literature markets.

The symbolic, material, and bodily violence of [the separation of Humanity and Nature] performed a special kind of “work” for the modern world. Backed by imperial power and capitalist rationality, it mobilized the unpaid work and energy of humans—especially women, especially the enslaved—in service to transforming landscapes with a singular purpose: the endless accumulation of capital. (P. 79)

When women’s work is confined to the “natural,” symbolic, material, and bodily labor are forcibly removed from visibility and waged production systems. Symbolic labor—forms of non-material social reproductive labor—include but are not limited to emotional labor, caregiving, and education inside the home. Material labor encompasses all cleaning, cooking, childcare, and shopping which takes place inside domestic spaces. Most significant for my understanding of *Hour of the Star* (Lispector 2015) is the bodily labor violently divorced from society and humanity in the world-system, including sex work, pregnancy and childbirth, personal hygiene, and care during illness. Reading the bodily labor in *Hour of the Star*, as I will later explore, becomes crucial for understanding how the labor and reproductive work done by women is peripheralized. To fully explore what happens when this work is peripheralized, invisible and unsupported—and where this work is present in Lispector’s novel—I turn to Karl Marx.

Metabolic Rift as Literary Theory

Marx’s (1991) theory of the metabolic rift, I suggest, literalizes prerequisite forms of production, including energy, fertility, and exhaustion (and makes visible the hidden and immaterial women’s work present in the world-system). Here I take my cue to apply the metabolic rift to literary studies from the seminal essay “World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature” by Michael Niblett (2012), a founding member of the WReC, which convincingly advocates for literature to be considered a product of unequal ecological exchange behind core interaction with peripheral countries and states. Niblett (2012: 21) proposes that “moments of the emergence or intensification of the metabolic rift will coincide with the eruption into a text—even if otherwise broadly realist—of irrealist elements.” In reading literature as capable of registering, in its form, the presence of the metabolic rift, Niblett sets a precedent for the metabolic rift as an analytical tool in literary studies. Marx (1991) conceives of the metabolic rift (or ecological rift) in *Capital: Volume Three*, drawing on agricultural chemist Justus von Liebig’s understanding of soil nutrients to explain how private property limits agricultural production and the “rational treatment, maintenance, and improvement of the land itself.” Marx (1991: 949) writes that landed property “produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism,” resulting in “a squandering of the vitality of the soil.” What Marx describes is a process where, after agricultural products are shipped from rural locations to cities for consumption, the nutrient-rich waste left behind is expelled and discarded in cities instead of being returned to the soil in a fertilization process previously routine in feudal agricultural production. As a result, the soil becomes exhausted and unable to produce food again. For agricultural production to continue, the introduction of chemical fertilizers to the soil thus becomes necessary. This cycle of artificially replaced nutrients through chemical fertilizer, and consequent exhaustion, is what deepens this

“rift” and eventually triggers an ecological revolution to reset the crisis of agriculture the rift causes. World-ecological revolutions are defined by Moore (2015: 74) as the conditions that make “new streams of unpaid work/energy available for commodity production” and are rooted in historical specificity. When used as a framework beyond agriculture, the metabolic rift explores the “unjust manner in which dominant actors in the capitalist world-system simultaneously exploit labor and nonhuman or biophysical nature while undermining sustainability” (Gellert 2019: 108). The metabolic rift demonstrates that without an intervening method of restoration, the drive for continued production and profit undermines the sustainability of capitalism itself. By applying the metabolic rift beyond its original use, we can begin to understand cycles of extraction, exhaustion, and crisis such as commodity production, social reproduction, and literary production as they appear in literature.

In more recent critical works, the metabolic rift has been revisited to contest assertions that Marx does not examine the environment in his works. When attempting to rediscover Marx’s perspective on the ecological, in *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, John Bellamy Foster (2000) brought the metabolic rift to the attention of today’s critical theorists. Since it gained traction amongst ecological Marxists, two interpretations of the metabolic rift have emerged, predicated on the acceptance or rejection of Cartesian dualism. In Foster’s original text, the separation of nature from the system of capitalism is fundamental to his understanding of how nature is exploited under capitalism. Other voices in the field have contested this approach and, most significantly, Moore (2011) has suggested an interpretation of the metabolic rift which does not perpetuate the separation between nature and society. Moore’s (2011: 39) assertion that “the perspective of capitalism as world-ecology, unifying the production of nature and the accumulation of capital, offers a new ‘way of seeing’ the metabolic rift,” and his historical reading of Marx’s value theory challenges Foster’s interpretation of the metabolic rift. Instead, Moore (2011: 16) suggests “the apparently external relations of capitalism to nature—codified in the metabolic rift...—are revealed as inner relations (capitalism-in-nature), constitutive of new, and profoundly restless, socioecological configurations.” In this reading of the metabolic rift, the configuration of capitalism and nature in the same system allows the same cycle of production, extraction, waste, exhaustion, and artificial enrichment present in agricultural production to be seen in other types of production. It is in Moore’s (2011) interpretation of the metabolic rift, especially, we can view biophysical processes in *Hour of the Star* (Lispector 2015) such as Macabéa’s hunger and bodily exhaustion as a product of the capitalist world-system. As this article will demonstrate, the soil exhaustion prevalent in the metabolic rift model can be used as a tool to understand how capitalism’s coercion of women’s affective and reproductive labor supports varying forms of production, including commodity production, social reproduction, and literary production (cycles of extraction, exhaustion, and crisis). In turn, I will argue the reproductive labor the metabolic rift exposes is intrinsically connected to the irrealist aesthetic of world-literature written by women.

Exhaustion in *Hour of the Star*

Published just a few weeks before her death in 1977, Lispector's (2015) *Hour of the Star* is written at a time where Brazil was experiencing rapid economic growth and instability as it approached the economic crisis of the 1980s. A combination of its increased industrialization, external debts, and increased agricultural production produced economic growth that was accompanied by high inflation and income inequality, producing socio-economic unevenness. Coffee and sugar represent Brazil's emerging and declining agricultural products and were an integral part of this economic growth. Boris Fausto (1999: 294), in his *A Concise History of Brazil*, states "Between 1947 and 1964, coffee accounted for 57 percent of Brazil's export revenue. Between 1965 and 1971, it fell to 37 percent, and between 1972 and 1975 it sank to 15 percent." Sugar, on the other hand, replaced coffee by 1974 as the top-earning export product. Jennifer Eaglin (2019: 934) recounts how sugar "held an increasingly important role in the new military dictatorship's focus on industrialization," mechanizing sugar production to "take advantage of the erratic but profitable world sugar market." Notably, "failed harvests in other sugar markets, market protections, high inflation, and the energy crisis" caused "international sugar prices [to boom] in the early 1970s" (Eaglin 2019: 934). It is in these specific ecological and economic circumstances that I will situate the metabolic rift. The distribution of sugar and coffee displaced the nutrients which should have been returned to the soil in Brazil's agricultural zones and, by the time Lispector was writing, a crisis of soil erosion and infertility was already emerging. Brazil's resulting ecological revolution was established through no-till farming, which revolutionized Brazil's agricultural production, reduced the labor required for agriculture, drove profit margins, and allowed continued commodity production. It is no surprise that, as the metabolic rift in Brazil's agricultural production intensified, Lispector directly engaged with these agricultural products in a way that invokes the specific manifestation of the metabolic rift in Brazil at the time she was writing. At a point of ecological revolution, in which "new streams of unpaid work/energy [are made] available for commodity production" (Moore 2015: 74), it is significant that Lispector chooses to identify her protagonist with the two agricultural products which increase energy levels, either by acting as a stimulant or spiking blood sugar levels, signaling the crisis of existing labored energies.

Lispector's novel is set in the port city of Rio de Janeiro, where agricultural products are prepared for broader market consumption. In this semi-peripheral location of connected production processes, *Hour of the Star* itself as well as Macabéa's body, become sites for this exhaustion to play out. The role of labor-power in understanding SRT has been firmly established as one of the central assumptions of unpaid female labor and gendered exploitation in the capitalist mode of production³. It is particularly significant to this paper that Marx's (1991) original theory already connects soil exhaustion and the exhaustion of labor-power:

Large-scale industry and industrially pursued large-scale agriculture have the same effect. If they are originally distinguished by the fact that the former lays waste and

³ See *Wages Against Housework* by Silvia Federici (1975) and Lise Vogel's *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (1983)

ruins labour-power..., whereas the latter does the same to the natural power of the soil, they link up in the later course of development, since the industrial system applied to agriculture also enervates the workers there, while industry and trade for their part provide—agriculture with the means of exhausting the soil. (P. 950)

This offers a powerful analytical tool for figuring the crisis of agricultural and other forms of production and the crisis of social reproduction as brought about by the same process of extraction and exhaustion. It is through the soil exhaustion, artificial fertilizer, and consequent crisis of production embedded in the metabolic rift that I will use to demonstrate how, under capitalism, non-masculine energies are depleted and a crisis of social reproduction emerges. Since Marx connects the consumption of labor-power and the stolen fertility of the soil, the pressures on labor-power which must be restored by a form of social reproduction and the destroyed sustainability of production processes under capitalism can be drawn in parallel. Where the soil's fertility must be restored by artificial fertilizer, labor-power must be restored by social reproduction. The model of the metabolic rift, therefore, becomes a useful framework for making visible the hidden labor that sustains production.

Lispector connects commodity production and social reproduction in *Hour of the Star* by identifying Macabéa with the commodities associated with Brazil's agricultural exports. Both coffee and sugar undoubtedly go through a process of commodity production which Lispector incorporates into her novel. Lispector (2015: 15) alludes to the commodification of sugarcane when the narrator declares the story is "written with the sponsorship of the most popular soft drink in the world even though it's not paying me a cent, a soft drink distributed in every country." Brazil's other top-earning export, coffee, is similarly integrated into Macabéa's identity. In the most explicit case of this identification, Lispector (2015) details how, on a day off from work, Macabéa

got, as a favor, a little instant coffee from the landlady, and, as another favor, she asked for some boiling water, drank it all licking herself and in front of the mirror so as not to miss any of herself. The encounter with herself was a good she had not yet known. (P. 33)

Not only is the experience of drinking coffee packaged as an "encounter with herself," but Lispector also adopts the homonym "good," opening the passage to readings which suggest Macabéa is encountering an *exported* "good." Macabéa's self-identification with commodities, when read alongside the metabolic rift, makes visible the way commodities temporarily sustain labor power at the same time commodity production is sustained by gendered marketing and female consumption. Macabéa's identification with coffee is, firstly, symptomatic of the pressures placed on women to be consumers to sustain cycles of commodity production. Macabéa's identification with commodities is, secondly, important for considering how, as a peripheralized woman, Macabéa's labor power must be artificially restored through an (albeit calorically empty) energetic resource. When the narrator declares "nobody looked at her on the street, she was cold coffee" (Lispector 2015: 19), Lispector alludes to how Macabéa can temporarily increase her capacity to labor with empty energy sources such as sugar and caffeine and, as a result of the

inevitable exhaustion this causes, alludes to Macabéa's reduced capacity to fulfil the social reproductive role expected of her. Her energies are becoming increasingly depleted, much like the lost heat—and, therefore, lost energy—of the cold coffee, as she is increasingly unable to reproduce her own labor power.

To fully contextualize why Macabéa cannot reproduce her own labor power, Lispector explores the social and economic environment Macabéa exists within. As an employee of a pulley-distribution firm (a piece of equipment vital for many of Brazil's export products, including oil, gas, textile, sugar, and paper), Macabéa's labor-power is extracted for the benefit of Brazil's largest industries. Lispector situates Macabéa's story in a country with an already deepening rift between the demands of production and the capacity of social reproduction to restore labor-power. Macabéa's upbringing in the agricultural northeast is used by Lispector to contextualize her socio-economic background in a peripheral area. At the start of the novel, the narrator labels Macabéa: "a girl in a city that's entirely against her" who "should have stayed in the backlands of Alagoas in a cotton dress and without any typewriter, since she wrote so badly, she only had three years of school" (Lispector 2015: 7). Lispector (2015: 19–20) later continues: "She was born with rickets, a legacy of the backlands.... By age two her parents were dead of the bad fevers of the backlands of Alagoas, there where the devil lost his boots." Lispector ensures that Macabéa's upbringing is synonymous with illness, death, and lack of access to education. These have all put pressure on her body and ability to work and, despite being paid a wage as a typist, Macabéa cannot afford the food she needs to survive. With a lack of universally available healthcare and education, Macabéa is unable to restore her labor-power and begins to lose her sense of corporeal materiality. This is most evident when the narrator describes how Macabéa's boss attempts to dismiss her from her job and, taken aback by Macabéa's politeness, relents into letting Macabéa keep her job. It is immediately after this moment, that Macabéa flees to the bathroom,

to be alone because she was all shaken. She mechanically looked at herself in the mirror atop the filthy and cracked sink, full of hairs, which matched her own life so well. It seemed to her that the dark and tarnished mirror didn't reflect any image. Could her physical existence have vanished? (Lispector 2015: 17)

When Macabéa considers being separated from her employment, and, therefore, material production processes, she experiences a moment of immateriality. The pressures placed on social reproduction in public services, such as healthcare and education, have placed Macabéa in a position of precarious employment and, simultaneously, a lack of presence in material production.

The manifestation of this rift in the cycle of commodity production is more noticeable when Lispector (2015) directly engages with the role consumerism plays in its increasing demand. The distance between commodities and the human labor responsible for producing them, as Marx has explored, leads to commodity fetishism. The distance between commodities and human labor closely resembles the distance between the country and the city responsible for the displacement of nutrients, causing unsustainability in the cycle of production. Applying this logic to commodity production, the exchange value of commodities that the consumer must pay ensures the use-value of a commodity will always be lower than that of the purchase value. Workers with a low

socioeconomic status consequently find their wages are insufficient to cover the cost of living when the exchange-value is too high. This system becomes self-defeating when a worker can no longer afford the commodities marketed to them since, without consumers, capitalism enters a state of decline. Therefore, a rift in the social metabolism grows between the capacity for workers to consume and capitalism's need for consumers to purchase. Extending this logic to the metabolic rift analogy, consumerism must continue to support profits and must be restored through some intervening force, much like the exhausted soil is restored through artificial fertilizers to sustain agricultural production.

Self-Consumption and Self-Destruction in *Hour of the Star*

In commodity production, consumerism is restored through marketing and advertising, where workers are coerced into purchasing products because an emotional connection is formed between the produce and the consumer. This cycle collapses when the worker can no longer physically purchase products, as demonstrated through Macabéa's extreme poverty and starvation. During a health check, Macabéa's doctor asks:

—What do you drink? Milk?

—Only coffee and soft drinks.

—What kind of soft drinks?—he asked not knowing what to say.

He randomly inquired: —Do you ever have fits of vomiting? —Do you ever have fits of vomiting?

—Oh, never!—she exclaimed very shocked, for she wasn't fool enough to waste food, as I said.

The doctor took a good look at her and was well aware she wasn't on a diet. But it was more comfortable to keep insisting that she shouldn't diet to lose weight. He knew that was just the way it was and that he was a doctor to the poor.

(Lispector, 2015:54)

The lack of support for Macabéa from healthcare services is indicative of a wider crisis of social reproduction. In addition, this scene not only emphasizes Macabéa's commodity consumption but also demonstrates how Macabéa cannot afford the kind of food and drink capable of restoring her health. In establishing Macabéa's sustained need to consume commodities, Lispector highlights how their lack of substance has a direct impact on her ability to sustain her body. Losing weight correlates directly to losing mass and, implicitly, losing materiality through capitalism's bodily violence.

Critical explanations of Macabéa's identification with and consumption of commodities have been, in some cases, unforgiving. Thomas P. Waldemer (2008: 105) describes Macabéa as "an anorexic cannibal, isolated by the monotony of her material existence and lobotomized by the consumption of symbols that have no real meaning for her." Waldemer largely ignores the way Lispector presents Macabéa's consumption as a form of gendered exploitation through the marketing and advertising present in the novel. In one of the most startling images of the novel, Lispector (2015) describes an advert Macabéa enjoys looking at which,

showed in full colour the open pot of cream for the skin of women who simply were not her. Blinking furiously...she just lay there imagining with delight: the cream was so appetizing that if she had the money to buy it she wouldn't be a fool. To hell with her skin, she'd eat it, that's right, in large spoonfuls straight from the jar. Because she lacked fat and her body was drier than a half-empty sack of crumbled toast. She'd become with time mere living matter in its primary form. (P. 30)

Macabéa's interest is symptomatic of the way women are simultaneously the targets and subjects of commodity marketing, and simultaneously the producers and consumers of these commodities.⁴ In the semi-peripheral Rio de Janeiro, Macabéa is divorced from the human labor associated with commodity production. Surrounded by radio adverts, magazine adverts, and new forms of entertainment, Macabéa's migration from a peripheral area to a semi-peripheral area creates an acutely gendered conflict between her background as a producer and her attempts to become a consumer. Another conflicting dynamic in Macabéa's interest in the cream is the rising conflict between the cream's intended use-value and the exchange value and self-identification which compels her to buy it, at the detriment of her body's need for food to survive. Lispector (2015) is enacting a brilliant reversal of traditional commodity dynamics. Where a beauty product traditionally has a concealed surplus value, Lispector emphasizes the material presence of the cream, as opposed to its immaterial value; only a material object would be able to sustain Macabéa's body, signaling the contradiction within commodity production caused by Macabéa's poverty. This conflict is acknowledged by Lispector (2015):

Because, no matter how bad her situation, she didn't want to be deprived of herself, she wanted to be herself. She thought she'd incur serious punishment and even risk dying if she took too much pleasure in life. So she protected herself from death by living less, consuming so little of her life that she'd never run out. (P. 24)

As Macabéa attempts to consume the products she has been driven to purchase, she can be seen as increasingly consuming her *self*—her identity. Consumption in the novel, therefore, is a kind of cannibalism: “she lived off herself as if eating her own entrails” (Lispector 2015: 29).

This cycle of self-consumption defeats Macabéa's ability to remain self-sufficient and can be compared to the soil exhaustion which arises as a symptom of agricultural production under capitalism. The false and manufactured identification with commodities enforced on women drive consumers to continue purchasing at the detriment of their quality of life; Macabéa is exploited for the sake of increased capital and profit. Macabéa begins to lack self-sufficiency because she identifies with the agricultural products that are plundered and repackaged back to her character as commodities, forcing her to be both consumer and producer. Macabéa is caught in a cycle between consumption and production, creating a rift between what Macabéa has left to produce after she has consumed herself in a self-defeating system. Macabéa becomes exhausted under a

⁴ Marketing products to women and marking up the price has been a technique coined the “The Pink Tax” and is just one of the ways women are exploited for profit (Bhargava and Tara 2022). The concept has been extensively explored in America's consumer culture but is applicable to branding and marketing anywhere where the gendered capitalist mode of production persists.

system that demands she spends her wages to benefit capital. The contradiction is, ultimately, reflective of a key contradiction in commodity production; in exploiting the consumer, demand for production is threatened. Without the deepening rift between Macabéa's production and consumption, the key driver of the economy—consumer spending—would be reduced. Marketing and consumerism, therefore, are non-material components of production, which resemble the introduction of artificial fertilizer to the soil that sustains agricultural production—albeit only temporarily. In *Hour of the Star*, the conflict between material needs and immaterial methods of restoring consumption is proven to be gendered. Peripheralized women's work in the world-system, therefore, is a cycle of unfulfilled material need that puts pressure on social reproducers.

Sex Work and Fertility in *Hour of the Star*

To further demonstrate the presence of a realist/irrealist dichotomy in Lispector's (2015) novel, I turn to other representations of invisible labor: namely, sex work. The role of sex work and sexual pleasure in the reproduction of labor-power has been noted by Marxist Feminists since the 1970s. Silvia Federici (1975), in *Wages Against Housework*, theorizes:

In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually, to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible. (P. 3)

Federici's assertion that the sexual services of women restore a worker (and, implicitly, their labor-power), is not solely applicable to the role of the housewife: where wives are not available for men, the sex industry offers a space for the reproduction of labor power through sexual pleasure. In *Hour of the Star*, Lispector (2015) highlights the way capitalist systems attempt to impose the role of sexual reproducer on women. Macabéa's boyfriend, Olímpico, is portrayed as only interested in the sexual and reproductive labor he assumes Macabéa can offer. Whilst Macabéa believes Olímpico's intentions to be pure, Lispector dispels this notion. After taking Macabéa for a coffee, Olímpico refers to a brothel in Mangue: "It's a bad place, just for men. You won't understand but I'll tell you something: you can still get women cheap. You didn't cost me much, just a coffee. I won't spend another cent on you, okay?" (Lispector 2015: 47). Whilst Macabéa does not understand the connection between sex work and Olímpico's intentions, Lispector makes clear Olímpico views the relationship as transactional and is interested in how Macabéa can service his needs in exchange for a coffee. In light of my earlier reading of coffee as a form of artificially provided nutrients intrinsically connected to Macabéa's identity, Olímpico buying Macabéa a cup of coffee can be read as an attempt to symbolically and literally restore her energies such that she is able to service him better. That coffee is associated with Macabéa's identity and also an

overproduced item in Brazil's commodity production makes visible the way her sexual value has been exhausted under the demands capital places on her body.

Despite Olímpico's intentions, Lispector (2015) emphasizes Macabéa's lack of substance, primarily as a result of her malnutrition, which ensures she cannot carry out the sexual service Olímpico expects from her. The narrator states:

I know there are girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession, in exchange for a good dinner instead of a bologna sandwich. But the person I'm going to talk about scarcely has a body to sell, nobody wants her, she's a virgin and harmless, nobody would miss her. (P. 5)

As I have previously demonstrated, Macabéa's body has been metabolized through a cycle of commodity production, which has exhausted her body to the point of immateriality. Where her female identity had previously positioned her as a "natural" resource to be extracted, her the value other characters saw in her—Olímpico, her employer—has been lost and she has been discarded as waste. Her lack of substance is only highlighted when, as Olímpico begins to understand that Macabéa "scarcely has a body to sell," he turns his attention to Macabéa's coworker, Gloria. In drawing a contrast between Gloria and Macabéa, Lispector (2015) explicitly describes how Olímpico rejects Macabéa for the sake of a female body capable of reproduction:

Olímpico was a certified and vital demon and from him children would be born, he had the precious semen. And as was already said or not said Macabéa had ovaries shriveled as a cooked mushroom. Ah if only I could grab Macabéa, give her a good bath, a plate of hot soup, a kiss on the forehead as I tucked her into bed. And cause her to wake up and find simply the great luxury of living. Olímpico in fact showed no satisfaction in dating Macabéa—that's what I'm discovering now. Olímpico might have seen that Macabéa didn't have the strength of breeding, she was a subproduct. But when he saw Glória, Macabéa's coworker, he immediately realized she had class. (P. 50)

Lispector devalues Macabéa by elevating Olímpico's reproductive potential; where Olímpico is "vital" and his semen "precious," Macabéa is "subproduct" and denotes how she has been dismissed as useful in all forms of production. Despite this perspective, the very fact that Lispector is writing about Macabéa is evidence she is not entirely exterior to production. The incongruity between her peripheralized state and her centrality to the story is another indication of the irrealist/realist conflict in Lispector's novel.

Lispector (2015) also acknowledges how the pressure put on Macabéa makes living difficult. To Macabéa, life is a "luxury" and, most importantly, breeding requires a "strength" Macabéa does not possess as a result of her lack of access to nutrition. Instead, Olímpico chooses Gloria for her "class" and "strength of breeding." The narrator notes that Gloria's hips indicate she "was made for childbearing," opposing Macabéa, who "seemed to have in herself her own end" (Lispector 2015: 51). Upon first seeing Gloria, Olímpico "guess[es] that, though ugly, Gloria was well fed. And that made her quality goods" (Lispector 2015: 50). Gloria was born into urban life and is the daughter of a butcher, decidedly lower-middle class, and representative of the most visible and

consumer-facing stage in livestock farming: an alternative and rival industry to agricultural production sustained by agricultural products. Native to Rio, Gloria can be considered a local “good,” connecting Gloria and fleshy goods and becoming a symbol of visible and valued production in Brazil. This is in opposition with the abstracted commodities that agricultural production produces, which Macabéa—the Northeastern girl—represents. Throughout the novel, Macabéa is defined by her inability to embody the role of social reproducer as a result of her inability to reproduce labor-power her empty energies. In Gloria, we view the other form of social reproduction Macabéa could have offered—the housewife and mother. Macabéa’s lack of self-sufficiency renders her infertile and thus her flesh becomes ultimately of no value to Olímpico or other men. Through this contrast, Macabéa becomes a peripheral body in which the larger crisis of social reproduction can be more keenly felt. When viewing the story in its entirety, it is ironic that the same production processes her energies are intended to support are the same processes that exhaust her ability to survive. Macabéa’s depleted body, therefore, becomes a way of reading the self-defeating logic of capitalism.

The threat this poses to the capitalist mode of production is demonstrated in Macabéa’s death. When the fortune teller predicts Macabéa will get married, fall in love, and become very rich, Lispector (2015) perfectly exhibits this irony. Macabéa is handed her futurity and, ultimately, crumbles under the pressure of it. The burden of life becomes her death and, in the novel’s, close, Lispector offers up the ultimate contradiction of social reproduction. To demonstrate this contradiction, Lispector (2015) draws parallels between life and death. When Macabéa is hit by a car she becomes

pregnant with the future. She felt inside her a hope more violent than any despair she had ever felt. If she was no longer herself that meant a loss that counted as a gain. Just as you can be sentenced to death, the fortune-teller had sentenced her to life. Everything suddenly was a lot and a lot and so wide that she felt like crying. But she didn’t: her eyes glistened like the dying sun. (P. 70)

In the contradictions “hope” and “despair” and “loss” and “gain,” Lispector demonstrates the condition of conflict that Macabéa, as an exhausted and incapable social reproducer, experiences. That Macabéa is “pregnant with the future” is a form of bodily violence too much for her exhausted body to sustain. In the ultimate embodiment of immateriality (future) and materiality (pregnancy), Macabéa ceases to exist. Where this experience is “a lot and a lot and so wide,” Macabéa’s life is expanding beyond her control and the expansion is symptomatic of the demand for increased profit under capitalism and the deepening rift between the capacity for Macabéa’s body to produce and the demand for reproduction she experiences. She has been “sentenced to life” because the demands on her to reproduce her own life are so great that she can no longer live. She is burning up on her own fuel like a “dying sun.” Lispector (2015) continues her description of Macabéa’s death by stating that “in death she would go from virginity to womanhood” because,

only now was she understanding that a woman is born a woman from the very first cry. A woman’s destiny is to be a woman. She had intuited the almost painful and

whizzing moment of love. Yes, painful and such a difficult reflowering that she used for it her body and the other thing you call a soul and I call — what?
 Then Macabéa said a phrase that none of the passersby understood. She said clearly and distinctly:
 —As for the future.
 Would she have longed for the future? (P. 75)

Macabéa has been sacrificed for capital and reaches womanhood in death because, to Lispector, to be a woman is to have your energies consumed by capital. To be born a woman is to live with “effort,” to produce and reproduce for capital, and to ultimately be metabolized in the service of capital. That Macabéa dies at the end of the novel reveals how the pressure on social reproduction can be self-defeating when it extracts too much energy from the producers and reproducers it relies on. Lispector acknowledges this contradiction in Macabéa’s final words. The phrase “As for the future.” transforms what would typically be a question into a statement, alerting readers to Macabéa’s robbed future and the loss of capitalistic futurity her death represents.

Literary Production

These conflicts between fertility and infertility, presence and absence, and value are indicative of a gendered form of peripheralization caused by the ignored cost of social reproduction. As such, it is unsurprising that Lispector’s (2015) novel is entirely framed by a meta-narrational device that is indicative of the irrealist characteristics the WReC (2016) consider a registration of the world-system. Lispector (2015) tells Macabéa’s story entirely through the narration of a male author, Rodrigo S.M.; that Macabéa’s story is mediated by a male author has significant implications for the visibility of peripheralized voices. Where the metabolic rift theorizes how energy and nutrients are converted through agricultural production to a physical product, so too immaterial stories, characters, and thoughts are transformed through literary production to a physical product. Building on this comparison, the extraction within the cycle of the metabolic rift can also be applied to literary production: authors writing with an implied global readership can “extract” narratives from peripheral locations and export them to the literary market at the core of the capitalist mode of production. The distance these narratives are exported, akin to other forms of production I have explored in this paper, resembles the distance between the country and the city from which agricultural products are extracted and sent to in the model of the metabolic rift. When read in parallel to the metabolic rift, the WReC’s (2016) supposition that irrealist characteristics are produced by conflicts between the material and immaterial, the formal compromise could be figured as a form of sustenance—a compromise that allows the literature to continue to operate in a cycle of literary production. Niblett’s (2012: 21) theorization that “moments of the emergence or intensification of the metabolic rift will coincide with the eruption into a text—even if otherwise broadly realist—of irrealist elements” enables us to read the meta-narrational framed narrative which overlays Macabéa’s story in *Hour of the Star* (Lispector 2015) as both a consequence of the intensification of the metabolic rift and a consequence of the formal compromise indicative of world-literature, symptomatic of the clash between the material and immaterial.

In addition to indicating (semi-)peripherality in a world-literature, formal compromise, is characteristic of the pressures placed on writing—especially women’s writing—to ensure their work meets the expectations of literary production. Writing as the Latin American Boom came to a close, Lispector (2015) would have invariably been competing for market space with the existing standard set by male authors. María Rosa Olivera-Wiliams (2015), in “Boom, Realismo Mágico – Boom and Boomito,” gives a comprehensive overview of the Latin American Boom and so-called Post-Boom from the perspective of female authors. Women writing during and after the Boom were often “silenced” and “excluded,” as a result, had to produce their own boom to enter the canon of literary recognition, study, and circulation. With this in mind, it is surprising that the conflation between the Lispector (2015) as the novel’s author and the male author narrating the novel in a large number of critical interpretations of *Hour of the Star*. While it is undeniable that Lispector would inject her views on authorship into the perspective of a fictional author, I argue the choice of a male narrator is significant and not to be overlooked. In fact, Lispector (2015: 5) makes a connection between Macabéa’s lack of voice and the lack of space for female authorship: Rodrigo declares “I realize now—nobody would miss me either. And even what I’m writing somebody else could write. A male writer, that is, because a woman would make it all weepy and maudlin.” That Lispector’s formal compromise comes in the form of a male narrator demonstrates that, to an extent, a female narrative and women’s writing are peripheralized in the literary market Lispector’s novel is contained in.

Where Rodrigo is the only character to address the assumed readership, Lispector (2015) demonstrates, through Macabéa’s lack of authorial voice, the distance Rodrigo must negotiate to reach a peripheral narrative. The narrator declares:

Like the northeastern girl, there are thousands of girls scattered throughout the tenement slums, vacancies in beds in a room, behind the shop counters working to the point of exhaustion. They don’t even realize how easily substitutable they are and that they could just as soon drop off the face of the earth. Few protest and as far as I know they never complain since they don’t know to whom. Does this whom exist? (P. 6)

As Lispector suggests, Macabéa’s social and economic status robs her of her ability to “complain” because she is one voice of many like hers and is rendered invisible to a global readership or the primarily Anglophone literary market. The narrator’s intervention into Macabéa’s story, therefore, becomes a way of making visible her life which exists on the periphery, where Macabéa’s story becomes paradigmatic of the women’s work treated as an expendable and disposable resource in the capitalist mode of production.

Despite this, Lispector (2015) leaves clues that the narrator has not been successful in relinquishing his subjective experience when writing of Macabéa’s life. Rodrigo declares “I have no social class, marginalized as I am. The upper class considers me a weird monster, the middle class worries I might unsettle them, the lower class never comes to me” (Lispector 2015: 10). This display of objectivity, at first, positions Rodrigo as separate from Macabéa. Lispector, however, leaves clues that contradict this attempt at objectivity. Rodrigo opens one scene with the

declaration that the scene is “an attempt to reproduce three pages I wrote and that my cook, seeing them lying around, threw away to my despair” (Lispector 2015: 34). That Rodrigo is able to employ a member of staff to carry out acts of paid social reproduction indicates a degree of financial stability and a significantly higher social class than Macabéa. The cook destroying the pages of writing makes them another character in the novel intrinsically connected to hunger and food, situating physical labor and fuel in contrast to the narrator’s intellectual labor and the act of writing. Elsewhere in the text, Lispector connects the literature to food when Macabéa eats paper in an attempt to get rid of hunger pains. Rodrigo is thus caught in a contradiction between his proximity to the core and distance to the subject of his writing.

The conflict between Rodrigo’s proximity and distance to the core is addressed by Lispector (2015) when the narrator announces:

to speak of the girl I can’t shave for days and must acquire dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, nodding off from sheer exhaustion, I am a manual laborer. Besides wearing old ragged clothes. All in order to put myself on the northeastern girl’s level. (P.11)

To accurately tell Macabéa’s story, therefore, Rodrigo must traverse the distance between their backgrounds using a form of embodied performance. To bridge the imaginative rift between his writing and the exhaustion of Macabéa’s story, he must experience a real material exhaustion of the body that is nevertheless artificially induced. Lispector (2015) then extends this performativity to the assumed readership of Rodrigo’s work and, by extension, *Hour of the Star*. Rodrigo narrates:

If the reader possesses any wealth and a comfortable life, he’ll step out of himself to see how the other sometimes lives. If he’s poor, he won’t be reading me because reading me is superfluous for anyone who has a slight permanent hunger. Here I’m playing the role of a safety valve for you and from the massacring life of the average middle class. I’m well aware that it’s frightening to step out of oneself, but everything new is frightening. Though the anonymous girl in this story is so ancient that she could be a biblical figure. (P. 22)

By making the assumed readership complicit, Lispector engenders a dynamic where the implied reader questions the spectatorship of Macabéa’s poverty, only emphasizing the distance between the core and the periphery. It is a spectatorship the act of writing has historically absorbed for profit.

In drawing attention to this complicity and making her assumed readership question their spectatorship, Lispector (2015) creates the beginnings of a crisis of literary production. Rodrigo attempts to reject this conflict by devaluing Macabéa and struggling to maintain the distance from her story he originally possessed. This devaluing has the consequence of rendering Macabéa a waste product of the writing process, one which Rodrigo will discard after extracting her story. In telling Macabéa’s story, he will “sanitize” himself (Lispector 2015: 8). If Macabéa’s story is not told, he will “choke” (Lispector 2015: 9) on her. She is “stuck to [his] skin like some sticky treacle or black mud” (Lispector 2015: 13). Elsewhere, she is described as “vermin” (Lispector 2015: 24). All these examples present Macabéa as less than human, unhygienic, and something that the act

of writing (or reading) will cleanse the narrator (or reader) of. Just as Macabéa is eventually used up in processes of commodity production and social reproduction, she is likewise used up as a character in a story. Whilst other criticism of Lispector view Rodrigo's choice to kill Macabéa as a comment on the burden of poverty and class (Torres 2017: 198), it is equally a commentary on the burden of authorial responsibility. Authorial objectivity and distance, therefore, become a mode of preventing a crisis of literary production; As a literary body, Macabéa is, again, metabolized at the expense of maintaining a production process.

Conclusion

Lispector's (2015) novel serves as a poignant critique of the systemic exploitation and erasure of peripheral bodies and narratives within a capitalist society and the metabolic rift provides a lens for making visible this exploitation. Building on the WReC's understanding of the incongruity between the material and immaterial—caused by the shift to financialization—and the resulting irrealist characteristics in literature, I have established how the metabolic rift literalizes prerequisite forms of production, including energy, fertility, and exhaustion. These, in turn, I have explored in Clarice Lispector's *Hour of the Star*. Where Lispector demonstrates how commodities themselves temporarily energize labor-power, I have suggested they represent the extracted and exhausted energies of women's work. Only material products can sustain Macabéa and other social reproducers. Their reduction into a peripheral and immaterial place demonstrates the unsustainability of their ignored labor, signaling the crisis of consumption Macabéa's poverty causes, whilst her exhausted body—fed by commodities lacking substance—gradually loses materiality until she is entirely peripheralized. In exposing the depletion of women's physical and emotional resources which capitalism's exploitation produces, female exhaustion can be drawn in parallel with the unsustainable demand for production and profit that exists as a key factor in the self-defeating logic of capitalism. Lispector's *Hour of the Star* demonstrates how Macabéa's peripheralization and expendability are symptomatic of the ignored cost of social reproduction in a capitalist society.

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