

**The Body Written:**  
*L'écriture féminine* in two Brazilian novels:  
*A Hora da Estrela* and *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*

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*"Write your self. Your body must be heard.  
Only then will the immense resources of  
the unconscious spring forth."  
—Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa"*

Feminists in general agree that Western thought is the product of a fundamentally phallogocentric culture based on the systematic repression of women's experience (Jones 361). Consequently, they believe the primary literary discourse of Western culture to be phallogocentric: both men and women educated in traditionally male-dominated institutions have been trained to read and write as males. Acknowledging that an authentic female aesthetics is impossible as long as the primary literary discourse of Western culture remains phallogocentric, one school of French feminists including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and other proponents of *féminité* (the theory that "female subjectivity derives from women's physiology and bodily instincts as they affect sexual experience and the unconscious" [Jones 363]) herald *l'écriture féminine* as a powerful alternative discursive form and as an effective means of resisting and challenging male-centered thought.

By definition *l'écriture féminine* is the written articulation of the female body. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," a manifesto for *l'écriture féminine*, Hélène Cixous calls for women to write themselves; that is, to find their own expression in a language based upon what makes them different from men: their bodies. Thus, in theory, *l'écriture féminine* makes possible a discursive alternative to the predominant phallogocentric discourse of Western culture, through the employ of the female body as a direct source of women's writing (Jones 366). According to the proponents of this theory, such a new "female" discourse is necessarily spontaneous and immediate, flowing from the body, unrestrained by the logic that they claim to be typical of "male" discourse. Chantal Chawaf goes so far as to state:

In order to reconnect the book with the body and with pleasure, we must disintellectualize writing. The corporality of language stirs up our sensuality, wakes it up, pulls it away from indifferent inertia. Theories deprive us of whirlpools sparkling and free which should carry us naturally toward our full blossoming, our rebirth. (177)

In a similar comment equating bodily instincts with the drive for self-expression, Cixous writes:

". . . Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood". (891)

In view of these statements, not only is the alternative discourse made possible by *l'écriture féminine* "corporal," but also the very act of writing becomes a corporal experience likened to the acts of giving birth (artistic creation) and being born (self-creation as a writer).

In the two Brazilian novels to be analyzed in the following pages, Clarice Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela* and Marilene Felinto's *As Mulheres de Tijucoapapo*, we find clear evidence of the sort of female expression described above. This does not necessarily mean that the authors of these novels are proponents of French feminist theory, nor that the theory of *l'écriture féminine* is without inherent problems. We can state, however, that Clarice and Marilene—in very different ways—indeed write from the body, re-creating themselves as writers in the process of creating a literary work.

## I

### Artistic Creation and Self-Transfiguration in Clarice Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela*

by Alice A. Brittin

*Eu não sou um intelectual, escrevo com o corpo.*  
—Rodrigo S. M., narrator of *A Hora da Estrela*

Clarice Lispector's *A Hora da Estrela* (1977) is a metafiction: Clarice writing about a writer writing about the creation of a fictional character. As the list of alternate titles (15) implies, the novel is subject to numerous readings and interpretations. The interpretation that I find most appealing is that of *A Hora da Estrela* as a meditation on the act of writing as both artistic creation and self-transfiguration.

This interpretation is rendered by a metaphorical reading of the writer's project as the conception, gestation and eventual birth of a literary character.

The treatment of artistic creation in *A Hora da Estrela* takes as its premise the interdependence of the writer and his/her characters: a fictional character cannot exist without being written, and, likewise, a writer's existence as such depends upon his/her artistic creation. For example, the narrator, Rodrigo S. M., acknowledges that the creation of the fictional character Macabéa, a poor, uneducated girl from the Northeast of Brazil, affords him a destiny: "Ao escrever me surpreendo um pouco pois descobri que tenho um destino" (21). He also acknowledges that his creation is not merely narrative: "Não se trata apenas de narrativa, é antes de tudo vida primária que respira, respira, respira" (19). He considers her, instead, a living, breathing human being as real as himself: ". . . uma pessoa inteira que na certa está tão viva quanto eu" (25) of whose destiny he is but an impotent witness: "O fato é que tenho nas minhas mãos um destino e no entanto não me sinto com o poder de livremente inventar: sigo uma oculta linha fatal" (27). Interestingly, Rodrigo employs what according to the theory of *l'écriture féminine* is decidedly "female" discourse and his description of this interdependent relationship and gradual development of Macabéa can be read metaphorically as a process of gestation from the moment of conception (the first two sentences of the novel): "Tudo no mundo começou com um sim. Uma molécula disse sim a outra molécula e nasceu a vida" (17); through pregnancy: "Ela forçou dentro de mim a sua existência" (37); culminating in birth: "Macabéa no chão parecia se tornar cada vez mais uma Macabéa, como si chegasse a si mesma" (93); which is ironically achieved through abortion with the death of Macabéa: "Desculpai-me esta morte" (97).

Once aware of this metaphorical reading of *A Hora da Estrela*, numerous images and references to Macabéa as a fetus gestating in the narrator's imagination become evident. For example, in the beginning of the novel Macabéa is said to be living in a state of limbo: "Ela somente vive, inspirando e expirando, inspirando e expirando" (30). As the novel progresses, the "fina matéria orgânica" (47) that is Macabéa slowly takes shape as a young woman increasingly conscious of herself as a living organism: ". . . sou datilógrafa e virgem e gosto de coca-cola" (44) though she barely conceives of herself as human: "Desculpe mas não acho que sou muito gente" (56). Finally, Macabéa's visit to the fortune-teller, Madame Carlota, is symbolic of her (re)birth and the beginning of a new life as a person pregnant with

possibilities: "uma pessoa grávida de futuro" (90). But something happens. Rodrigo aborts Macabéa's new life before it has a chance to begin; he runs her down with a yellow Mercedes driven by the handsome foreigner that Madame Carlota had predicted would soon enter her life.

Though the theme of abortion is not explicit in *A Hora da Estrela*, it is implied throughout the novel. Many of the alternate titles suggest this theme: "A Culpa É Minha", "Ela Que Se Arranje", "Uma Sensação de Perda", "Eu Não Posso Fazer Nada", "Saída Discreta Pela Porta dos Fundos" (15); and Macabéa is described as a discarded fetus: "Um feto jogado na lata de lixo embrulhado em um jornal" (44). The recurrent theme of abortion implies that the narrator's killing of Macabéa is indeed a form of abortion and perhaps it is due to this metaphor that Clarice, desiring to establish distance between herself and Macabéa, chooses to employ a male narrator, for as Rodrigo S. M. observes: "Um outro escritor, sim, mas teria que ser homen porque escritora mulher pode lacrimejar piegas" (20). Such is to say that women, experiencing physically the life gestating within their bodies, would naturally have a more emotional reaction to abortion than men.

The narrator of *A Hora da Estrela* relinquishes all responsibility for Macabéa's demise: ". . . Esta história de que não tenho culpa e que sai como sair" (44), and offers no explanation as to why her new life is so abruptly terminated. Perhaps Rodrigo S. M. is convinced of her incompetence for life: ". . . ela era incompetente. Incompetente para a vida" (31). Perhaps he is convinced that she has no place in the world: "Macabéa viu que não havia para ela lugar no mundo" (76). Or perhaps her inferiority, "era subproduto" (68), condemns him as an inferior writer/ creator.

The question remains unanswered. However, the narrator does explain that he undertakes the creation of Macabéa because the writing of her story will ultimately result in his self-transfiguration: "A ação desta história terá como resultado minha transfiguração em outrem e minha materialização enfim em objeto" (27). Keeping in mind the concept of the interdependence between a writer and his/her characters, Rodrigo S. M.'s explanation as to why he writes about Macabéa reveals that he is only able to define himself as a writer/creator in contrast to his character/creation. Thus, Macabéa is Rodrigo's transfiguration as writer; his existence is as dependent upon the creation of Macabéa as her existence is dependent upon his having given her life. Theirs is a mutual existence, and, consequently, a mutual death: "Macabéa me matou" (97). Or so it seems, and herein

lies the irony of *A Hora da Estrela*: try as he might, Rodrigo is unable to fully abort his creation, for once created, a fictional character is immortal. Macabéa's death, the moment in which she gains full self-consciousness ("... eu sou, eu sou, eu sou" [95]), her hour as a star ("a hora de estrela de cinema de Macbéa morrer" [94]), is her transfiguration. It is the single moment that gives her existence essence, making her a fully developed literary character and allowing her to be conceived anew every time a reader opens the novel and reads "Tudo no mundo começou com um sim" (17).

## II

### Swamp and Creation in Marilene Felinto's *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*

by Kimberle Schumock López

*As Mulheres de Tijucopapo* (1982) by Marilene Felinto is a clear example of writing from the body: the first person narrator, Rísia, a poor black Protestant woman from the Northeast of Brazil, gives birth to herself through the process of writing the novel. Because of her marginality, she needs to re-create herself from her own past and through her own body. With repetition and metonymy, the novel traces the nine-month journey of Rísia's consciousness backwards from adulthood toward the womb, where she is able to recreate herself again from the material of her mythicized home, Tijucopapo.

The place-name Tijucopapo is extremely significant for understanding the creative process in Marilene's novel, since it juxtaposes the two words "tijuco," defined as "morass, slough, mud, mire, ooze, bog, marsh, swamp," (*Novo Michaelis Dictionary*) and "papo," connoting the slang expression "bater papo," to talk or chat. The combination of these two words suggests that language itself—the *materia prima* of the novel—surges from the matter of the swamp, the overabundant source of the sticky, vital fluids associated with the lower body and the creation of life.

Marilene Felinto creates a new language and a new self out of the matter of the swamp, processed through her body. Her writing is essentially feminine, according to the definition of the French feminists: it is fluid, flowing from the body, and it appears spontaneous and immediate. Her novel also is not phallogocentric: it has no center, structured beginning, nor narrative closure. Marilene rejects linear narrative, relying instead on fragmentation, repetition and flashback to

portray a more complex and organic creative consciousness. The most powerful technique that she employs is metonymy, since it is through a series of metonymic associations that Rísia re-creates herself—and the novel(em)from the matter of the swamp.

Through metonymic association, the swamp, full of mud and waste, of life and potential life, is the matter from which the narrator re-creates herself. For example, she describes the black earth that receives liquid: "essa terra preta que aloja os pingos da chuva" (42, 125), and employs a sexual metaphor, "chuva caindo e penetrando a terra" (104). She wants to be the fecundating liquid, since her tears are rain (42, 44, 104, 130) and she herself is rain: "Eu era um pingo de chuva, uma dor" (125); however, she is metonymically more related to the receiving earth, which is black like her: "a terra negra" (44); "minha cor estava negra" (110). Liquids are more associated with sperm: Rísia's tears are salty (61), she swallows salt (78) and water (61) and salty tears (111). She feels herself invaded by the salty water of the sea when, before arriving in Tijucoapapo and being reborn, she obtains the ultimate sticky, salty liquid necessary for her rebirth—literal sperm—by having sex with Lampião (111, 117), the legendary hero of the backlands (111). Rísia thus re-creates herself from the essential matter of the swamp and from the lower body, which is both masculine and feminine, since only woman can give birth, but not without the essential element of sperm.

Thus Rísia re-creates herself from the swamp, which is full of essential life-giving matter. Marilene's novel abounds with references to excrement, mud, swamp, blood, sperm: these are the sticky vital fluids associated with the life cycle. The narrator repeats on various occasions that she "comia terra e cagava lombriga" (14, 15, 44); eating dirt and excreting parasites becomes a symbol of the ability to create life from existing matter processed through the body. This is a process which residents of the *Higienópolis* (91) of São Paulo deny (106), and which therefore makes the marginal Rísia the bearer of a vital capacity that city dwellers lack. She not only processes these materials; she gives birth to herself by actually becoming the swamp which is the source of life. She says, "sou mesmo feita de lama" (15), "Sou feita de lama imunda. O meu choro. Era uma vez, no onde a praia vira lama, Tijucoapapo, nasceu minha mãe. Eu sou feita de lama que é negra de terra" (56). She returns to her place of origin, Tijucoapapo, ". . . para descobrir se eu sou mesmo feita de lama" (115). Only by going home to where her mother was born, "lá donde é tudo lamaçal" (57), can she form part of the women of Tijucoapapo, "mulheres da matéria do tijuco" (57).

The narrator thus creates herself and her novel by molding these vital substances to transform them into something new. In flashbacks to her childhood Rísia explains that she often played in the mud, (48) sculpting earthen forms. In one significant scene, the child Rísia makes a figure out of clay and gives it the name of her stillborn brother, Ismael (47), with whom she identified only when told that he looked like her (46). Another important sticky substance is wax, since Rísia uses crayons, "lápis de cera" (56, 100), to transform her world, to create a new landscape (86, 105), and to paint her revolution (68, 79, 100) on the blank page (56). Crayons are not only made of a moldable substance to be used for drawing; they are also a child's first writing instrument. Besides painting her revolution and re-creating herself, Rísia also creates a novel, through the written word.

But the word is also primordially spoken. According to the French feminists, women's expression surges spontaneously from the body; in this it can be compared to vomiting. Marilene's protagonist vomits on several occasions (16, 17, 34, 80, 88, 90, 121): "vomitei quase até as tripas" (16), a sign of intelligence: "sou muito inteligente e vomito com extrema facilidade" (88). The desire and the need to express herself from the body is inherent in Rísia: "Há uma ânsia de vômito inerente a mim" (80). It is a means of expression parallel to speaking, or even a substitute for other forms of expression. Rísia vomits life and blood "Eu vomitei placas coaguladas de sangue" (125) and language: "Não tive forças para gritar e vomitei" (125). It is significant that vomit is the result of matter being processed through the body, like the new language Marilene's narrator creates: a corporal language which surges forth from the body, but which is fashioned from the existing material available to her.

In the act of creating a new discourse from both her body and existing matter, the narrator of *As Mulheres de Tijucoapapo* gestates, "a criança que existe dentro de mim," (82) and gives birth to herself. She cannot erase her past and begin from nothing: she cannot deny the marginal context in which she grew up, in Tijucoapapo, where "Papai quase sempre me pegava" (15) and "Mamãe nunca me abraçava" (25). Instead of creating a completely different life, in a social vacuum or in the *Higienópolis* (91) of São Paulo, she recognizes that she was born and raised in a social and psychological context, a context which, no matter how negative an experience it constituted, is still hers, and still the material from which she must re-create herself. Thus Rísia gives birth to herself, but in order to do so, she returns to her home, to Tijucoapapo.

Marilene's narrator must return to her origin in order to give

birth to herself and to her new language, since the sterile environment of São Paulo takes the word away from her: "quase perco a fala na grande cidade" (56). Thus she needs to return home, to the swamp, where she ate dirt and produced life, where she ate, spit and defecated and spoke, creating the word from herself and from her world. The body and its products are thus associated not only with physical creation, but also with language and the act of writing: "Eu tinha cinco anos e comia terra e cagava lombriga abestalhada . . . comendo, cuspindo e cagando e dizendo . . ." (14-15).

In conclusion, *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo* is clearly one example of writing from the body. Both the form and content of her novel reflect the specifically female capacity to reproduce, since with the written word Rísia creates a new self which emerges from the matter of the swamp: from mud, from clay, from rain; and from the matter of the lower body: from excrement, from intestinal parasites, from sperm. Thus the matter of the swamp, when processed through the body, becomes the material for both physical reproduction and literary production: Marilene's narrator not only re-creates herself in the process of her nine-month journey home to Tijucopapo; she also creates the novel that is *As Mulheres de Tijucopapo*.

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