

Offering 7. Abject feminine characters

7.1 Macabéa and The Hour of the Star

A Hora da Estrela or in translation “The Hour of the Star” (Lispector 1986c) was Clarice Lispector’s last text and has been a huge source for my performance work and thesis, especially since I moved to Australia in 2003. I loved Clarice Lispector when I was in Brazil in my early twenties and had just moved from the countryside to Brasilia. I have read *A Hora da Estrela* and watched the movie many times and ended up in tears the last time I watched it in Melbourne after enthusiastically finding the DVD at Readings Bookshop in Carlton.

7.1.1 A synopsis

The story concerns a protagonist Macabéa, a simple *nordestina*²³ who arrives in Rio and finds work as a typist. She has a name that conjures disgust in the other characters, sounding as it does in Portuguese, like “a skin disease” (Lispector 1986c:43). Her impoverished upbringing is reflected in her internal, spiritual poverty and Macabéa lacks articulation to understand her own feelings. She never complains about her life as she accepts things as they are, and she never has courage to harbour hope. She could however reflect “with satisfaction”:

I am a typist and a virgin, and I like coca-cola (Lispector 1986c:35).

Macabéa has a dismal affair with *Olímpico* (a false name invented with illusions of grandeur)—a *nordestino*²⁴, murderer and metal-worker, who derived little satisfaction from their *relationship*, and left her for her buxom *mulata*²⁵ workmate Glória. Macabéa lacked even the sense to know she was unhappy. Finally Macabéa—after losing her job and after visiting a false-clairvoyant and ex-prostitute *Madam Carlota*—does experience a kind of happiness or perhaps ecstasy, trembling all over, “for there is a painful side to a surfeit of happiness” (Lispector 1986c:77). She would meet a man, a foreigner called “Hans”, and she would marry him. Leaving Madam Carlota’s rooms, Macabéa was “a person enriched with a future”. At that moment crossing the road, she is struck and killed by “a yellow Mercedes, as huge as an ocean liner” (Lispector 1986c:79)—Hans’ Mercedes?

²³ Female from the North East of Brazil, a deeply impoverished region of Brazil.

²⁴ Male from the North East of Brazil.

²⁵ A woman of African and European heritage, but in the Brazilian context, a term frequently loaded with notions of sexual availability.

7.1.2 Alterity, instability and hybridity

Estava com uma dificuldade para renovar o meu visto e isso, junto com a isolação que estava sentindo por fazer o doutorado e o fato que sou uma estrangeira, muitas vezes me faziam sentir como uma Macabea em Melbourne. I was having trouble renewing my visa and this, together with the isolation I was feeling from doing my PhD and the fact that I was a foreigner in Australia, often made me feel like a Macabéa in Melbourne. Am I a Macabéa? Do I perform for myself? Where am I—in-between? In-between what? Am I less important than nothing?

I love Clarice Lispector because, although she often touches the political, racial, identity, and social facets of her “moving characters”, she is not stable and identifiable enough to be captured by these factors. Her writing questions “phallogocentric” discourse, gendered definitions, and racialised identities “by blurring the line between them while commenting on the multiplicity of identity brought about by these dislocations of the subject” (Feracho 2005:67). Feracho writes:

A study of Lispector’s oeuvre reveals a common theme of tension: always moving between two worlds. The instability and flux of the narrative voices are due to several destabilizing factors found inside and outside of the texts, including the author’s geographic and linguistic displacement and the influence of a poststructuralist orientation in her work. Lispector begins from a position of marginality and engages in a constant dialogue with various sometimes dominant discourses, be it on a social, economic, or structural level. In ‘A Hora da Estrela’ the instability of language and subject results in a self-examination through the structural representation of hybridity in three areas:

1) *The connection of authorial and narrative voice established in the “Dedicatória.”*

2) *The interconnectedness of author/narrator/protagonist ...*

3) *The textual subversion of masculine and feminine discourses as an authorial subversion and post-feminine critique of her own process of self definition.*

The first step to understand the particular dynamics of this dialogue for both the author, Lispector, and the characters in her text is to establish the levels of marginalization and centrality on which they are operating (Feracho 2005:69).

According to Nelson Vieira, says Feracho, Lispector has a certain “biculturalism” due to her birth in the largely Catholic Ukraine to a Jewish family and subsequent migration to Brazil with its endemic Candomblé and

Macumba practices, and this explains the “sense of alterity, instability and hybridity in her narratives”. Vieira also claims that Lispector’s originality “stemmed from a unique style that transmitted a sense of indeterminacy and alterity as well as eagerness to understand the mysteries of existence. This quest kept her grappling with Derridean feelings of displacement and de-centeredness, which are recurring features of Jewish exegetic thought and culture” (Feracho 2005:70).

Feracho writes that in order to escape her feelings of isolation and difference, she used a literary technique common to that of Jewish thought, one harnessing these feelings in a “quest for meaning”, and this drive for belonging was to achieve a state of balance from her inherent position of instability (Feracho 2005:70). Even so, this balance was a volatile one:

For Lispector, the literary terrain became a quest born between an effect of de-territorialization and her insertion into a space at the very limits of the language to which she actually desired to belong. In the tension between the clear boundaries of a geographically referentialized space and the search for a potentially unlimited space that could subsume all creative energy lay the fact that she was a foreigner, trying not to be one yet being one at the same time. Her nomadic transit originates, then, in the habitable zone of conflict that language constitutes (de Sousa in Feracho 2005:71).

Hélène Cixous considers *The Hour of the Star* unparalleled in its “signification, audacity, and invention” (Cixous 1990:145). Cixous writes of Macabéa as being “so little, so miserable, so thin” that she would “not have been useful for anything” were it not for Lispector’s literary attention. Cixous wonders however—hinting at Macabéa’s autobiographical qualities—if it was not the character that had invented the author (Cixous 1990:145).

Cixous points to the multiple listing of alternative book titles in the opening chapter and its idiosyncratic typography:

THE HOUR
OF THE STAR

The Blame is Mine
or
The Hour of the Star

or
Let Her Fend for Herself
or
The Right to Scream²⁷
Clarice Lispector (her signature)
.As for the Future.
or
Singing the Blues
or
She Doesn't Know How to Scream
or
A Sense of Loss
or
Whistling in the Dark Wind
or
I Can Do Nothing
or
A Record of Preceding Events
or
A Tearful Tale of Cordel
or
A Discreet Exit by the Back Door

She describes Lispector's signature inserted between the titles as a kind of scream. More cryptically, she asks if the insertion of Lispector's signature signifies the "or" of the text, the "or" of her protagonist, the "mark of a possibility of exchange between equivalents" (Cixous 1990:146). The author's dedication bears the note "in truth Clarice Lispector" and is written in the male voice. "Are there two Clarices?" Cixous asks, and of her writing as a man "All women writers have done it, but with her, it is voluntary, both as game and as a serious business. It is carried to extreme maturity here" (Cixous 1990:148). Lispector writes in this dedication:

*I dedicate it to the deep crimson of my blood as someone in his prime ...
to all those prophets of our age who have revealed me to myself and*

²⁷ "Scream" is translated as "Protest" in the 1986 English edition of *The Hour of the Star*.

made me explode into: me. This me that is you, for I cannot bear to be simply me, I need others in order to stand up (Lispector 1986c:7-8).

The “prophets of our age” and the text’s reader, according to Feracho, are what support Lispector and constitute her *identidade*, her identity. The “collective connections” with the reader and the “other influences are a necessity to maintain her creative capacity” and the “reader is invited to be an active participant in her texts by stating that the two are in fact one” (Feracho 2005:73). Lispector, in Ferraco’s view, “breaks down the boundary between the author or creator as sender of the message and the reader as solely the recipient of the text or message” (Feracho 2005:74).

Feracho notes the “racial, ethnic, and class alienation of Macabéa and its effect on outside definitions of her identity”. She writes of the narrator *Rodrigo S.M.’s* “feelings of entitlement” over the story of Macabéa:

It is my duty to relate everything about this girl among thousands of others like her. It is my duty, however unrewarding, to comfort her with her own existence” (Hour of the Star 13). Here the narrator expresses his perceived power over Macabéa’s story as his social right to present the injustices of her life. It is important to look at the reasoning Rodrigo uses specifically at the end of this page. He ends by saying that there exists a general entitlement to exercising one’s voice (specifically about the miseries of life) but follows this declaration not with an affirmation or hope for Macabéa one day finding her voice but rather of his decision to speak for her. The underlying supposition is that she is silenced in society and as such is invisible, even to herself (Feracho 2005:78).

The other alternative titles “A Sense of Loss” and “I Can Do Nothing” can be seen as a declaration by both the narrator Rodrigo and the protagonist Macabéa about “the individual transition from object to subject” (Feracho 2005:80). Macabéa from the northeast of Brazil—a *nordestina*—with a background that she prefers to forget, Clarice from the Ukraine, running away to Brazil and Rodrigo, the *rational* and articulate side of Macabéa and Clarice, two lost, displaced women, who are too close to the object of analyses: themselves. Due to this overly intimate look at themselves, they get mixed, lost and cloudy. They are all together as “one” and this “one” is multiple, kaleidoscopic and hybrid.

7.1.3 The character-actor hybrid

I am an actor who always gets mixed with the character, with the author—I become multiplied. *Eu nunca tive o controle que teve o Rodrigo porque sabia que nos não temos controle no final. Nos todos vamos morrer*

um dia. I have never had Rodrigo's control because I know we have no control in the end. We are all going to die one day. Is it my spiritualistic and anthropophagic upbringing that made me a displaced actor?

I am multiple and hybrid in my creations. I no longer control my background and I lose consciousness if I try to control all the voices and references: such as Umbanda, Candomblé, Spiritism, butoh, ballet, ex-votos, contemporary theatre, anthropophagy, Carnival, and violence. *A culpa é minha*, "The Blame is Mine" about the way this research is (being) shaped. It is a mosaic of me and I despair due to the multiplicity of my many possibilities. I am too close to the object who became a subject and vice versa.

I feel very close to Clarice now, for example, and I am the voice of Clarice, Rodrigo and Macabéa.

Posso fazer nada ou estou perdida e gosto dessa dor: ai ai ai. Criei o Pequeno Mundo de um aluno brasileiro de PhD numa bolsa de estudos em Melbourne. Comecei apenas com um filho que fala português e acabei com um marido que fala inglês. "I can Do Nothing" or "I am lost", and I enjoy that pain: *ai ai ai*. I invented the *Little World* of a Brazilian PhD student on a scholarship in Melbourne. I started out with only a Portuguese speaking child and have ended up with an English speaking husband.

7.1.4 Feeling of Loss, Laziness, and Migration,

As Rodrigo/Lispector observes on Macabéa's upbringing, this *senso se perda*, this feeling of loss is one that we can trace back to birth. For the narrator, she, Macabéa, is vaguely aware of her inability to completely belong to, or to be on an equal footing with, those around her—whether it be linguistically, socially, economically, or even, to a certain degree, racially. As a migrant identified as originating from the northeast state of Alagoas in Brazil, Lispector presents the reader and narrator with an identity for her protagonist that is charged with historical, economic, racial, and social connotations of alterity and oppression. Macabéa is a misplaced *nordestina* in Rio de Janeiro. I am a misplaced *Uberabense/Brasiliense*²⁸ in Melbourne. I type as badly as Macabéa, although my fingernails are cleaner. Am I going to be able to finish this PhD? Is my supervisor going to stop supervising me?

²⁸ Uberabense: someone from Uberaba. Brasiliense: someone from Brasília.

7.1.5 Macabéa as an unknown butoh-Carmem Miranda

In a scene in *The Hour of the Star*, Macabéa fails to go to work one day to stay at home performing in front of the mirror. This sounds sad I know and I myself did just that for months. The result of those pathetic and exciting hours spent in front of the mirror (doing a kind of Latin mouse's contemporary dance training—I will come to this mouse idea later!) in a tiny apartment in Fitzroy North, Melbourne, was the performance called *Little World*—version number one, presented in the South Project (see Section 9.3).

However, in contrast to Macabéa, this character-mosaic is not so unlucky as to die before realising her desires. She divinely desires. She needs. *Simonéa* (Simone + Macabéa) finally and deliberately decides that she will not go anywhere, but stay inside the closet where she sleeps—a kind of moving furniture/house/jumble where she plays with her many invisible friends/spirits/offerings (heads, legs, arms of dolls, simple toys, a collection of fake teeth and moustaches, weird fancy dresses, jackets, huge ears, noses, bride's mouse dresses). On top of the closet there is God named *Tempo* (time). She makes him offerings because she knows she has as many lives as she desires until the end of her project and the final performance. She is too self-conscious to be the performance-artist in the dream as described by Guillermo Gómez-Peña (see 6.6). Furthermore "she" is a post-modern artist who is still linked to her own fantasies of possible Indigenous roots—and by the way she does not want her soul to be robbed by a video camera. She is the self-image and the anti-image. She is a Butoh Carmen Miranda with *tamancos*²⁹ dancing with musical bananas inside the closet. Sometimes she disappears but she tries to communicate with her audience. She always does come back. Is she a spirit? Is she invisible? Is her daily food (coca-cola and hotdogs) fattening enough to make her visible?

She might prefer call herself or the character *Ela* (She). It means that she is "the other" while being herself. She is not "me". She is "She" despite being "me". Is subjectivity also imagination? It is like a simple play of opening the closet and unclosing. She appears each time with a different face/body (mum, daddy, lovers, haters, ghosts, scary monsters, romantic brides, a woman in crisis over turning forty, laughing Frida Kalos).

²⁹ Brazilian women's platform shoes.

It is a semi-autobiographical performance. Everything is somehow true but despite this the character will remain “the other.” We live and we die, but what happens in-between? She is never completely happy but she has some disturbing fun with her uncertainty. Sometimes she *stresses-out* because for example she has a deadline for a performance and the sense of responsibility of becoming something else, that is She, herself. But She has a final doubt: is She an actor?

7.2 Josefine the Songstress

7.2.1 A vulnerable talent

Who is *Josefine the Songstress*? Josefine is a mysterious and refined singer among simple and rude people, that’s who. She is also the protagonist in another *final* text, this time Kafka’s last story (Gross 2002:90) from 1924, *Josefine, the Songstress or: the Mouse People*.³⁰

Josefine has a rare talent among the mouse people. She can sing, and beautifully so, and she has a dedicated though fickle audience. To the mouse people Josefine seems to bring moments of levity with her music—but is it music or escapism? Some, question the veracity of her talent and suspect she is only *piping* the notes. The narrator of the story, himself a mouse person also wonders; he says:

If you stand a good way away from her and listen, or still better put yourself to the following test: if Josefine should happen to be singing along with other voices, and you set yourself the task of picking out hers, then you will invariably distinguish only a quite ordinary piping, standing out if at all by its fragility or weakness. And yet if you are placed in front of her, it is not mere piping; in order to understand her art it is necessary not just to hear her but to see her as well (Kafka 2000b:221).

In the story, she receives a certain protection from the people and yet, Josefine, “takes the opposite view: she believes that it is she who protects the people” (Kafka 2000b:226). Josefine seeks concessions from society in an ongoing petition “to be excused all work on account of her song; all the cares about gaining her daily bread and about everything else in our struggle for existence” (Kafka 2000b:231). Her requests are ignored, for the mouse people “so easily moved” by her performances are, “sometimes not to be moved at all” (Kafka 2000b:231). Like all mouse people she is “sensible” and

³⁰ The text was in fact written “to help finance Kafka’s desperate need for medical care”—from the editors note in (Kafka 2000b).

does her proper share of work, sings as best she can—but she tires of her struggle (Kafka 2000b:232).

Over time, the (mice) people reciprocally tire of her, thinking her lazy. She begins to make threats, on one occasion threatening to limit her performances—removing the grace notes from her song—or at least cutting them short. No one seemed to notice. She begins to feign illness, but still to no avail—and her protests at concerts do nothing to further her cause. She eventually fails to show up for her concerts and disappears. “Of her own accord she withdraws from song, of her own accord she destroys the power she has won over our hearts”. The narrator asks: “How could she have gained that power, since she knows these hearts so little?” Ultimately the mice people will recover from their heart-break as the narrator predicts: “She is a little episode in the endless history of our people, and the people will get over their loss” (Kafka 2000b:236).

7.3 Macabéa, Josefine and the abject

In the washroom at the office she painted her lips lavishly beyond their natural outline, in the hope that she might achieve that stunning effect seen on the lips of Marilyn Munroe. ... The thick lipstick looked like blood spurting from a nasty gash, as if someone had punched her on the mouth and broken her front teeth ... When she went back to her desk Glória chuckled:

- *Have you taken leave of your senses girl? What are you up to, wearing all that war-paint? You could be mistaken for a tart.*
- *I’m a virgin! You won’t find me going out with soldiers or sailors.*
- *Excuse my asking: is it painful being ugly?*

— Clarice Lispector

- *Are you dieting to lose weight, my girl?*
- Macabéa didn’t know how to reply.*

— *What do you eat?*

— *Hot dogs.*

— *Is that all?*

- *Sometimes I eat a mortadella sandwich.*

— *What do you drink? Milk?*

— *Only coffee and soft drinks.*

- *What do you mean by soft drinks?—He probed, not knowing how to proceed. He questioned her at random:*

— *Do you sometimes have fits of vomiting?*

- *Oh, never!—she exclaimed in a panic, for she was not a fool to go wasting food.*

— Clarice Lispector
(Lispector 1986c:61-62 & 66-67)

7.3.1 Kristeva's *abjection*

Julia Kristeva identifies three main kinds of *abjection*: that in relation to food, to waste and to sexual difference (Grosz 1989:73) and from the two quotations above, our Macabéa would seem to have scored the hat-trick.³¹ *Parabéns Macabéa!*—congratulations!

In psychoanalytic terms and in order to understand abjection, Elizabeth Grosz writes, we must examine the ways “the inside and the outside of the body are constituted”, the demarcations between the self and the Other, and the way a child’s body becomes “bounded” as a “unified whole”—“the conditions under which the child is able to claim the body as its own and, through its ‘clean and proper’ body, gain access to symbolisation” (Grosz 1989:73). To clarify, a symbol is an object or action used to substitute for something else—for example, a word can substitute for a thing—and this developmental *access to symbolisation* depends on an ability to gain autonomy from the outside world and upon the desire to communicate what is being experienced (Tustin 1992:135).

Grosz contrasts Kristeva’s notions of the abject with Freud’s claims that civilisation has been founded on a repulsion “of ‘impure’ incestual attachments” (see Freud 1942). While there is a parallel in this with Kristeva’s view that subjectivity and sociality exist only with the exclusion of the “improper, the unclean and the disorderly”, the excluded—or the abject—can “never be fully obliterated”. It is the recognition of this “impossibility” in the subject that generates the sensation that Kristeva describes as *abjection* (Grosz 1989:71-72).

Abjection is what the symbolic must reject, cover over or contain. The abject is what beckons the subject ever closer to its edge. It insists on the subject’s necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality—those relations which consciousness and reason find intolerable ... Abjection is a byproduct of traversing bodily zones and sensations, those which need to be unified and harnessed in the constitution of the subject according to the norms and rules of a given culture. The abject cannot be readily classified, for it is necessarily ambiguous, undecidedly inside and outside (like the skin of milk), dead and alive (like the corpse), autonomous and engulfing (like infection and pollution) (Grosz 1989:71-72).

The three types of abjection relating to food, to waste and to sexual difference have approximate equivalence in the oral, anal and genital forms of

³¹ Sporting terminology, used particularly in cricket, for three consecutive successes.

sexuality—and reaction to such *abjects* can be profound—commonly expressed in “retching, vomiting, spasms” and “choking” in disgust (Grosz 1989:73). The abject “is an unnameable, pre-oppositional, permeable barrier”, it needs some “kind of control” or, without it, some manageable “segregation” away from the “symbolic”. According to Grosz, a number of rituals perform this segregation separating the “sacred and the profane” and Julia Kristeva’s trio of ‘revolutionary’ terms 1) Madness, 2) Holiness and 3) Poetry, establish connections with the abject that “breach, yet also confirm symbolic conventions”. Kristeva, says Grosz, argues that religion, prizes the subject “from the abyss of abjection” to displace it. In socialisation, “the acquisition of a symbolic place” represses the abject, and that literature, poetry, the arts, are all “attempts to sublimate the abject” (Grosz 1989:77).

7.3.2 Art versus Law, Morality and Religion

Am I looking for abjection or am I trying to purify the abjection? Do my characters seek to liberate the spirit through a sublimation of the abject or are they a vehicle for me to dwell in my own personal horrors? What is the relation between art and abjection? Does performing and writing imply an ability to conceive the abject and to speak its language? According to Kristeva, Religion, Law and Morality are the constructs necessary to contain the “perverse interspace of abjection”. She argues that while not acting as their substitute, contemporary literature (I would risk to say contemporary performance too) acknowledges their shortcomings and absurdity—making “sport of them”. The artist, fascinated with the abject, internalises it and studies its language. The artist acts as a “judge” on abjection, impersonating the law, but is also an “accomplice”—and the same thus becomes true of the artist’s work. Literature (and we will presume other art forms) traverses boundaries between “Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality” (Kristeva 1982:16).

7.3.3 The abject mouse

The Brazilian—less accustomed to sentimental Anglophone stories such as the *Wind in the Willows*, with its *Ratty*, Beatrix Potter’s *Johnny Town-Mouse* and numerous sympathetic *rodent-ine* portrayals in film (rabbits are also popular)—has little love for the mouse, or the rat, in fiction or elsewhere. In Brazil, people die each year from *Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome*, propagated by rodent urine and faeces (da Silva et al. 1997) and I know of few stories in the Portuguese language embracing the rodent as a heroic

protagonist. What could be more abject than a mouse?! I rather suspect that Kafka, living in Prague at the beginning of the 20th Century had a similar distaste.

The abjection in *Josefine the Songstress* is one linked to her artistic vanity and conceit:

Nor is this a common vanity, for the opposition, to which I myself half belong, certainly admires her no less than the great crowd, but Josefine does not want just to be admired, she wants to be admired in exactly the manner she prescribes, admiration in itself is of no interest to her (Kafka 2000b:222).

Her vanity resonates with grotesque *mousiness*: This “fragile, vulnerable” (Kafka 2000b:225) mouse with “that small and feeble voice” (Kafka 2000b:222); with her “touchy discontent” (Kafka 2000b:227), fighting against the dissent of her audience “with all the might of her feeble vocal chords” (Kafka 2000b:225) and “with her arms outflung and her neck stretched up as far as it would go” (Kafka 2000b:223). Josefine’s conceit and pretensions are rendered all the more ludicrous because of her abject qualities—their implied malignancy.

Josefine however cannot be held wholly responsible for her deceptions—the abjection extends to her entire mouse community. Her audience has needs too, and is complicit in the deception by abandoning reason:

A certain perennial, ineradicable childishness pervades our people; in direct contrast to our greatest virtue, our infallible practical common sense, we sometimes behave with the utmost foolishness, and it is exactly the same kind of foolishness that children display: a crazy, extravagant, grandiose, irresponsible kind of foolishness, and often all for the sake of a little fun (Kafka 2000b:229).

Kafka has the heart not simply to lay abjection at the feet of the artist, but with her entire community—with her culture. So we can view *Josefine the Songstress* as a satire on both the artist and the role of the artist. While a tension and constant struggle exists between the artist and her audience, they are co-dependents and co-conspirators.

7.3.4 Macabéa—a study in abjection

Where Kafka uses abjection as a device to satirise the artist and society, Lispector’s *Macabéa* is a direct study in abjection. *Macabéa*, as I have said

above, has a name that sounds in Portuguese like that of a skin disease.³² According to Kristeva, the skin is “the essential if not initial boundary between of biological and psychic individuation” (Kristeva 1982:101). Macabéa’s name is itself an abjection—the diseased boundary between Self and Other; at the very coalface of abjection, so to speak.³³

In part one of the epigraph at the beginning of section 7.3, Macabéa’s poorly applied lipstick “like blood spurting from a nasty gash” is a clear allusion to menstruation—a “prime abject” as Grosz says (Grosz 1989:76). She is compromised inside and out:

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpses, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without ... Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (Kristeva 1982:71).



Figure 7.1 Cachorro quente brasileiro com molho de pimenta (Brazilian hotdog with chilli sauce)

The hotdogs (see part two of the epigraph in 7.3), washed down with coca cola, and on which Macabéa finds sustenance, have multiple abject and

³² Macabéa is pronounced ‘mak-ka-bey-ya’ with the accent on the ‘bey’. Australian friends tell me the name sounds quite *pretty* in English.

³³ It is interesting to note that her name was in fact a votive offering! Her mother had vowed to *Our Lady of Sorrows*, to give her this name should she survive the first years after birth (Lispector 1986:43).

psychoanalytic qualities—loaded with symbolic and implied references to castration, the ingestion of innutritious matter (ingested pollutants) or of bodily fluids, the cadaver, and perhaps even references to the biblical serpent. Let us however keep this simple, and look at the hotdog as a fast-food “pollutant”: Kristeva writes, the loathing of “food, a piece of filth, waste or dung” as the “most elementary and most archaic form of abjection”; the “repugnance” of which, as experienced in spasms, retching and vomiting, acts as protection” (Kristeva 1982:2). In the epigraph—which details a conversation with a bemused and *abjected* doctor—we see Macabéa has no discrimination in her consumption, and consequently has no abhorrence of the impure or mechanism to reject it. She is at-one with the abject.

The narrator of *The Hour of the Star* mocks Macabéa:

I forgot to mention that Macabéa had one unfortunate trait: she was sensual. How could there be so much sensuality in a body as withered as hers, without her even suspecting its presence? A mystery. At the outset of her affair with Olímpico, she had asked him for a small photograph, three by four centimetres, which showed him smiling broadly and showing off his gold tooth. She was so excited when he gave it to her that she said three Our Fathers and two Hail Marys to recover her composure (Lispector 1986c:60).

Should I divulge that she adored soldiers? She was mad about them. Whenever she caught site of a soldier, she would think, trembling with excitement: is he going to murder me? (Lispector 1986c:35)

Macabéa’s sensuality seems loathsome, distorted and out-of-place. Similarly her attempts to achieve femininity are forced and clumsy, coming as they do from crude observations of films (see 7.3), or in response to the passing comments of strangers. The inappropriateness of her sensuality is due to her incomprehension of that sensuality, and because of her de-sexualised body. In terms of abjection, she herself is a pollutant—or “like a hair in one’s soup” as Olímpico once observed (Lispector 1986c:60). As with Olímpico’s condemnations, the narrator’s assaults on Macabéa are equally damning and relentless:

Lost in thought, she examined the blotches on her face in the mirror. In Alagoas they had a special name for this condition—it was commonly believed to be caused by the liver. The girl concealed her blotches with a thick layer of white powder which gave the impression she had been whitewashed but it was preferable to looking sallow. Her general appearance was grimy for she rarely washed (Lispector 1986c:26).

Coitadinha Macabéa! Poor little thing!

7.4 Me as Josaphine

In the period of devising *Little World*, reading Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Franz Kafka, I received an intriguing letter from my friend Marcela Hollanda, an artist/intellectual/fashion designer from Brasilia whom I met in the University of Brasilia in Theatre Department in 1986. Marcela also collaborated as set and costume designer in my first significant performance work called *Flor* in 1987, presented in a festival called "Cometa Cenas" (see 9.6.16). She wrote to me, answering some questions that I no longer exactly remember, but she responded in a beautiful though provocative letter, presented here in translation:

Yes, I will answer and say what comes to mind without thinking too much about it. Some of the thoughts seem to contradict themselves. I'm going to say what I remember and what I know today.

The oldest memory I have of you, is of you arriving on foot at the department, alongside Marcos Savini. You had long hair which fell down over your face and you were almost always looking down. You were wearing a baggy purple top and black trousers and you seemed frightened, lost: you really looked the part of a simple girl from the countryside, from Uberaba.

Gradually, another Simone began to show herself, both in the classroom and through your solo work. This Simone caused a feeling of uneasiness in everybody but it's hard to put a finger on it. Nobody knew if you were an actress, a ballerina, a performer or simply mad. But, anyway, or maybe because of, each 'strange' work you presented, the big question kept coming up - is Simone marvellous or is she crazy? I'm sure the majority of our friends and the audience at that time in the city asked themselves that question. I know, or used to know, people who felt afraid of you then. But, when you played 'the rose', 'the horrendous beast' and other roles, an eerie silence filled the room which, again, nobody could put their finger on but everyone recognised as a powerful strength coming from deep within. The reviews, published or not, always recognised you quickly but this feeling of unease was always present. The uncertainty of mice, and here, another point comes up. Your small body and your darting, fearful look, seemed, to me, like a mouse cowering in a corner. Not knowing where to go and afraid of all the danger surrounding you.

But, beneath all this, it was always certain that Josefina, Maria Bethania³⁴ or Simone Reis, were certain to sing, to be, to be, also, totems on stage.

Today, as I see time has passed, I think you managed to carry a large part of your strength on stage over into your

³⁴ One of the superstars of Brazilian popular music and sister of the equally famous Caetano Veloso.

personal life: Your transformation was visible to everyone. You became a beautiful woman, aloof, secure, decisive, a fighter and self confident. These were the years with Davi's father, of Davi himself, of becoming a teacher, of facing criticism and of becoming self-assured. And that's not to mention what came after: a Master's, a move, doctorate, English and Australia. All of this in your life as Simone. But, the artist, right from the beginning, always showed this strength which made and still makes others feel bewitched. As Artaud says: in life, there are witches and the bewitched. You were always the witch!

I think Josefina knows she is and, so, others believe it too or, even if they don't, they all feel stunned when faced by her. If she sings, squeaks, whatever she does, it doesn't matter. The important thing is that she believes ...

I find the tale 'A Fasting Artist'³⁵ by Kafka, very similar. I wanted to stage it together with Josefina. The artist also knows who he is. I don't know if you know the tale but, at the end when he's dying and those around him ask why he didn't call anyone to feed him, he replies: Because I have never found any food that satisfies me. This, for me, is a metaphor for being an artist (different, strange) having to get to know yourself first to be able to assert yourself after for everyone to believe in you. This is a sign of the times too: everyone tells us how it is and we all believe them. I don't know what it's like there but you know that anyone here who says that he/she is an actor/actress, is already made, even if they have never done anything or are not an actor at all!

When I thought of Josefina, I actually thought of putting people in dressed as mice. Mice in laboratory experiments for research on predictable and verifiable behaviour. Perhaps it's another game with science, who knows? I know that when I studied psychology for 2 years at CEUB³⁶ we had to sit there, for 4 hours every week, literally sitting and jotting down everything the mice did in a maze. Deprived of food, not deprived, with light, without light ... it was crazy enough to make anyone crazy! I don't remember if the word maze is in the tale but I do know that they—the mice—come out of all the underground tunnels, don't they?³⁷

I haven't reread the text so I'm just talking from memory ...

But, at the time, I think the biggest connection I made between you and Josefina was that of a person who seemed to cower in a corner but, at the same time, someone who had the power to warm others to you when on stage. This was because she believed she was.

³⁵ See (Kafka 2000a).

³⁶ A university in Brasilia.

³⁷ In fact, no.

I don't know if I have helped you here but this is all that comes to mind at the moment".

(Marcela Hollanda, email, 2005 (with permission))

This letter both disturbed and encouraged me to make links between what I had already developed at that time and the ambiguity of Kafka's Josefine. I read the story many times and found it fascinating, ironic, disturbing and tragically hilarious. I realised that I was living in a kind of an uncanny tunnel that would allow me to traverse the borders that separates Brazil and Australia, actors and people, artists and academics, theatre and life, the dead and living, civilized and third world people, white and coloured—*Que maravilha!* How marvellous!

Pathetically, the apartment where I lived was a perfect set design for a "mouse performer" who rehearsed hours per day to convince herself that she was an actor (was she?). I became confused between theatre costumes and my own clothes due to lack of space. I also became entangled amongst my child's toys that were my second best "company" when he went to school.

Is piping something to be considered "art"? In my case, my piping comes from: contortion and doubt; many doubts; infinite doubts; laughter and the necessity to do something else other than "be myself" and function normally in the society, based on the first impression that I present. For example, somebody might say:

She is a woman, a wonderful person, a horrible mother, a good mother, a great actor, a performance artist, an ordinary person, a nice woman, a good neighbour, a bad student, a lovely Brazilian artist, a depressive lecturer, an eccentric, a Latin American performer, a messy housewife, an absent-minded foreigner on a student visa, a wonderful lover, a disappointing lover considering that she is an energetic actor.

I feel identified with Kafka's story because I have been working at the border of life and art. I prefer calling myself a half-character actor and this performance, a semi-autobiographic performance. What is the other half? I have no idea. I think it is not simply a *half* but millions of parts: a carnival of heads with no bodies, sometimes bodies with no heads, no arms, sometimes just tiny hearts, livers, lungs gurgling in the darkness among little candles.

The trajectory of doing this research in a foreign country was a fascinating path that strengthened my capacity to be as lost as Macabéa. I

was happy to have had this great opportunity to investigate performer idiosyncrasies, abjections, and nonsensicality.

7.5 What happens now?

Perhaps this performance and writing will go nowhere. "I want to see the skin of the light" says Cixous (Cixous 2005:184), and I love the freedom of structuring performance through events, like in life—this discontinuous continuity. Can I change the topic a little now? Do I have to explain through signs to you what is going to be the next paragraph? *Com licença*, excuse me:

THE FAKE PSYCHIC MADAME CARLOTA

OR

LOVE

OR

MACABEA HAS MURDERED ME

Madame Carlota is an important character in *The Hour of the Star*. For it is she that gives Macabéa something she has been lacking, *a future*.³⁸ The following conversation took place between the two:

— *I am a fan of Jesus. I am just mad about Him. He has always helped me. Mind you, in my heyday I had enough class to live the life of a lady. Things were easier then, thanks to Jesus. Later on, when I didn't rate quite so highly on the market, Jesus lost no time in helping me to set up a brothel with a friend. That earned me enough money to buy this ground-floor apartment ... Are you interested in what I am telling you?*

— *Very.*

— *Wise girl, for I'm not lying. You should become a fan of Jesus too, because the Savoir truly redeems ... I was poor, I had nothing to eat, no decent clothes to wear. So I became a prostitute. I quite enjoyed the work for I'm a very affectionate woman, and I became very fond of all my clients. Besides, life was good in the red-light district. There was a great deal of friendship among the prostitutes ... The quarrels were enjoyable, too, for I was a sturdy lass and I enjoyed punching, biting and pulling the hair of anyone who crossed me. Speaking of beating, you can't imagine what lovely teeth I once had, all white and sparkling. Alas, they rotted so badly that I'm left with dentures. Can you tell that my teeth are false?*

— *No, Madame ...*

³⁸ Can somebody tell me what will happen *now* in my life?

— *Tell me, flower, am I boring you with the story of my life? No? Are you sure? Have you the patience to wait just a little longer before I start reading your fortune?*

— *Of course, Madame Carlota.*

Finally, after licking her lips, Madame Carlota ordered Macabéa to divide the cards with her left hand. With your left hand, is that clear, my little one?

Macabéa divided the pack with a trembling hand: for the first time in her life, she was about to know her destiny. Madame Carlota was to be the climax of her destiny, the vortex of her life as it was about to be channelled into that voluptuous odalisque whose complexion shone like plastic under the bright rouge. Madame Carlota opened her eyes wide.

— *Poor little Macabéa, what a terrible life you have! May my friend Jesus have pity on you, my child! How awful! Macabéa turned pale: it had never occurred to her that her life was so awful.*

Carlota divined everything about Macabéa's past, and even revealed that she had never really known her own father and mother and that she had been brought up by a relative who had been as wicked as any stepmother. Macabéa was horrified by these revelations. She had always believed that her aunt had treated her badly for her own good. Madame Carlota went on to say:

— *As for your immediate future, my child, that's miserable as well. You are about to lose your job just as you've already lost your boyfriend, you poor little thing. If you haven't got the money to pay me, don't you worry. I'm a woman of some means.*

Macabéa, unaccustomed as she was to receiving any favours, turned down this generous offer but with a grateful heart. Whereupon (bang) something happened out of the blue: Madame Carlota's face suddenly lit up:

— *Macabéa! I have some wonderful news for you! Listen carefully my flower ... your life is about to change completely! And something else: it will change the very minute you leave this house! You will feel like a new person (Lispector 1986c:72-76).*

Macabéa makes a virtue of her worthlessness. Macabéa is a question. Macabéa's goal is much more humble yet at the same time a lot more complex to achieve, specifically because she probably wants to find her own uniqueness. Her effort has been remarkable for its uncommunicativeness. A life of vagueness. A singular state of grace, faith and anti-heroism. That's Macabéa. "What is Macabéa?", the narrator asks after he announces that she is dead. He wonders what was the truth about Macabéa?

He claims that it is sufficient to find out the truth that "she no longer exists" (Lispector 1986c:84). She is gone. The narrator says that the instant

has passed. He asks himself "what is she?" and in an automatic reply he himself answers that "she is not" (Lispector 1986c:84).

The narrator continues:

But don't grieve for the dead: they know what they're doing. I have been to the land of the dead and after the most gruesome horrors I have come back redeemed. I am innocent! Do not devour me! I am not negotiable! ... I try forcing myself to burst out laughing. But, somehow, I cannot laugh. Death is an encounter with self. Laid out and dead, Macabéa looked as imposing as a dead stallion. The best thing is still the following: not to die, for to die is not enough. It fails to achieve my greatest need: self-fulfillment. Macabéa has murdered me. She is finally free of herself and of me. Do not be frightened. Death is instantaneous and passes in a flash. I know, for I have just died with the girl. Forgive my dying. It was unavoidable. If you have kissed the wall,³⁹ you can accept anything. But suddenly I make one last gesture of rebellion and start to howl: the slaughter of doves! To live is a luxury. Suddenly it is all over. Macabéa is dead (Lispector 1986c:85).

Perhaps the final manifestation on death holds a touching message. What Macabéa perceives, Lispector seems to have already acknowledged: "death is an encounter with self". Macabéa's death is a concise, delighted flash or shift. A physical form is phenomenally transformed into "vigorous air" (Lispector 1986c:85). Spiritual forces are at play; and despite the parody in the character of Madame Carlota, there is always a reminder of insight, forecast, and divination in Lispector's characters.

³⁹ As a child Macabéa would kiss the wall in the absence of anyone else to kiss.