
Writing by Ear, the Aural Novel, and Echopoetics: A Listening Vocabulary for Literary Analysis

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Abstract: Given the robust plurivocality that has characterized literature in Brazil since its colonial inception, and the eminently (and explicitly) receptive stance that many of its modern authors have adopted, I have structured my argument to follow two intersecting paths. Firstly, Clarice Lispector’s notion of “writing by ear” serves as a foundation for a renewed history of Brazilian literature, framed as a history of active listening. Secondly, the hope is to offer a Luso-Afro- Amerindian-Brazilian contribution to Latin American criticism, turning the semantic range of terms related to edges, margins, and borders into a more explicit semiotics of corporeality and performativity revolving around the ears and sound, echoes and silence, more generally.

Keywords: Clarice Lispector, Machado de Assis, Oswald de Andrade, João Guimarães Rosa

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I argue in this study¹ that there is a listening in writing. This is an idea that suggests a reframing of authorship as a form of active and fertile *aural* reception. It also recasts the written text as a mute sign that nonetheless resonates and echoes within the mind (and body) of the reader. Clarice Lispector is a point of departure insofar as she persistently proposed throughout her career a conceptualization of writing by ear and opened a path for such writing and analysis, which finds representation in the work of other writers, both within and beyond Brazil. Lispector’s “ear” is connected to her experience with a range of languages (e.g., Brazilian Portuguese, English, French, Hebrew, and Yiddish). This ear also situates us within a third space beyond the traditional binaries of speech/writing, orality/literacy, activity/passivity, and sound/silence. Such a stance has far-reaching implications in Latin America and the Global South; however, it likewise matters a great deal for texts produced in a wide range of cultural settings and frameworks. It is this “listening-to” the world that ultimately constitutes the central focus of this study.

For some time, historical, philosophical, literary, linguistic, and anthropological studies have discussed the relation between literacy and orality, above all in the context of Latin American literature. Important examples include the work of Angel Rama, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Carlos Pacheco, and Martin Lienhard, among others.² These studies consistently call attention to the relation, at times conflictive and at times complimentary or even magnetic, between these two poles. In this

line of research, the proposed divide between speech and writing amounts to a “rhetorical device” used not to inscribe an essentialized orality but to create an effect of orality that helps to displace the written system itself (Millay 19). In the end, it serves to contest the ideology and power attributed to literacy, and in this context, writers effectively position themselves as cross-cultural mediators. In these foundational studies, one can say that the focus rests, above all, on the way in which European literary forms were adapted and transformed within the colonial and postcolonial context. However, the presence of hearing/listening in writing calls on its readers to contemplate a sense that has been left largely (if paradoxically) unexplored in previous discussions on the relationship between orality and writing. Indeed, the inclusion of the ear changes the panorama of the discussion.

Despite the differences between speech and writing, both are manifestations of language. But what does it mean to think about the relationship between the ear and the process of writing? The ear does not produce a language: the ear is mute, it does not speak, and it has no voice. Although it occupies a fundamental position in the cycle of spoken language, the ear is basically a receptive organ, the channel and the labyrinth through which the sounds of the outside world enter and communicate within our body. Unlike voice and writing, which produce speech and texts, listening is silent and receptive. From this receptivity, the following questions arise: What is the specific aesthetic for which listening in writing calls? What is the relation that listening in writing establishes with silence, echo, and the sounds of the world? How do we to understand authorship when writers present themselves as objects of reception rather than subjects of production? What is the relation that exists between the book – a mute text – and the verbal practice of the world that surrounds it? What is the relation between written literature in Brazil and the significant percentage of Brazil’s population that does not possess alphabetic literacy? In which ways does the robust oral and aural culture of Brazil shape literary genres and forms with unmistakably European roots?

The main point of the argument is that listening, as a third term, takes part in both poles of speech and writing: listening is part of the oral dimension of speech, and it is likewise part of the silent dimension of written words. Listening, as we will see (or hear), is not merely sonorous but is also steeped in silence. At first, one might think that the auditory question might just be another way of linking writing to orality, since audition would signify the audition of voices. Taking into account Lispector’s work, however, it becomes clear that theorizing the relation between listening and writing requires a differentiated approach: listening in writing necessarily refers not to audible sounds alone but to silence as well. This is not about an opposition between written silence and orality, or between text and speech, or between silence and sound; rather, it is the conjunction of these two moments – their friction. It is a writing by ear; that is, a text that is the result of the hearing of sounds that remain in writing, as silence. In what follows, I unpack the notion of listening in writing, an idea that I break into three constituent parts or concepts: writing by ear; the aural novel; and echopoetics.

1. A Listening Literary Turn

With the terms “writing by ear,” the “aural novel,” and “echopoetics,” the broader aim is to offer new vocabularies for the study of literature focused on the act of listening in writing. I am particularly interested in describing what I call the “aural novel,” which corresponds to a certain configuration that the novel has acquired in Brazil at least since the work of Machado de Assis in the late 19th century. I consider both “writing by ear” and the “aural novel” to be part of a broader poetics of listening that I

refer to as “echopoetics.”

“Echopoetics” is a term that refers to a poetics of resonances that considers the aesthetic, ethical, and ecological reverberations of the imaginary. It is through an echopoetics that we might begin to attend more adequately to the semantic spirit of words as echoes of the material presence of voices, rumours, and noises that surround writers in their time and life, and that resonate with each reader. A written text founded on listening is first a receiving text rather than a producing one. By “echopoetics,” I refer to such a receptive capacity as an unconditional openness to the outside, and as a result of being completely inside in the sense of belonging, of being part of something that can be the womb, the world, and/or the planet itself, as Lispector articulates it.

If writing is silent, listening to what is written does not simply imply an ability that has to do with sound. In addition to the sounds of the world to which it points, there are sounds inside the reader’s mind, which emerge when we repeat the words we read in silence. Garret Stewart, in *Reading Voices*, has shown the magic of this internal noise that so affects us at the embodied level in silent reading. Addressing the “reading body,” Stewart argues: “This somatic locus of soundless reception includes of course the brain but must be said to encompass as well the organs of vocal production, from diaphragm up through throat to tongue and palate. Silent reading locates itself, that is, in the conjoint cerebral activity and suppressed muscular action of a simultaneously summoned and silenced enunciation” (1). The practice of what Stewart defines as phonemic reading (processed in silence by the “listening reader” [278]) “has to do not with reading orally but with aural reading” (2). Aural reading resonates internally within our body, as the muted interior sound never fully ceases to be sound, even if it is never louder than the faintest whisper. Writing by ear involves these two dimensions: sound and silence. If on the one hand acoustics matters in this discussion, the presence of listening in writing involves hearing non-sonorous sounds – in other words, sounds that are not audible. We call them “silence” for lack of a better term, since we tend to think of silence as opposed to sound, even if we are aware that sound is audible, and silence vibrates. As Lispector herself has presented this idea, in her best-known novel, *The Passion According to G.H.*: “a respiração contínua do mundo é aquilo que ouvimos e chamamos de silêncio” (“the continual breathing of the world is what we hear and call silence”; 98, 99). This approach corresponds to one of the critical questions proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy: “Is even listening itself sonorous?” (98). Not necessarily, as it turns out. Deafness, partial or not, is an important aspect to be considered in a theory of listening in writing.

This is also a way to escape the fate of sound studies and its obliviousness to the “non-cochlear ear,” to call to mind Seth Kim-Cohen’s expression. Kim-Cohen’s book distinguishes sonic art from music and the audible with the aim of conceptualizing non-sonorous sound in order to consider an expanded field of artistic experiments from the 1950s onward: “The expanded situation of sound is the idea that I have been trying to bring into play— . . . so that the implications of thinking sound-beyond-sound and/or sound-without-sound might take root” (xix). The sonic arts that Kim-Cohen studies are contemporary with Lispector’s first novels: “Pierre Schaeffer’s initial experiments with *musique concrète*, John Cage’s first silent composition, and Muddy Waters’s pioneering electric recordings—all occurred in the same year: 1948” (xix).

At the same time, it is important to state that a focus on listening does not mean any backgrounding of the sense of vision. In my own approach, I make ample use of the visual arts—especially painting and photography—to speak of sound art. By privileging a verbivocovisual approach to literary texts, I avoid the “audiovisual litany” (Sterne 15), i.e., the clear division between

sound and sight as opposing poles (similar to the division between oral speech and written texts discussed above). In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Sterne shows that sound, hearing, and listening are central aspects of modernity, but, similar to Nancy's critique of the oculo-centric character of philosophy, Sterne signals the predominance of a visual terminology in the theoretical domain. If the culture of listening/hearing is predominant as the culture of seeing in modernity, philosophical knowledge is predominantly ocular. As Sterne has put it, there is "a disjuncture between the aurality of a practice and the ocularcentric language used to describe it" (12).

In fact, hearing produces an affinity between writing and orality, and it helps us to think of a new distribution and mobilization of the senses: listening in writing, visual audition, silent but resonant reading, mute but speaking writing, and so on. The result, I argue (following Lispector's conception), is a writing by ear, with the novel as an eminently aural space and authorship as a locus of reception more than production.

2. Jean-Luc Nancy's Ears

In his small but fundamental book *Listening*, Jean-Luc Nancy proposes that we consider resonance as the foundation of all senses. Nancy's text helps us think the transference from the auditory/musical field to the literary, when he distinguishes between the terms "hearing" and "listening" (*entendre* and *écouter* in French). On the one hand, "hearing" means to understand the meaning of the message, to understand what is being said by means of the intellect. On the other hand, "listening" denotes intense and special concentration on that which is received in terms of bodily resonance, paying attention above all to the intonation, the timbres, the noises, and the silences. Thinking about listening means thinking about what comes before articulated language, like an infra-language (noises, babbling, murmurs, whispers), and what comes after, the ultra-sound that outlasts and transcends language like an extended rhythm or an echo that rebounds. Silence is a special case, as it is as much infra- as ultra-, and is placed as easily before and after semantic language.

For Nancy, and the philosophical tradition to which he belongs, listening represents an escape from the dominance of language and signification, and in order to think it, one must bend language a bit so as to hear and give sense to the extra-semantic modes of signification, to that which makes sense primarily as sound, timbre, and tone. Reminding his reader that there is quite possibly "more isomorphism between the visual and the conceptual," Nancy criticizes the vision-centric character of philosophy from Plato to Lacan (30). Instead of terms (metaphors) such as accent, tone, timbre, resonance, sound, amplitude, density, vibration, or undulation, philosophical knowledge has instead drawn from terms associated with the visual domain: form, idea, representation, aspect, and phenomenon—all of which serve to maintain the dominance of the visual rather than that of "acoustic penetration" (3). If listening is what escapes theorization, it is because it is also what quite naturally escapes the gaze. Nancy reminds his reader that one cannot see what one hears, and that it is thus necessary to move from an eye-oriented phenomenology to an ear-oriented ontology, which also implies "surmounting, outsmarting [*dejouer*], or displacing the 'impossibility of circumscribing the essence of listening' within a theoretical system" (78). What if, as a thought experiment, we were to imagine the allegorical cave in Plato's *Republic* as a space of echoes instead of shadows? Can it be done? Might one, for instance, theorize listening (and timbre) by undoing the "primacy of language and signification" (30)? Would the resulting "negative semantics or paradoxical hermeneutics" provide

enough of a foundation upon which to build (Nancy 34)?

According to Nancy, a philosophy of listening must satisfy three demands. First, it needs to consider resonance as a special particularity of hearing that can serve as the foundation of all senses. Second, it must foreground the “listening body” as a resonant chamber: From the first cry of a newborn to the last murmur, a listening body releases “something produced in the throat, a borborygmus, a crackle, a stridency where a weighty, murmuring matter breathes, opened into the division of its resonance” (27). Third, it must frame the subject as a “diapason-subject,” by which Nancy means a presence that occurs not “in view of” but rather in a process of constant referral, an echo (16). Such a framing effectively transcends the subject-object distinction and goes back “from the phenomenological subject, as intentional line of sight, to a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to the same self” (21). The subject here is reverberation itself.

3. Writing by Ear and Multilingualism: “I Live by Ear”

In *The Hour of the Star*, published in 1977 two months before her death, Lispector, in the guise of a male narrator, made a complex connection between written words and the sense of hearing: “E a pergunta é: como escrevo? Verifico que escrevo de ouvido assim como aprendi inglês e francês de ouvido” (“And the question is: how do I write? I can confirm that I write by ear as I learned English and French by ear”; 18, 10).

The expression writing-by-ear, in fact, describes a distinctive quality of literary texts, and its specificity in Brazilian modern fiction: this fiction’s sharp sense of hearing, in other words, the way fictional writing captures timbres and nuances, accentuated in a culture where orality and musicality are predominant.

In this expression, “I write by ear,” which is akin to a self-discovery, Lispector opens the doors to a world that is still little explored in the printed literary universe: the study of the auditory and acoustic properties of writing, present not only at the moment of fictional creation, when the writer “hears” voices and inscribes them, but also during silent reading, when an imaginary world is awakened by the vibrations of the words’ sounds and images. Taking the expression “writing by ear” literally, and unfolding the web of its musical and auditory metaphors, the aim is to describe the form it takes in fictional prose. The doubly implied metaphors, “playing by ear” and “learning by ear,” suggest that “writing by ear” functions as an allegory (a metaphor of the third degree) for the production and interpretation of fictional texts based on musical acoustic non-writing practices. Writing by ear also requires readers who are able to “hear” a written text, in order to capture precisely that which passes between the lines, like the form and design of an intonation, a tone or a timbre.

The expression “I write by ear,” which appears in Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*, is the fictional version of a personal note that Claire Varin found in one of Lispector’s notebooks, and which became a point of departure for Varin’s study: “Vivo de ouvido. Vivo de ter ouvido falar” (“I live by ear. I live by having heard [others] speak”; Varin 26). This was perhaps not by chance. It is in fact striking that Varin, a native of Canada who had travelled to Brazil to study Lispector’s work and learn Portuguese, could capture the importance of voice and listening in Lispector’s writing, or as Varin has so beautifully put it, the “ecstasy of the voice before all apprehension” (69). Varin’s study opened possibilities for new work in this area, such as the present one, which focuses specifically on

understanding the term “writing by ear” (something not analysed in Varin’s work) and its possibilities for wider application.

4. The Features of the Aural Novel in Brazilian Literature

The aural novel can involve three interconnected features that are repeated with variations in several authors of Brazilian literature: 1) duplication of authorship through the creation of characters who are themselves writers, and presented as apprentices of a form they don’t master and that, for this same reason, they feel free to experiment with; 2) a conversational pattern establishing a direct dialogue with their readers as if the book could change according to the reader’s answers and expectations; 3) the exposure of their book as a work in progress, an “improvised draft” being written as if at the same time as it is being read. Listening is involved in all these procedures. As they delegate authorship, actual authors assume a receptive standpoint (just as an ear does). The framing of the book as a conversation and the way it is exposed as a work in progress, and often as if it were an improvised one, stress the dimension of an interaction that combines both speaking and listening. If we agree that these techniques in isolation or in conjunction are part of the genre of the novel or the novella, and that they can be found in various literary traditions, what strikes us is the reason for its recurrence in prose fiction in Brazil; in other words, the reason why it has established itself as a model that is continuously emulated. I propose that these techniques help to produce identification between these novels and a broader Brazilian public used to learning “by ear.” Thus, while these techniques could be found in different literary traditions, their recurrence in Brazilian novels means something more and different that we need to specify.

5. Machado de Assis

Machado de Assis is the point of origin, the father of what we define as modern aural novel in Brazil. In his writing we find the duplication of the writer into fictional characters who then assume authorial functions, a tendency that has been carefully and subtly analysed by Abel Barros Baptista. “Autobibliography” is the term that Baptista borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy to refer to a book that speaks about itself as a book, which refers to its own birth, makes its own self-analysis, and sets out the rules of the game it plays. Brás Cubas, the fictional author who writes his memories from the grave in *As memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1997 [1881], *The Posthumous Memoir of Brás Cubas*), and Bento Santiago, who “writes” *Dom Casmurro* (1997 [1900]), are two Machadian characters that Baptista identifies as “supposed authors.” The idea of listening to other voices becomes important, thus creating a “obra difusa” (“scattered work”) in a “free form.” These are the terms used by Brás Cubas when he defines his book: “The truth is that it’s a question of a scattered work where I, Brás Cubas, have adopted the free-form of a Sterne” (Assis, *The Posthumous* 5). As Baptista shows us, this definition is repeated by the actual author, Assis, who quotes his character with the voice of authority when defining this book that is, or should be, the property of the real author, who is now deprived of the power of being the only voice. For Baptista, the key to Assis’s worldwide renown as a master of the metafictional process is his anticipation of what would come to be known as the “death of the author” in the 20th century. The delegation of authorship to fictional writers makes it impossible to assign responsibility for the text, since those who set out to write are characters. This self-exposure

takes place through a dialogue with readers, in a potential conversation that gives the impression of assigning the responsibility for the book's achievements or failures to the reader. The radicalization of this self-exposure takes place when the fictional writer says he is writing the book here and now, at the very moment it is being read.

Throughout *Dom Casmurro* the reader is also informed that the book is being written right here and right now, as if the reader were witnessing the moment of its creation: "I might take this out when the book is printed" (95); "now I am composing this narrative" (105); "I beg your pardon, but this chapter should have been preceded by another, recounting an incident . . . but it's a great nuisance to alter the page numbers; I'll leave this as it is, and then the narration will go straight on to the end" (220). Thus Bento Santiago is a "supposed author" who pretends to be writing the book as the reader is reading it; this leads him to define it as a "book with gaps in it" (112), gaps that are to be filled in by the reader. The book's "scattered," dispersed form can also be related to what Roland Barthes argues in "Listening" when he defines modern listening based on the paradigm of psychoanalytic listening, attentive to nuances of speech and intonation rather than the literal composition of the meanings of the sentences uttered (259). In my view, Assis's "scattered" work appeals to a kind of listening that is also diffuse or dispersed, obligating the subject (author or reader) to renounce his or her privacy and enter a zone of whispers and secrets in the collective unconscious, which are now laid out and exposed to view. It is here that the question of auditory writing in Assis is related to the term "auditivty" and to a gestural form, a way of moving the body, transcribed and imitated in the play of writing. As such, Brás Cubas, who narrates his life from beyond the grave, announces one of the principal features of auditivty in a writing that is sinuous, not following the "regular and fluid style" preferred by readers but rather following bodily gestures: "This book and my style are like drunkards, they stagger left and right, they walk and stop, mumble, yell, cackle, shake their fists at the sky, stumble, and fall" (Assis, *The Posthumous* 111).

6. Oswald de Andrade and The H of the Question

In 1926, in the first preface to his novel *Serafim Ponte Grande*, Oswald de Andrade announced, in his aphoristic style, a key procedure for Brazilian fiction: "A gente escreve o que ouve, nunca o que houve" ("We write what we hear, never what was here"; 48). The jocular nature of Andrade's phrase relies on the fact that it must be written down and read, since the sound of the words is the same (ouve/houve [hear/here]) but the meanings are distinct (to hear/to happen). Thus, the sentence promoting the importance of hearing must be read to be understood, establishing an immediate relation between the ear and the writing process, or between the sonorous sphere and the printed-mute texts. Years later, in 1935, Fernando Pessoa would write a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro explaining the origins of his system of heteronyms. He states: "ouvi, dentro de mim, as discussões e as divergências de critérios, e em tudo isto me parece que fui eu, criador de tudo, o menos que ali houve" ("I heard within me the discussions and *disagreements* regarding criteria, and my sense is that while I was the creator of it all, I was less *there* than the rest"; 343). One reads in Pessoa's letter the same relation between hearing (ouvir) and being-there (haver). In this case, it seems clear that hearing implies a significant dispossession of the authorial "I." To hear in the field of fiction is different from the solipsism of hearing oneself, since it acts as an opening to the outside, to speak of and from something or someone that resides somehow beyond oneself, beyond authorial control or reduction. We have here/hear, in other words, a basic

principle of fiction and its intense and intimate connection to listening.

Why is it that prose fiction enjoys a closer proximity to listening than other types of narrative? Andrade is acutely aware of the fact that he is announcing a crucial difference between the writing of invention, the literary writing of “descoberta e transposição” (“discovery and transposition”), and the writing of history, dedicated to the *ex post facto* comprehension of what happened (here). He establishes a distinction between auditory perception (which would be characteristic of fictional writing) and historical description, a distinction that has yet to be more sufficiently developed. Through this listening principle, including the incorporation of the other and of tradition, the fundamental dilemma of copy versus original is at stake. Refuting realist and naturalist aesthetics as submissive copies from abroad, Andrade suggests a fictional production based on listening/hearing.

In his novel *Serafim Ponte Grande*, Andrade unveils (or undresses) the artifice of literary production by exposing it in the final product. The result is a text that exhibits itself more as a work in progress, characteristic of a novel written by ear. Haroldo de Campos, in his study on Andrade (“*Serafim: A Great Un-Book*”), relates the latter’s technique to the procedure of “defamiliarization,” in an explicit reference to Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie*, a term defined by Campos in the following way: “Viktor Shklovsky, who made use of this concept in his 1917 study [‘Art as Technique’] . . . also developed the idea of ‘exposing the technique’ (or ‘procedure’) as a measure of the work of art’s specificity” (211). The book as a work of literature is thus negated voluntarily, as a book that denies its own wholeness and exhibits its own creation, similar to what one finds in *Lispector*. The novel is listed among the author’s “Rejected Works,” and the copyright is denied: “No rights reserved. May be translated, reproduced, and deformed into all languages,” and one of its chapters is in fact the result of a “Printer’s Error.” As studied by Campos, “[t]hese signs simultaneously ‘estrangle’ the object, or ‘defamiliarize’ it to our perception, through the very act of pointing to it or emblemizing it” (210). Naomi Lindstrom points to “the extreme fragmentation of the writing” (80), and she describes the structure of the novel: “Eleven narrative segments, each lampooning a different type of literature, appear in puzzling juxtaposition. Each fragment is a novel *in potentia*, for each suggests one possible mode . . . for elaborating *Serafim*’s attempts to break with bourgeois cultural patterns. These hypothetical novels remain, necessarily, undeveloped” (80). Oswald denominates his novel an act of “invention.” As pointed out by Campos: “On the cover of my copy of *Serafim Ponte Grande*, which I receive personally from the author, the term ‘novel’ was crossed out and replaced by the word ‘invention’” (367). If, in 1945, Antonio Candido defined *Serafim* as “a fragment of a great book” (qtd. in Campos 213), Campos, in the 1970s, would redefine it as “a great un-book made up of book fragments” (213). Campos goes on to argue: “it is precisely through the syncopated technique and the resulting unfinished quality that the construction becomes apparent, that the woodwork of the traditional novel, as *priem*, as procedure, was exposed” (213). And he adds: “*Serafim* is a composite, hybrid book made up of pieces or ‘samples’ of various possible books. . . . Each one of these excerpts or ‘trailers’ of virtual books works . . . as a metonymic allusion to a certain cataloged type of prose, be it conventional or pragmatic, that never manages to impose itself completely on the Oswaldian book. . . . Instead, the excerpts point—allusively and elusively—to a literary mode *that could be but isn’t*” (212).

Similar to Oswald de Andrade’s aural novel, João Guimarães Rosa is defined by Ana Luiza Martins Costa as a writer *par excellence* of the “*mundo escutado*,” the “listened-to world.” In one of the prefaces to his 1967 novel, *Tutameia*, he announces: “A estória não quer ser história. A estória, em

rigor, deve ser contra a história. A estória, às vezes, quer-se um pouco parecida à anedota” (“The story has no desire to be history. The story should remain firmly opposed to history. The story, at times, wishes to resemble something like the anecdote”; Rosa, *Tutaméia* 3). For Guimarães Rosa, stories should approximate anecdotes and jokes in order to combat the nightmares of history. This phrase also served as a way of responding to critics who claimed that his work was not politically engaged; what it implies is that for fictional prose to alter socio-political relations between the rural population in Brazil and the lettered, urban citizen, it would be necessary not to represent these relations in line with historical narratives but rather to alter the politics of enunciation altogether. As Rosa made clear in an interview, “somente renovando a língua pode-se renovar o mundo” (“only renewing language can we renew the world”; Rosa and Lorenz 87). For the moment, it is important to point out that in Andrade’s phrase as well as in the preface to Guimarães Rosa’s 1967 novel, one finds the same differentiation between fiction (*estória*) and history based on the presence or absence of the silent (in *ouve/houve* and *estoria/história*). Here a letter that lacks phonetic sonority in Portuguese, an absent presence or present absence, serves to mark fundamental ontological differences. In a similar vein, Lispector would write in *The Hour of the Star*: “Vai ser difícil escrever esta história . . . Os fatos são sonoros mas entre os fatos há um sussurro. É o sussurro que me impressiona” (“It’s going to be hard to write this story . . . The facts are sonorous but between the fact there’s a whispering. It’s the whispering that astounds me”; 31, 16). How might the whisper find written expression except through poetic and fictional creation? That is, how might this be except through a text that seeks to express, rhythmically and ideophonically, that which resides behind thought (also an early working title for Lispector’s *Água Viva*), or that which rests on the hither or thither side of language: sensations, pulsations, reverberations, and timbres?

Each of the aforementioned authors suggests that fictional works, particularly novels, are creations based on the sense of hearing and on the acts of listening rather than on an imitation of historical narratives, i.e., on a realistic model of the novel. Following their lead, I reclaim the relevance of aurality as a central feature of fiction, present both as a recurrent theme and as an element that gives it form.

7. Guimarães Rosa and Guerrilla Writing

The same device of authorial doubling is found in João Guimarães Rosa, representing the vast space of the Brazilian interior known as the *sertão*. In Guimarães Rosa’s 1956 novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*), the character Riobaldo narrates his life in one long and uninterrupted speech to the city doctor who listens to him. Thus we have a novel that exposes metafictionally the formation of an author coming from an oral experience. Riobaldo narrates his life, and meanwhile, we suppose, his interlocutor is taking notes about what the speaker is telling him about the backlands (as Guimarães Rosa himself did on his research visits to the area). The situation is akin to one of fictional ethnographic writing in which the author hears what his character tells him, pretending not to have control over the order of the narrative, which follows the ebb and flow of orality. Much has already been said—and much is still left to say—about orality in Guimarães Rosa, but for an analysis of auditivity we must recall the key episode of Maria Mutema, the character who kills through the ear, in the same way that the uninterrupted speech of Riobaldo kills, or silences, the speech of the city doctor. The book starts with the sound of a gunshot—“Those shots you heard were not men fighting”—indicating that the reader is entering into dangerous discursive territory (Rosa, *The*

Devi 3). While Euclides da Cunha in his *Os sertões* (Rebellion in the Backlands) denounces the crime committed by the city against the *sertão*, in Guimarães Rosa, the backlands fire shots to stay alive and to be heard by the man from the city. *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is, thus, a discursive war machine. Like the trackers and *jagunços* or backlands cowboys at war, rhetorical guerrilla tactics including auditory weapons (speech, orality, listening) are used to disarm the traps of the “lettered city” (Rama, 1998). The strategy creates a paradox: how to relate to an at once non-lettered and hyper-cultured literature? In the case of Rosa, “writing by ear” corresponds to the creation of a high “illiterate” literature, a literature whose literary value has unlettered practices at its pulsating heart.

Guimarães Rosa structured his written work based on the sources of oral/aural transmission found in the *sertão*, a geographic place distant from the coastal “lettered city.” Close to oral traditions present in the popular genres of “repente” and “cordel,” the *sertão* reverberates with European medieval poems and narratives spread out by errant colonizers in the first centuries of the conquest, and simultaneously preserves linguistic forms of archaic Portuguese, as well as the first language contacts between Natives, colonizers, and Africans. As a place of freedom and escape for Indigenous, Afro-Americans, and mestizos, the *sertão* became an important literary topos in Brazilian history, and it received a renovated avant-garde treatment in Rosa’s fictional prose. The structure of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, a book without chapters, imitates an improvised speech that lasts for close to five hundred pages and which appears aimless, uncontrolled. As the narrator says, his speech takes “the wrong turn” without clear direction, precisely because it is not like the speech of the man from the city who knows how to write “a story in a book” (Rosa, *The Devil* 48, 69). However, what appears to be improvisation, like a narrative that pretends to be constructing itself aimlessly, does in fact obey a certain order – a disorganized order, but an order nonetheless. In other words, imitating orality or improvisation has an order that is not fixed but mobile, contingent and dependent on the ways in which it is read, privileging this or that aspect of the story. Individual readers then, each time they want to retell the story in their own words, will organize (or disorganize) the narrative in their own way; the book will appear to be an uncontrollable sea (one of the preferred metaphors of *sertanejo* narratives), always renewed with each wave of readings. Thus, applying the words of Assis, we find in Guimarães Rosa a “scattered work” in a “free form.”

8. *The Hour of the Star*

The Hour of the Star is a small but expansive book, a masterwork consisting of fewer than eighty pages. The last book published by Lispector during her lifetime, *The Hour of the Star* possesses an almost clairvoyant dimension, in the sense that it unites two points of view: birth and death. This is so insofar as Macabéa is linked to Lispector’s childhood as well as to the end of her life. In the work, Lispector morphs into Rodrigo S.M., presented as the author of a book about the character Macabéa, a poor migrant from the Brazilian Northeast living in Rio de Janeiro. Semi-literate, Macabéa works as a typist. Having lived both in the Northeast and in Rio de Janeiro, Lispector situates herself in the middle between the fictional male author who occupies her place (Rodrigo S.M.) and the character Macabéa, whose name evokes Lispector’s Jewish origin in its similarity to the term “Maccabees.” Thus, Clarice mixes her Jewish-Ukrainian origins with the Northeastern life of the Everywoman, Macabéa. In this last book of hers, published during her lifetime, she fuses echoes of Yiddish from her childhood with the sounds of the Brazilian Northeast. The entire novel is in fact produced as an echo,

one in which the dissonant sounds of Bach and a radio clock, the text of the supposed male author and the feminine voice of Lispector, echoes of Yiddish from Ukraine and Portuguese from Northeastern Brazil all resonate. The double voice of Lispector and Rodrigo S.M. serves to speak about a character without a voice: “ela falava, sim, mas era extremamente muda” (“She talked, yes, but she was extremely mute”; 36, 21).

The book begins with an author’s dedication followed by an annotation in parentheses that informs readers who has, in fact, written it “(Na verdade Clarice Lispector)” (“actually Clarice Lispector”; 7, xiii). Even if she is the real author of the book, authorship is transferred to the male narrator named Rodrigo S.M. However, Lispector cannot leave off pointing out that “actually” she is the author, even if her authorship is placed in parentheses and expressed only as a paratext. It is in this way that she begins a fictional play within her fiction, which gives her book a theatrical touch of performativity in that it exposes the framework of creation and its correlative process. As if performing upon a theatre stage, one can say that Rodrigo S.M., the fictional author, echoes upon that stage (i.e., the book that the reader holds) the voice of Lispector herself (the book’s actual author), which resonates from backstage.

Lispector repeats the process of authorial duplication in *Água Viva*: the main character, who is a painter, transforms herself into the writer of the text that we read; and again in *A Breath of Life*, which establishes the play between the fictional author (again male) and Angela, the book’s protagonist, who is herself a writer. Carlos Mendes de Sousa has coined the term *livro exposto* or “exposed book” (347) to name Lispector’s books that expose the behind-the-scenes of creation, with writer/characters who experience and express the dilemmas, anguishes, and delights of writing and narrating. One might justifiably apply this same term (“exposed book”) to the work of Assis and Guimarães Rosa. Authorial duplication is, in fact, part of a literary project expressed and problematized at a metafictional level. As we have discussed above, one finds, in a very condensed form, a procedure that repeats the authorial metafictional procedure initiated by Assis in the *Memoórias Postumas de Brás Cubas* nearly a century before.

The short dedication to *The Hour of the Star* begins with a kind of throw-away phrase: “Pois que dedico esta coisa aí” (“So I dedicate this thing here”; 7, xiii). If, seen from one perspective, the book is diminished as “this thing here,” from another it is aggrandized through its dedication to many of the great composers of European classical music: “Pois que dedico esta coisa aí ao antigo Schumann e sua doce Clara que são hoje ossos, aí de nós” (“So I dedicate this thing here to old Schumann and his sweet Clara who today, alas, are bones”; 7, xiii). The book is also dedicated to Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, Igor Stravinsky, Richard Strauss, Claude Debussy, Marlos Nobre, Sergei Prokofiev, Carl Orff, and Arnold Schönberg. The reader is thus faced with a text that mixes a high and low register with a kind of “null set,” a generic “thing here.” One can read in this a kind of contempt for writing on one hand and a high admiration for music as a superior art on the other: “O que me atrapalha a vida é escrever” (“What trips up my life is writing”; 5, xiv). After this dedication, the reader finds the title page with the book’s title and fourteen other possible titles or subtitles, among which appears the name of the author herself, as if the book could also be read as a biography or even an autobiography. In this way, before even beginning to read the novel, the reader is exposed to the process by which the book comes to be, to its sketch, within which various possible titles present themselves.

The text itself begins in the following way: “Tudo no mundo começou com um sim. Uma molécula disse sim a outra molécula e nasceu a vida” (“All the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born”; 17, 3). From the start of life to the birth of the

universe, *The Hour of the Star* begins as a cosmogonic book; at one point, the narrator affirms that he is effectively creating life through his slowly dying protagonist. In fact, the first twenty pages of the book are nothing but the auto-exposition of the pre-process of creating a fictional life, the life of Macabéa, and the book's difficult gestational process carried out by an author who decides to write about an anti-character. The text is quite violent in its description of how a bourgeois intellectual might relate to a character who lacks so much; at the same time, however, Macabéa, in her extreme fragility and ingenuousness, stands as a kind of philosopher of nonsense insofar as she estranges language and thus calls on the reader to rethink what discourse in fact is in relation to reality (Hansen 17). Her dialogues with Olímpico de Jesus, for example, are magisterial in their mix of humour and irony.

The Hour of the Star is an amalgam of various interwoven plots: an autobiographical plot, a sociological plot, a plot of literary intertexts, a musical plot, a photographic and pictorial account, and much metafiction all condensed within a tiny book that ends with both Macabéa's and Lispector's death (the latter would die only two months after the book's publication).

9. Improvisation

The duplication or multiplication of authors and voices highlights a text that is constructed as if without control, through improvisation:

Mas aí é que está: esta história não tem nenhuma técnica, nem de estilo, ela é ao deus-dará... Durante o dia eu faço, como todos, gestos despercebidos por mim mesmo. Pois um dos gestos mais despercebidos é esta história de que não tenho culpa e sai como sair. (44)

(But there's the rub: this story has no technique, nor style, it lives from hand to mouth... During the day I make, like everyone else, gestures I don't even notice myself. And one of the gestures I notice the least is this story of which I'm not guilty and which turns out however it turns out.) (28)

In *Lispector*, improvisation goes so far that it is not a method but rather a "way of life." This is what we find in another reflection offered by Clarice herself about the freedom found in writing: "A improvisação como modo de viver. Mesmo as narrativas discursivas têm em si uma liberdade, se não de quebra do condicionamento, mas de improvisação do destino" ("Improvisation as a way of life. Even discursive narratives have within them a freedom – if not breaking free from conditioning, then improvising a destiny," qtd. in Borelli 44). In other words, in improvisation, the plot structures itself in a way that pretends not to have a structure, as if events were developing by chance.

The Hour of the Star calls itself a "livro inacabado" (8), an "unfinished book" (xiv), similar to Oswald de Andrade's *Serafim Ponte Grande*, discussed before. The whole first part is devoted to exposing the process of writing the book as a metafictional essay prior to the action of the narrative, which then begins suddenly: "O jeito é começar de repente assim como eu me lanço na água gélida do mar... Vou agora começar pelo meio dizendo que—" ("The thing to do is to start all of a sudden just as I jump all of a sudden into the icy water of the sea... I am about to begin halfway saying that—"; 31, 16).

"Como que estou escrevendo na hora mesma em que sou lido" ("Just as I'm writing at the very same time I'm being read"; 18, 4). In this magnificent declaration, Lispector synthesizes what will be the distinctive feature of her last works: texts in fragments, which are later unified and reworked, but without losing the freshness, vividness, and immediacy of lived experience. It is there that

improvisation begins to be mentioned more and more in her works, along with the concept of writing by ear. Following her, I suggest that improvisation can be defined as an act of reaching an ideal state, in which impression (sensorial, physical, corporal) can immediately become expression (symbolic and artistic), so that (utopically) there is no separation between what is seen and what is painted, what is said and what is written, what rumbles and what is heard. Improvisation longs to create a symbolic expression that is the closest possible rendition of the sensorial impression, as if it were possible for the body not to distinguish itself from its surroundings. Improvisation suspends or eliminates weighed, measured, and controlled thought, and acts as the most immediate reaction to the stimuli present. The less programmed it is, and the more the performer lets him or herself be carried away by the stimulus of the moment, the better the results. This is what happens with improvisation during a music or theatre show: what counts is the immediate reaction to what is happening here and now. This reaction certainly includes prior knowledge and training, but in the act of improvisation all of this repertoire must be almost forgotten in order to look and sound new, unprecedented and surprising – for the audience as well as for the performer. Thus, improvisation is a question of movement, quick or slow, but always in tune with the event that awakens the concomitant and simultaneous reaction, so the thing perceived is also the thing that is thought, said, and read.

For Lispector, like playing music by ear, writing by ear is a process that advances by trial and error, in a living immersion that is more unconscious than conscious, progressing without method: gropingly, blindly. In this sense, Lispector's writing by ear is similar to Keats's verse "Darkling I listen" (in "Ode to a Nightingale"), which in turn recalls one of Lispector's revealing expressions about her method of writing: "A procura da palavra no escuro" (*A hora da estrela* 80) ("The search for the word in the dark" [*The Hour* 61]). Blindness, then, is a fundamental aspect of Lispector's *visionary* writing: the deprivation accentuates the sense of hearing, which becomes more developed in order to capture timbres and nuances.

10. Conclusion

We saw that, in the work of Assis and Guimarães Rosa, writing by ear and improvisation are also brought together in an oblique discursive link, creating a logic of the sinuous, tortuous, and indirect. Similarly, improvisation is also present in their texts, but a feigned one: the text pretends to have been written without planning, in the here and now, while the narrators converse with their readers. In the duplication or multiplication of authors and voices, a common characteristic appears in the works of Assis, Lispector, and Guimarães Rosa, albeit in different ways: their works seem as if they are being written at the very moment in which they are read, as if they were being created here and now, impromptu, without the prior establishment of control by their authors. The authors thus seem to be almost overtaken by their writing and stunned by their doubles, who take away their authorial control. What I am interested in highlighting here is that in this uncontrollable affiliation, the voices of these characters/supposed authors are what guide the construction of the narrative, and thus the authors themselves are no longer writing, but rather listening, and following the directions indicated by their characters/authors. The writers, then, act as ethnographers listening to their culture as if it were foreign, making it strange in order to better invent it in their fictions and dictions. And although authorial duplication is a common device in many literatures, its use by at least three major names in Brazilian literature seems to be of a piece with a tendency in Brazil for expression to be strongly

characterized by orality and, consequently, auditivity. And as a result of this tendency, “the aural novel” emerges as a distinctive (or “auditory”) and dominant feature of literature in Brazil.

Notes

1. This essay describes the main objectives presented in my monograph, in particular, regarding the field of Listening Studies in Brazilian literature and culture. Cf. Marília Librandi, *Writing by Ear, Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel*, U of Toronto P, 2018.
2. See Angel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa em América Latina*, Siglo XXI, 1982 (1982/1998); Antonio Cornejo Polar, *Escribir en el aire: Ensayo sobre la heretogeneidad socio-cultural en las literaturas andinas*, Editorial Horizonte, 1994; Carlos Pacheco, *La comarca oral*, Casa de Bello, 1992; Martin Lienhard, *La voz y su huella: Escritura y conflicto étnico-social en América Latina 1492–1988*, Ediciones del Norte, 1991.

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