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SPHERES OF SIMULTANEITY IN ADRIANA LISBOA'S NOVEL *HANÓI*

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Abstract: This essay has as its focus the interweaving of immigrant life stories and layers of human spaces in Adriana Lisboa's novel *Hanói* (2013). Relying on Ana Martins Marques' map-bending poems from *Cartografias* and on Doreen Massey's geographical concepts of "multiple trajectories" and "spheres of dynamic simultaneity" articulated in *For Space*, I analyze the sense of place in the novel, as well as the presence of elements denoting belonging, displacement and un-belonging, especially from the point of view of the two main characters and their interconnecting, yet disparate, worlds.

Keywords: Belonging; Displacement; Spheres of simultaneity; Adriana Lisboa.

Resumo: Este ensaio tem como foco o entrelaçamento de histórias na vida de imigrantes e nas camadas de espaços humanos presentes no romance *Hanói* de Adriana Lisboa (2013). Baseando-me nos poemas-mapas que se desdobram na série *Cartografias* de Ana Martins Marques e nos conceitos geográficos articulados em *For Space* de Doreen Massey, como "trajetórias múltiplas" e "esferas de simultaneidade dinâmica," analiso o sentido de lugar no romance, assim como a presença de elementos que indicam pertencimento, deslocamento e não-pertencimento, especialmente do ponto de vista dos dois protagonistas e de seus mundos interligados, ainda que distintos.

Palavras-chave: Pertencimento; Deslocamento; Esferas de simultaneidade; Adriana Lisboa.

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Você fez questão
de dobrar o mapa
de modo que nossas cidades
distantes uma da outra
exatos 1720 km
fizessem subitamente
fronteira [38]

You insisted
on folding the map
so that our cities
distant from one another
exactly 1,720 km
instantly joined
borders²

Combinamos por fim de nos encontrar
na esquina das nossas ruas
que não se cruzam [40]

We finally agreed to meet each other
at the junction of our streets
which don't intersect
Ana Martins Marques, Cartografias

Within broader notions of belonging and displacement, the theme of dislocation is one that Adriana Lisboa's work depicts with mastery. In order to address this prevailing aspect of Lisboa's novels, first, as a point of departure, I wish to conjure the map-bending, border-pliable perspective of Brazilian poet Ana Martins Marques' 2015 series, *Cartografias*. It is useful to consider the way in which Marques' geographically-infused poems propose the act of folding a map as a deliberate means of altering the perception of

² All translations from the Portuguese are my own.

distance; or how her poems suggest a creative means of establishing a meeting point within non-bisecting points, by positioning two individuals at the junction of two streets that do not intersect. Marques' poems aptly articulate a methodology for manipulating distance or proximity into malleable constructs, with a goal of facilitating serendipitous encounters.

Similarly, it is with remarkable skill that Adriana Lisboa's novels emphasize the concurrent acts of distancing and evoking notions of proximity. Lisboa is particularly adept at capturing forms of complex mappings and human convergences in two of her novels: *Azul-Corvo* from 2010 (translated into English as *Crow Blue* by Alison Entrekin in 2013), and *Hanói*, published in 2013. Lisboa situates most of the storyline in these two novels within the U.S., coincidentally the country in which she currently resides. In *Azul-Corvo*, Brazilian teenager Vanja travels from Brazil to Colorado in search of her father; it is there that her life intersects with that of Fernando, a transplanted Brazilian and former guerrilla fighter. In *Hanói*, David, a Brazilian-American, encounters Alex, a Vietnamese-American in Chicago. These encounters are fortuitous and transformative.

In this essay, I address the interweaving of immigrant stories and the layering (or map-bending, to use Marques' technique) of human spaces in Adriana Lisboa's novel *Hanói*, with a few corresponding references to *Azul-Corvo*. For this purpose, I rely conceptually on the work of the late British geographer Doreen Massey. Massey developed several key ideas regarding a social notion of space within the field of human geography, which she articulates within a theoretical framework in her 2005 book *For Space*. In *For Space*, she presents many of the concepts I explore in this essay, including this notion of space as "a product of interrelations" (Massey, *For Space*, 10). Here, I apply to Adriana Lisboa's *Hanói* three of Massey's chief points from *For Space*, addressed primarily in Part 2 entitled "Unpromising Associations." In the interest of conciseness, I base all three concepts on responses Massey gave in a 2013 interview with Nigel Warburton for the podcast *Social Sciences Bites* entitled "Doreen Massey on Space." The first is based on the following concept:

Space concerns our relations with each other and in fact social space, I would say, is a product of our relations with each other, our connections with each other. So globalization, for instance, is a new geography constructed out of the relations we have with each other across the globe. (Massey, "Doreen Massey on Space," 2)

In *Hanói*, Lisboa's narrative thread focuses on third culture adults, that is, third generation immigrants who are born in the U.S., and for whom English is a native language. In this work, Lisboa also draws attention to a broader spectrum of concepts of home, belonging and the realm of imagined geographies, as the novel's multifaceted plotline encompasses several categories of individuals: refugees; immigrants of two generations, as well as American-born; and multicultural and multilingual individuals of mixed heritage. I will analyze this multigenerational narrative focus momentarily.

Firstly, to extend Doreen Massey's notion that space is constructed from the relations we have with one another across the globe requires conceptualizing individuals of different generations and heritages as reaching out into the "space of the other." Adriana Lisboa achieves this in *Hanói* through fictional means, that is, through the layering or weaving of lives of a multiplicity of characters. In the novel, this form of human layering is described as an "estalo de proximidade" (155), or the sudden spark generated by proximity or a close encounter between two disparate people, in this case, her protagonists, David and Alex. Through these two characters and their distinct experiences, Lisboa creates personal blueprints that intersect and interconnect, weaving an experiential tapestry of sorts. In her words: "Esses micromundos que se juntam para formar o seu micromundo" ("These microworlds that come together to form their own microworld") (168).

1 The resonance of multiple narrative voices

Adriana Lisboa constructs her novel with a layering of affective connections and narrative threads, centered on the happenstance encounter between two main characters who are transnational adults living in Chicago. They are both children of immigrants

and, moreover, offspring of hybrid relationships. David is a thirty-two-year-old Brazilian-Mexican-American who is an amateur trumpet player and hardware store employee with brain cancer. Alex is a twenty-two-year-old Vietnamese-American student who is a shop clerk and single mother. She identifies herself as Chicago-born: “venho daqui mesmo, nasci e cresci aqui em Chicago” (“I come from right here, I was born and grew up here in Chicago”) (14). The novel interweaves the lives of David and Alex with tender precision and increasing proximity, while it steadily reveals the culturally disparate life-scaffoldings of their ancestral pasts, which stand in contrast to the fortuitous, geographical overlap of their Chicago-based present. On a map, these life-scaffoldings might easily correspond to longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates; in other words, the Earth’s geographical framework. Similarly, David and Alex’s life-scaffoldings anchor them and evoke their past origins, histories and geographies.

David and Alex are hybrid beings both ethnically and culturally. They are products of at least two cultural references: David’s cultural identity consists of links to Brazil and Mexico via his immigrant parents, as well as to his own native U.S. David maintains a close bond to his father by way of his father’s native language, Portuguese, and nostalgically clings to his mother through music. Alex is culturally connected to her mother and grandmother’s homeland of Vietnam through, among other things, food. She also adheres to the U.S. of her American father, as well as to her own native Chicago, also birthplace of her biracial son, Bruno. Race is an added strand in Alex’s life. In fact, later in the novel she, David and Bruno come to represent America’s ethnic composition. In Alex’s mind, the three of them embody the country’s principal minorities, as she states: “Poderiam fazer de conta que eram uma família. Se um deles era quase latino, o outro quase negro e a outra quase asiática, isso apenas apontava para alguma coisa pouco ortodoxa, que não dizia respeito a ninguém.” (155) [“They could pretend they were a family. If one was almost Latino, another almost black, and the other almost Asian, they communicated something far from conventional, that shouldn’t concern anyone.”]

In further analyzing the roles of David and Alex in Adriana Lisboa's *Hanói*, we might take into consideration a second element from Doreen Massey's concept of space, in which she associates the social connections we make, as individuals and world citizens, with the social-spatial narratives we create. Massey extends this interconnection to include the multiple narrative voices that resonate in the spatial spheres we inhabit during our lives, as her words affirm:

Most obviously I would say that space is not a flat surface across which we walk; Raymond Williams talked about this: you're taking a train across the landscape – you're not traveling across a dead flat surface that is space: you're cutting across a myriad of stories going on. So instead of space being this flat surface it's like a pincushion of a million stories [...] So I want to see space as a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any one moment. Space and time become intimately connected.

Hanói epitomizes Doreen Massey's notion of space as a myriad of stories through its formal structure as a collection of interwoven stories. In this sense, Lisboa's novel intertwines the life trajectories of four generations within a multicultural scope. While reliant on a third-person narrator, the novel intersperses numerous stories that lend multidimensional fiber to its plotline. Júlia Braga Neves defines *Hanói's* narrative thread as a patchwork quilt. According to Her

Lisboa constrói a narrativa de *Hanói* como uma colcha de retalhos que reúne fragmentos de reflexões internas de Alex e David, de espaços imaginários que transitam (141)
[Lisboa frames *Hanói's* narrative as a patchwork quilt that unites fragments of David and Alex's inner reflections; imaginary spaces that flow between Brazil, Mexico, Vietnam and the U.S.; and daily scenes set in Chicago . . .]

These narrative fragments or mappings unfold as a series of cherished stories that have the potential to be called back to life at any moment, and which deserve to be remembered. They are tinged with nostalgia and often conditioned by displacement and hardship. In this sense, vestiges of individual stories from the Vietnam War and from subsequent refugee migrations, or from undocumented migrations into the U.S. from Latin America, surface in overlapping storylines tied to the personal encounters and spatial intersectionality of David and Alex, as they occupy overlapping time and space

coordinates. In this way, this patchwork of stories is present, if not always visible in the temporal present.

2 Transience instills buoyancy

To further develop this line of study, I would argue that in *Hanói* Adriana Lisboa creates geographical and generational layers through a gravitational pull toward diverse human biographies. In their co-authored essay, Diego Fascina and Wilma Coqueiro underscore the broad scope of Adriana Lisboa's diasporic reach (126). Previous generations come to the surface through David and Alex's fierce focus on the present, conditioned by the critical aspect of David's terminal illness. The past is thereby rescued—even if temporarily—entering the present through reminiscences, snippets of memory, and reflections.

Imminent death for David unleashes the past, resurrects it, causing it to come back to life even as he prepares to die. He remembers his parents in several instances, in spaces of memory that recall his father's undocumented entry into the U.S. from Brazil via Mexico (102; 134), or that recount his Mexican mother's brief presence during his childhood, by way of a beach scene, for instance, in which they both search for shells (118-120). Another example focuses on David's parents together, celebrating the Fourth of July. On the U.S.'s Independence Day his father had linked the festivities to his own memories of Brazilian Independence Day in his native Minas Gerais. The past thus resurfaces in the ever-porous, geographically othered present through these tender moments of connection and subsequent separation, of love and inevitable departures.

Family lineage and parenthood are recurring motifs in *Hanói*. Families are represented as fragmented or severed, mostly due to cultural, circumstantial or geographical ruptures. For example, David's mother leaves his father when David is a child; Alex's grandfather (a soldier in Vietnam) is never seen nor contacted again; Alex's older, American father, a table tennis-playing plumber, dies from heart disease. And

David's own death hovers over the reader with the inexorable hint of grief. Malcolm McNee artfully addresses the presence of mourning in Lisboa's fiction, when he states: "Lisboa explores an alternative literary ethos and ethics, centered on the fragile beauty of things and moments, and on the resilience of beings in crisis, as they attempt to fully inhabit a present continuously interrupted by memories of traumatic loss." (181)

Despite recurring instances of separation or grief, Adriana's novel delicately and determinedly stresses continuation rather than termination. The novel underscores the reality that hybrid, multicultural individuals must coexist with change and fragmentation, requiring from them resiliency and determination: "Mas também falava de resiliência e determinação" ("But it also referred to resilience and determination") (185). Memory serves a vital purpose here, as a resource from which the resiliency and determination is drawn, and also as a necessary means for allowing cultural heritage, human connectivity or continuity, and even life itself to persist.

While the novel also underlines mortality and transience, surprisingly, instead of inducing trauma, transience instills the buoyancy necessary for provoking memory, amalgamation, and continuation. Life for its multifaceted characters is a continual process of adaptation and improvisation, ever a balancing act that encompasses loss and absence while critically incorporating the presence of the other: "sempre surpresas, tapetes fugindo de baixo dos nossos pés, e a gente achando que tudo seguia alguma ordem. A gente ainda esperando um mundo de um e dois, de certo e errado." (156) ["always surprises, the rug being pulled out from under our feet, and us thinking that everything was following a certain order. We're still expecting a world of one and two, of right and wrong."]

In Lisboa's fiction events do not quite line up to produce a happy ending, but there is room to revel in tender, lighthearted moments of unexpected connection, as Vilma Costa in "O Elogio do Encontro" emphasizes. For instance, when David appreciates spending time with Alex and Bruno, he states: "Basta eu passar umas horas

com vocês, isso vai ser ótimo” [It’s enough for me to spend some hours in your company, that will be great”] (155).

As David gets to know Alex, her personal attachments become part of his world. While David’s material world shrinks due to his divestiture of possessions (his clothes, his fish tank, his kitchen gadgets, his music collection, etc.), his own broken, absent family is replaced by four generations of Alex’s family members, all now geographically close. Alex’s family includes, firstly, Linh, her grandmother, who during the Vietnam war had met an American soldier and gotten pregnant. She is described as a permanent expatriate: “uma expatriada para sempre. Um resto de qualquer coisa, jornal, sacola de plástico, que vai sendo levado por aí com o vento, sem muito propósito.” [“a perpetual expat. A remnant of any little thing, a newspaper, a plastic bag, blown by the wind, without much purpose”]. (181)

In addition to Linh, there is Huong, Alex’s Vietnamese mother, who arrived in the U.S. at the age of seventeen and became a manicurist and maid: “Nunca foi fácil, nem lá nem aqui” [It was never easy, neither here nor there”] (80). There is Alex’s son, Bruno, who has been told that his black biological father is his cousin Max who visits once a month. Lastly, there is a personal bond with Trung, Alex’s boss at the Asian market where she works. He is an ex-Buddhist monk who came to the U.S. as a refugee after living in an encampment for two years. For Trung, the U.S. had seemed like the Promised Land (145).

The author’s reliance on various intersecting narrative threads departs from a laborious chain of events and expectations imposed by linearity, geography, and chronology. In her review of *Hanói*, Vilma Costa expresses admiration for this lack of linearity, and for the novel’s unconventional interweaving of recent and remote memories. This narrative configuration allows instead for a compelling polyphony of melodies and countermelodies that transcend temporal and spatial limitations. These, in turn, lift the novel beyond its plotline to map unexpected harmonies and moments of

tenderhearted connection. This harmonic motif becomes a momentary tribute to life over death.

Adriana Lisboa's novel maintains a healthy balance between absence (detachment) and presence (attachment) by means of David's terminal illness. It also establishes light tension between the notion of place as immediate and concrete, and place as a distant, longed for homeland or imagined space for sanctuary. For Alex's expatriated grandmother Linh, after living in greater Chicago for 30 years, Vietnam becomes a nostalgic homeland that corresponds neither to present-day reality nor past memories. For David, perhaps more importantly, the city of Hanoi is an idea, an imagined place that promises shelter. It is in that city that he envisions dying without any personal correspondence or ties, embracing the physical and ethereal unknown:

Será que em Hanói, um lugar tão estrangeiro para ele, a morte ficaria detida na fronteira? (194)
[Could it be that in Hanoi, a place so foreign to him, death might be detained at the border?]

A escolha roleta-russa de Alex estava perfeita: longe, outra língua, outra gente, outra comida, outro tudo (134).
[Alex's Russian-roulette choice was perfect: far away, in another language, with other people, other food, other everything]

3 A dimension of multiplicity

At the end of the novel, through her travels to Vietnam with Max and Bruno, and through her personal pilgrimage to Hanoi in honor of David, Alex transforms David's image of Hanoi from an imaginary journey's end, or final resting place, into a living city. For her, Hanoi becomes a place in which life is affirmed, steeped in resilience and memory. Here again Doreen Massey's words resonate, bringing to mind a third element in her human-centered geography:

If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, it's the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things being, existing at the same time: of simultaneity. It's the dimension of multiplicity. [...] space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other; space is the dimension of multiplicity. (Massey, "Doreen Massey on Space," 2)

In keeping with Massey's dimension of multiplicity and spheres of simultaneity, it is fitting to explore how Adriana Lisboa denotes human connectivity within these disparate, transitory lives. The notion that our lives are intertwined in spheres of simultaneity—a radical re-imagining of globalized geography disengaged from the actual globe—is present and central to *Hanói*, particularly as seen through Alex's eyes: “Será que todas as pessoas que conhecemos, ela se perguntou mais tarde, têm alguma função em nossa vida, algum papel a desempenhar (ou nós em sua vida, o que em essência dá no mesmo)?” (90) [“Would all the people we meet, she asked herself later on, serve a purpose in our lives, have a role to play (or us in their lives, which essentially amounts to the same thing)?”]

In weaving together so many characters and the multiplicity of their collective experiences (and stories), Lisboa's novel expertly presents place—itsself an expression of shifting geographical and temporal happenstance—as malleable and fluid rather than rooted or fixed. It does so by concentrating on two individuals whose lives are permeated with impermanence. By contrast, in Adriana Lisboa's previous novel, *Azul-Corvo*, the main characters Vanja and Fernando straddle two countries, Brazil and the U.S., in a way that underscores a far more linear, perhaps more narrowly defined, and, therefore, more difficult process of cultural adaptation: a process that is unwarranted or even immaterial for U.S.-born David and Alex in *Hanói*. Despite being a legal U.S. resident for almost thirty years (67), Fernando, in *Azul-Corvo*, expresses the unease of not belonging, of not feeling at home anywhere: “Não é que a casa estivesse em toda parte: a casa não estava em parte alguma.” (“It wasn't that home happened to be everywhere: home was nowhere”) (73).

The favorable manifestation of cultural hybridity embodied by David and Alex hovers instead over Fernando's and Vanja's lives as a negative element, in what Vanja refers to as hybrid and impure (72). In this vein, Fernando's death at the end of *Azul-Corvo* also carries a more melancholic tone than David's in *Hanói*.

Hanói underscores the notion of more positive or generative impermanence by threading through the narrative two overarching motifs: the first is music-bound and improvisational, suggested by the jazz playlist present on David's laptop and MP3 player, items he passes on to Alex and to an old friend he encounters in the park, respectively.

Adriana Lisboa's *Hanói* captures this sense of improvisation, of reinvention and renewal, both through and despite the overall theme of inevitable loss. Thus music, specifically jazz—in the form of concentric grooves on a record or in enveloping sound waves—pervades the storyline and plays a fundamental role. In fact, music literally and figuratively becomes the soundtrack and backdrop to the multiple tracks of interwoven narratives, as a way of emotively drawing in and bringing together David and Alex, of course, but also as a stream of peripheral yet nonetheless meaningful encounters. In regards to the theme of music in *Hanói*, André de Leones states: “Em um mundo cada vez ‘menos nítido’, os sons sustentam o que é possível sustentar no processo de esboroamento. Sustentam, dão sentido, preenchem.” [“In a world increasingly ‘less distinct,’ the sounds sustain what it is possible to sustain in the process of unraveling. They sustain, give meaning, fulfill.”]

The second overarching motif concerns the vastness of the world and our minute place in the universe. Adriana Lisboa's narrative emphasizes this contrast in the following instances: “A engrenagem do mundo, rodando como sempre, parafusos, porcas, molas.” (99) [“The world's gears, are forever shifting: nuts, bolts, springs.”]; “O mundo era tão vasto. Tão incrivelmente vasto.” (220) [“The world was so huge. So infinitely huge.”]

This cosmic leitmotif manifests itself throughout the novel. For instance, it is present in David's infinitesimal sense of self as a fleeting shooting star within the great expanse of the universe (12). It appears in Alex's map of the constellations in her bedroom, as well as in her study of astronomy. It also reveals itself in Bruno's worries over Laika, the space dog. Through *Hanói*, Adriana Lisboa strikes a delicate balance

between our individual finiteness and our lasting imprint on the universe's infinitude. The following three passages uphold this statement, in David's own reflections about his place within the cosmos:

A única característica comum a todas as coisas, ele pensou, enquanto o embalo suave do metrô o jogava para a direita, para a esquerda, para a direita, para a esquerda, é que elas num determinado momento começam a existir e num outro momento deixam de existir (31)

[The only characteristic common to all things, he thought, as the gentle sway of the subway car shifted him to the right, then to the left, to the right, and to the left, is that at some moment in time they begin to exist, and in another instance, they cease to exist.]

Se a função de todas as coisas não seria simplesmente estar ali, como partes do todo. Se ele não achava que as coisas se completavam... (92)

[If the reason for all things might not simply be to be present there, like pieces of a whole. If he didn't think, in fact, that things existed to complete each other...]

Esbarramos, trocamos um olhar, uma palavra, seguimos em frente. E a marca fica, o registro daquele evento na memória de um universo no qual tudo importa. (91)

[We bump into each other, exchange glances, a word, and keep going. And the impression remains, the trace of that encounter in the universe's memory, in which everything matters.]

By way of a conclusion, I would argue that Adriana Lisboa's novel *Hanói* allows the reader to reflect upon the myriad of stories that exist in the immense spatial map of the universe—a map within which, as both theoretical physics and our own memories attest—time and place intersect, conflate, and exchange places. In keeping with Doreen Massey's pathways of human geography, Lisboa constructs fluid avenues for her interlocking narratives to intersect and overlap, to simultaneously cease and continue, and in so doing, to create layers of meaning on a scale that is at once mortal and, thanks to the infinitudes of fiction, immortal. As if to say: our physical lives are ephemeral, our possessions are of no consequence, but our crisscrossing trajectories—in time and in space—become durable, lasting, illuminating threads in the universe's memory.

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