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**Tales of Two Cities: The Space of the Feminine in
Sonia Coutinho's Fiction**

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Critics in Brazil and abroad have hailed Sonia Coutinho (b. 1939) as one of the most interesting and original female authors in contemporary Brazil. An award-winning novelist and short-story writer, Coutinho has been praised for the formal aspects of her fiction, as well as for her feminist critical analysis of gender relations in Brazilian society. Her short stories are often included in literary anthologies, such as Darlene Sadlier's *One Hundred Years After Tomorrow* (1992) and Italo Moriconi's *Os cem melhores contos brasileiros do século* (2000) (*The One Hundred Best Brazilian Short Stories of the Century*). Critics such as Luiza Lobo, in "Women Writers in Brazil Today" (1987), and Lucia Helena, in "Perfis da mulher na ficção brasileira dos anos 80" (1990) (Female Profiles in Brazilian Fiction of the 1980s), have praised Coutinho as one of the best contemporary women writers to create a distinctively female voice in Brazilian letters, while Susan Quinlan, in one of the rare English-language studies on Coutinho's fiction, discusses the author's androgynous narrative style in the novel *O jogo de Ifá* (1980) (*Ifá's Divination*), and the representation of Brazil's multiracial heritage as the key to understanding her female characters (Quinlan 140). Quinlan places Coutinho alongside writers such as Nadine Godimer and Doris Lessing, both of whom wrote on the racial reality of South Africa, and Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, writers who have addressed in their works the Afro-American and Native American cultural heritages.

The criticism on Coutinho has mostly discussed her female characters and their struggle to achieve independence and self-fulfillment, including professional, psychological, and sexual realization. As Lúcia Helena Viana states, the author ". . . avança na questão do feminino ao tratar da mulher que enfrenta os percalços de viver a própria liberdade, oscilante na condição de objeto e sujeito, múltipla, mediatizada por muitas máscaras, construindo um novo modo de relação com o homem" (173) (. . . advances the feminine question by writing about the woman who faces the difficulties of living her own freedom, oscillating between being object and subject, multiple,

mediated by many different masks, building a new relationship with the male.)¹ Most of these studies focus on Coutinho's short stories; in addition to Quinlan's examination of *O jogo de Ifá*, a few other critics have discussed her novels *Atire em Sofia* (1989) (*Shoot Sofia*) and *O caso Alice* (1991) (*The Alice Case*) as detective novels (Brink-Friederici on *Sofia*), and as examples of Brazil's postmodern narrative (Villaça). A recent book by Rosana Ribeiro Patricio, *As filhas de Pandora: imagens de mulher na ficção de Sonia Coutinho* (2006) (*Pandora's Daughters: Images of Women in Sonia Coutinho's Fiction*) studies *O jogo de Ifá*, *Atire em Sofia* and *O caso Alice*, again centering on the female condition as seen through Coutinho's protagonists. Lobo explores the relationship of these characters to their urban environment, positing them as city wanderers in the tradition of Baudelaire's *flâneur* (Lobo, "Sonia Coutinho Revisits the City"). Lobo discusses this relationship as depicted in several stories by the author, and refers also to Coutinho's first three novels mentioned above, in order to present a general view of the interaction between the female subject and the urban space.

In this essay I will take a different approach from Lobo's, and will examine the presence and importance of the urban space in Coutinho's fiction. My purpose here is, first, to situate Coutinho's work in the context of Brazilian urban narrative; and, second, to explore several literary tropes associated with postmodernity and the urban space, such as displacement, travel, and exile. My main object of analysis will be *O jogo de Ifá*, a paradigmatic text in which Coutinho advances several themes and narrative strategies she introduced in earlier books and later develops in subsequent works. I will explore here the contrastive representation of two Brazilian urban spaces, Salvador, the capital city of Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro, and I will discuss specifically the images the author creates in the depiction of Salvador. In this way, I will explicate not only an important aspect of Coutinho's work—the importance of these two cityscapes in the characters' lives—but also the social and cultural dynamics that take place in Salvador and that are expressive of contemporary urban life in Brazil at large.

Sonia Coutinho in the Context of Brazilian Urban Narrative

Coutinho emerged in the Brazilian literary scene in the 1960s, and began to attract critical and public acclaim in the late 1970s and 1980s, with *O jogo de Ifá* and the volumes of short stories *Os venenos de Lucrecia* (1978) (*Lucrecia's Poisons*) and *O último verão de Copacabana* (1985) (*The Last Summer in Copacabana*). These first volumes came out during a period of social, cultural, and political convulsion in Brazil and in the world. The rapid acceleration of the country's industrialization and urbanization, which had

begun in the 1950s, was embodied in the inauguration of Brazil's new capital, Brasília, in 1960. Built in the heart of the nation, the new capital was the very symbol of all the promises of progress and development the "País do Futuro" (Country of the Future) seemed to hold for its people. Four years later, however, in 1964, the nation witnessed the military coup d'état that began a twenty-five year dictatorship, and Brasília became less the "Capital da Esperança" (Capital of Hope), which it initially had been called, and more the symbol of political power and political repression.

But Brasília was not the only sign of urbanization during that period, for the country experienced many changes throughout its regions, states, and cities. As internal migration continued to increase, to include not only the rural poor, but also the middle classes, these social, political, and cultural changes were strongly felt in the nation's Southeast region, specifically in its two cosmopolitan centers: Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Reflecting all these changes, a new and important wave of Brazilian urban fiction emerged in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, giving continuity to Brazil's long-standing tradition of urban literature. Coutinho's name is often mentioned among this new group of urban fiction authors—among them Rubem Fonseca (b. 1925), Tania Faillace (b. 1939), Roberto Drummond (1940–2002), and Sérgio Sant'Anna (b. 1941)—whose writings, characterized by innovative narrative techniques and oftentimes a brutally frank narrative voice, reflect the social convulsions and new cultural influences the country was experiencing at the time. Since then, Brazilian contemporary narrative has been characterized as mostly urban in its outlook and thematic concerns.

Brazilian critic Regina Dalcastagnè, for example, points out that "o espaço da narrativa brasileira atual é essencialmente urbano ou, melhor, é a grande cidade, deixando para trás tanto o mundo rural quanto os vilarejos interioranos" (34) (the space of Brazilian narrative today is essentially urban or, better yet, it's the large city, leaving behind the rural world as well as the small provincial towns). In fact, as Brazil's rapid industrialization and urbanization, compounded by the process of globalization, has pushed the country to a profound and very visible socioeconomic chasm, the large metropolis has become the frequent scenario and theme of contemporary Brazilian narrative. Examples abound, such as Patrícia Mello's pulp fiction, Fernando Bonassi's short stories, and Ana Maria Machado's novels, all set in the urban spaces of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The old dichotomy city versus rural space—so significant in Brazilian fiction particularly during the Romantic period, but also in the first part of the twentieth century, with Lima Barreto, Raquel de Queirós, Graciliano Ramos, and others—would thus seem to be losing ground in the national literature.

That dichotomy, however, does not disappear completely from Brazilian literature. For some critics, the opposition between the rural space and the urban space is still part of the narrative representation of the city and, in fact, a meaningful depiction of the city emerges only against the concept of rural

space (cf. Lima 12). The rural space has also acquired mythic proportions in dystopian urban novels such as Caio Fernando Abreu's *Onde andar Dulce Veiga?* (1990) (*Whatever Happened to Dulce Veiga?*, 2000). Moreover, Brazilian urban literature has been occupying itself more and more with the inhabitants and problems of mid-size cities, such as Araraquara in Igncio de Loyola Brando, Manaus in Milton Hatoum, and Salvador da Bahia in Sonia Coutinho. If the dichotomy rural versus urban space is no longer as prominent in Brazilian letters, a different opposition between center and periphery remains a constant, but with the periphery often representing the more or less provincial space of Brazil's mid-size and smaller cities.

This more recent dichotomy again reflects various interesting and interconnected phenomena in Brazilian society: the urbanization and growth of towns in the interior of Brazil, outside of the dominant Rio-So Paulo corridor; the migration of middle-class citizens from these areas to the two metropolises, which has contributed to a mutual cultural influence; and, especially since the 1970s, the emergence and recognition in the national scene of artists (especially musicians) from these various regions, in a movement that has expanded the repertoire of Brazil's cultural voices. Adding to the voices of composers and singers such as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil from Bahia, Kleiton and Kledir from Rio Grande do Sur, Alceu Valena and Elba Ramalho from the Northeast, and many others, Brazilian writers have challenged the idea of a national culture and identity as homogeneous and centralized, by acknowledging the existence of various urban centers with distinct profiles located in the so-called "periphery."

The dichotomy center versus periphery raises many issues, and can be understood as expressive of a colonizing relationship between social spaces. Sonia Coutinho challenges the cultural hierarchy that stands behind this dichotomy, through the representation of the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia as two different models of urban life in Brazil. In her fiction, Salvador is not the cultural periphery looking up to the cosmopolitan city, but is rather the original space, the navel of the nation, a mythic space hiding the secret to the characters' and to the nation's identity. This representation of Salvador, fully developed in *O jogo de If*, unsettles the cultural hierarchy that normally foregrounds Rio de Janeiro and the Southeast as the face of the country.

Furthermore, Coutinho's representation of Salvador places her fiction in opposition to that of Jorge Amado—Brazil's most widely read and translated author—and his portrayal of Bahia and its inhabitants. One reason Salvador is seldom mentioned in her texts, appearing instead only as "a Cidade" or "The City," is that the author wants to achieve a portrait of the city disassociated from the stereotypical, exotic Bahia that emerges in Amado's novels, and that has been exploited by the country's tourism industry. In a 1989 interview in which she discusses her then recently-published novel *Atire em Sofia*, she declares: "Voc fala da Bahia e j pensa em mulata

sensual, já pensa em comida típica . . . Eu queria esvaziar isso e colocar em cena uma cidade do Terceiro Mundo, onde tivesse a influência negra, a mistura étnica. E eu queria que as pessoas olhassem para aquilo um pouco de fora, de maneira distanciada” (“A hora e a vez do romance” [The Time and Moment of the Novel] 58) (You mention Bahia and one immediately thinks of the sensual mulatta, and of typical food . . . I wanted to deflate that and to put forward a Third World city, where there is Black influence and ethnic mixture. And I wanted people to look at that a little more from the outside, in a detached way).

Coutinho prods her readers to look critically at the racial and gender stereotypes that inhabit Amado's Bahia. His work popularized the image of the sensual mulatta, which television and cinema have spread across the globe as the “typical” Brazilian woman. Coutinho rejects such a stereotype and its ideological implications: “From the beginning, I reacted to the myth that Bahia is a paradise, where all of the women are *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*. Good-hearted and ready to do whatever a man wants” (quoted in Szoka 224).² Amado's vision of Salvador and of its inhabitants conveys the myth of Brazil's “cordiality” by neutralizing differences and conflicts (cf. Abdala Jr. 54). Coutinho's vision, on the contrary, depicts the city through critical lenses, as the stage where individuals of different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, gender, and ideologies come together, and where conflict takes place.

Coutinho's fiction also adds a particular perspective to Brazilian urban literature by privileging a female perspective of the city, instead of the more common male viewpoint. Contemporary Brazilian narrative has drawn an urban map that is eminently—if not entirely, as Regina Dalcastagnè sees it—masculine (Dalcastagnè 36, 46). In fact, the cityscape has been notoriously registered through the eyes of male characters wandering the streets and public areas, while the urban experience of female characters takes place mostly within the limits of the home or other enclosed—and socially appropriate—spaces. The exceptions that come to mind, such as Márcia Denser's Diana Marini, are often social transgressors, women living “fora da normalidade,” outside the norm (Dalcastagnè 36).

Coutinho's female characters also find themselves outside the boundaries of “normalcy.” Contrary to the more common perspective of the *flanêur*, Coutinho's women characters offer their particular vision of the city as they wander its streets. The urban space thus mapped out reflects the lives of women set against the backdrop of a labyrinthine cityscape. These are women who venture out alone in the streets and other public spaces such as bars, spaces traditionally forbidden to them. Coutinho depicts her characters' experiences in a concrete and direct form that goes beyond the representation of their inner reality, to include the ways they relate to their physical environment. The urban space thus plays a role in the characters' psychological and emotional changes. City life, particularly in the larger

space of Rio de Janeiro, raises mixed and sometimes contradictory feelings in Coutinho's women. Feelings of liberty, happiness and excitement intermingle with feelings of fear and uncertainty, like those the anonymous protagonist of "Doce e cinzenta Copacabana" ("Grey and Sweet Copacabana") experiences:

. . . sai . . . , segue andando e sente, contra toda expectativa, uma certa alegriazinha, agora—os pombos voam de uma marquise para outra na Avenida Copacabana deliciosamente vazia, como um teatro depois de movimentada representação, mas claro que ainda sente medo, sua situação é um pouco como a de alguém inventando algo, um estilo de vida? (44)

(She goes out, keeps walking, and feels—against all expectations—a certain small happiness; now the pigeons fly from one marquee to another on a deliciously empty Copacabana Avenue, like a theater after the end of a lively performance; but of course she's still scared, her situation is a little like someone's who has invented something—a lifestyle?)

The sense of freedom and of communion with the urban space (here represented in the reference to the pigeons' flight) may be quickly replaced by the dingy reality of daily life but, nevertheless, these characters are making up their own paths as they struggle along ("Doce e cinzenta" 40, 46). Therefore, the conflicting ways of experiencing city life reflect not only the clash between an individual and the urban environment, but also, and most importantly, the conflicts of a generation of women faced with new life choices.

The City, The Cities in Sonia Coutinho's Fiction

Coutinho's female characters very often go through a displacement in space that parallels the author's biography. The author herself has declared: "A personagem feminina, admito, é constantemente meu alter-ego. Através dela não vivo exatamente minha vida, mas possibilidades de vida" ("A experiência com o conto" ["Experiences with the Short Story"] 1) (I admit, the female character is constantly my alter ego. Through her I live, not exactly my life, but possibilities of life). Her fiction is not autobiographical per se, but it brings together many aspects of the author's life experiences. Born in the town of Itabuna, in the cacao region of the state of Bahia, Coutinho moved to Salvador, the capital city, while still a child, and in 1968 left Salvador to pursue a writing career in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Throughout her fiction, these two spaces are constantly set in opposition, and the social and cultural contours of one help define the other's. Salvador is generally depicted as more provincial and conservative: "O clima fechado, entediante, modorrento e preconceituoso da cidade. Ao mesmo tempo, a beleza deslumbrante de seu cenário" ("A experiência com o conto" 1) (The city's stuffy, tedious, lethargic and prejudiced atmosphere; at the same time, the stunning beauty of its scenery). Salvador also has a strong African heritage, about which Coutinho writes in *Os venenos de Lucrecia* and in later volumes.

Rio de Janeiro, in turn, is the cosmopolitan city, in constant movement, apparently more tolerant, and more progressive. Coutinho examines the *carioca* cityscape through a "microscope" by using Copacabana as a metaphor for the postmodern metropolis. Copacabana offers its population freedom, choice of lifestyle and the mask of anonymity, behind which the individual lives his or her life as chosen. As with the masks in Greek theater, however, the mask of anonymity has a duality, of happiness and melancholy: one may live the liberty it offers, but must also live the loneliness and isolation it can create. Thus, writes Coutinho, in Copacabana "as pessoas na rua têm faces misteriosas e tristes, ao anoitecer" ("Pai e filho" [Father and Son] 75) (as night falls, people on the streets have mysterious and sad faces). These urban inhabitants—in Rio as in Salvador, even if for different reasons—experience what André Bueno has characterized as the discontents created by capitalism in the contemporary metropolis (Bueno 89). As a result, men and women face situations of estrangement and alienation, and Coutinho's protagonists seem particularly prone to them, given their position as outsiders and their acute self-awareness.

Being an outsider, an exile in their own land, and being acutely aware of their own selves and of their displacement in relation to their urban environment, summarizes the drama of Coutinho's characters, particularly her women. Moving between Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, her characters, usually middle-class women, seem to suffer twice the problems commonly associated with urban life, because they find themselves split between the patriarchal tradition within which they grew up, and the new social order of the cosmopolitan city, with its promises of freedom, independence, and self-realization. Examining the social and psychological obstacles faced by these women, Coutinho is rather critical of relationships between the sexes, and deconstructs cultural myths of femininity, specifically myths that relate to women's social roles, female sexuality, class, and race. Her paradigmatic female character is a single woman, either divorced or never married, who is facing the passage of time, and becomes aware of her social situation, and of the obstacles she needs to overcome in order to achieve self-realization.

Violence, a problem rampant in Brazilian cities, also affects Coutinho's women characters, not in a random way, as urban violence many times seems to do, but rather as a result of the characters' transgressive position in

their social milieu. The theme of violence is important in Coutinho's fiction, especially in her novels *Atire em Sofia* and *O caso Alice*, both of which can be read as crime narratives, and in *Os seios de Pandora. Uma aventura de Dora Diamante* (1999) (*Pandora's Breasts. A Dora Diamante Adventure*), a detective novel. In these narratives the female protagonists are (or appear to be) victims of others' violence. In turn, in the short stories, violence appears in the guise of self-aggression, such as suicide, a desperate attempt to escape the inimical urban reality, as seen in "Josete se matou" ("Josete Killed Herself"), from *O último verão de Copacabana*.

Fond of metafiction, the author may represent the protagonist's process of self-awareness through the use of an omniscient author-narrator who detachedly observes another woman. This creates a game of masks or personae, a strategy Coutinho fully explores in *O último verão de Copacabana*, but that is already present in her earlier stories. In these narratives, all the characters are in fact different masks of the same paradigmatic female subject: "uma mulher de classe média e de meia-idade . . . que andasse interminavelmente pelas calçadas de Copacabana, carregando sua sacola de compras repleta de sonhos" ("Amor, amores" [Love, Lovers]) 86) (A middle-class, middle-aged woman who wanders endlessly on the sidewalks of Copacabana, carrying her shopping bag filled with dreams). In Copacabana her characters feel the unforgiving dehumanization of life in the large city, while in Salvador they are equally dehumanized by social traditions and expectations.

The streets of Copacabana frame the characters' search, a search that begins with feelings of dissatisfaction experienced in the space of origin, Salvador, or more remotely, in a small town in the interior of Bahia. There begins their displacement and their exile, as these characters could no longer ignore feeling *out of place*. Displacement, uprooting, exile, as well as travel and movement through time and space, are recurrent tropes in Coutinho. These form the narrative paradigm that structures all of Coutinho's fiction since her first publications. For example, in *Nascimento de uma mulher* (1971) (*Birth of a Woman*), a volume that incorporates a few stories previously published, the theme of travel and displacement is already present:

Desliguei o telefone com uma dor fina no peito, como uma punhalada. Me servi de uma dose dupla de uísque e, com o copo na mão, caminho de um lado para outro deste meu apartamentinho deserto e sujo, na tarde de domingo. Lembrando outro domingo, quase trinta anos atrás, que mudou minha vida, lá na Cidade de onde eu e Dalva viemos. ("Conselho em família" [Family Council] 29)

(I hung up the phone feeling a sharp pain in my chest, like a stab. I poured myself a double shot of whiskey and, holding the glass in my

hand, walk back and forth in this small, dirty and deserted apartment, on Sunday afternoon. Recalling another Sunday, almost thirty years ago, that changed my life, there in the City from where Dalva and I came.)

Coutinho's fiction narrates a process of self-awareness that typically brings her female protagonists from inside enclosed spaces to the open spaces of the streets, from enclosure to expansion and movement, and, in cases of the protagonists' failed self-realization, back to the closed space of "home."³ This pattern is craftily and succinctly presented in her short stories, while her novels offer more complex pictures of women's lives in the chaotic space of present-day Babels. The urban reality Coutinho writes about—Rio de Janeiro as well as Salvador—is marked by the subject's estrangement and displacement, and necessitates specific forms of narrative representation. As the author places Salvador and Rio in constant opposition, representational images and metaphors are used for one and the other city. In addition to the leitmotifs of travel, displacement, wandering, and exile, other recurrent images and metaphors are labyrinths, mazes, puzzles, and enigmas, and these are used to describe both cityscapes. I will discuss some of these below, and will then examine specific images used in the portrayal of Salvador in *O jogo de Ifá* and *Atire em Sofia*. While examining the representation of the city of Salvador vis-à-vis Rio de Janeiro, I will highlight how the urban space impacts and reflects the constitution of the characters' self identity.

Of Babel, Labyrinths and Mazes: A Postmodern Aesthetics

In *As filhas de Pandora*, Rosana Ribeiro Patricio examines the narrative strategies the author employs in the construction of her novels and highlights the use of intertextuality, *mis-en-abîme*, and a metalinguistic and fragmented discourse as characteristic of what the critic calls Coutinho's "escrita em labirinto," a labyrinthine writing style (Patricio 173). Nizia Villaça has examined these and other narrative strategies in Coutinho's *Atire em Sofia* and *O caso Alice* as expressions of a neobaroque aesthetics. Both novels are characterized by ambiguity, metafiction, the presence of fantastic or surreal elements, and a labyrinth-like narrative structure. Villaça cites Omar Calabrese's theoretical work, in which the contemporary labyrinth, or maze, stands in opposition to the "classical labyrinth" (Villaça 142). The latter—as confusing or challenging as it may be—does provide "a way out" that the subject must seek. In other words, the textual labyrinth offers the possibility of elucidation and resolution to the reader who seeks to decipher its many leads. The contemporary labyrinth, however, according to Calabrese, points to irresolution, to what cannot be solved (cf. Villaça 142). Therefore, it can

be understood as a metaphor for postmodern life and, in Coutinho's fiction, specifically for urban life and the social relations that take place in the city.

The difference between the labyrinth and the maze parallels another distinction that Regina Dalcastagnè and Renato Cordeiro Gomes, in their readings of Brazilian urban narrative, have pointed out: the distinction between the *polis* and Babel. The *polis* represents an ideal of order, a space that enables encounters and communication among its inhabitants. Babel, on the other hand, is emblematic of the postmodern city, where chaos, conflict, and miscommunication are predominant. Gomes also uses the image of the labyrinth to describe the postmodern city, but stresses that the purpose of this labyrinth is to confound, imprison, and subdue its inhabitants (Gomes 25).

The textual labyrinth that Villaça discusses in Coutinho's second and third novels is already present in *O jogo de Ifá*, which, more so than in subsequent novels, is structured as a game or a puzzle. In fact, this is how the author-narrator describes the novel he admits to be writing: as a kind of a game, a Chinese box, or a model kit that must be assembled (*O jogo* 13). Quinlan observes how the expression "objeto de armar," a model kit, is reminiscent of Julio Cortázar's 1968 novel *62: modelo para armar* (*62: A Model Kit*, 1972) (Quinlan 151). *O jogo de Ifá* establishes a dialogue with this and with Cortázar's more famous *Rayuela* (1963) (*Hopscotch*, 1966). Like *Rayuela*, *O jogo* reveals the disorder of an apparently orderly reality through its game-like structure, as it offers the reader the challenge to put together a story line, a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces are the fragmented life stories of the many different characters that appear in the novel. In the subsequent novels, the different narrative voices become the very pieces of the puzzle, or the threads the reader—a postmodern Ariadne—must follow in order to exit the labyrinth. In *Atire em Sofia* and *O caso Alice*, these voices emerge anachronistically from various time periods and geographical spaces, and succeed each other at dazzling speed, again underscoring the image of the city as a present-day Babel. Through the use of the labyrinth, the maze, puzzles, and enigmas, Coutinho erects a cityscape like the Sphinx herself, the monster the protagonists must decipher, or else they will be devoured. The reader too must engage in this process of deciphering the city/narrative and solve its riddle, at the same time attempting to render legible the illegibility of the urban space.⁴

O jogo de Ifá: The Search for the Original Space

O jogo de Ifá, is a short but complex novel structured as a game (which is expressed in the novel's title) or a puzzle.⁵ This is a polyphonic and metaliterary text, full of intertextual references, historical, literary, and

mythological: Brazil's colonial period, the origins of Bahia, Virginia Woolf, the Minotaur, and many others. A constant reference is Jorge Luis Borges. Along with Cortázar, Borges's presence in the text helps situate it both in the context of Latin American culture, which is reiterated later in the narrative, and in the context of post-modernity. Borges becomes both an inter-textual reference and a literary influence. Early on in *O jogo*, the author-narrator states: "Pretendo que meu livro seja uma espécie de jogo. Ou um labirinto" (22) (I want my book to be a kind of a game; or a labyrinth), recalling what Borges himself has said about books and labyrinths being one and the same thing. His influence is seen also in the allusions to the "Aleph," and in the theme of the double.

In many of his stories, Borges played with the leitmotif "un hombre es todos los hombres" (a man is all men). Coutinho brings up Borges's leitmotif, introducing however its female counterpart, where one woman's destiny reenacts the destinies of other women, and a man and a woman live mirror-like experiences. Renato and Renata, the two protagonists of *O jogo de Ifá*, are a male and a female projection of the same being. Throughout the novel, we see them repeating each other's experiences and mirroring each other's emotional states. For example, the novel opens with Renato's return trip to his hometown, an event that will be reproduced later, almost *verbatim*, but with Renata as its protagonist (*O jogo* 60):

Tinha de ser assim, Renato, de ônibus, refazendo o percurso de dez anos atrás, quando partiu da Cidade para a qual volta agora, penosamente, pela tarde adentro, através da planície deserta Pois há exatamente dez anos, quando foi embora para o Rio, você viajou num ônibus igual a este, com um frasco de tranquilizantes no bolso da camisa, engolindo uma pílula de duas em duas horas, para evitar que a angústia o sufocasse, ou o fizesse gritar interminavelmente, como só se grita no meio de uma noite escura, no coração do deserto. (*O jogo* 9–10)

(It had to be this way, Renato, by bus, retracing the path of ten years ago, when you left the City to which you now return painfully, throughout the afternoon, across the deserted plains For exactly ten years ago, when you left for Rio, you traveled on a bus just like this one, with a small bottle of tranquilizers in your shirt pocket, swallowing a pill every two hours, in order to keep your anguish from suffocating you or making you scream ceaselessly, like one can only scream in the middle of a dark night, in the heart of the desert.)

If Renata repeats Renato's journey back home, and later the author-narrator repeats both characters' travels (86), the initial return is already a reenactment of an earlier trip, but in reverse direction. Renata and Renato are returning to "the City," which they had left ten years before for Rio de

Janeiro. Thus Coutinho sets out from the beginning the themes of travel, displacement, and exile that are recurrent in her fiction. In fact, as the novel progresses, the reader finds other female characters who have also left their smaller city for larger urban spaces, but also end up returning to the space of origin. Therefore, the opening paragraphs of *O jogo* also introduce an important structuring element of this novel: the idea of return, repetition and circularity.

“The City,” *a Cidade*, whose name is never mentioned in the narrative, more than the stage for the characters’ dramas and conflicts, becomes the very protagonist of the novel. It is depicted as a mythic space (45 and others), the missing link (84), the “dream of a visionary,” like Coleridge’s Xanadu (37) or Manuel Bandeira’s Pasárgada. It is the space to which the protagonists return in search of a revelation, the key for their destinies, and the understanding of their own selves. Renata, Renato, and the author-narrator are seeking a treasure, as Chapter 4, entitled “Mapa do Tesouro” (Treasure Map) suggests, and the City is the treasure chest they strive to open in order to reveal its secrets/treasures.

The juxtaposition of destinies, the repetition with variations of the same life pattern (displacement in the City, dislocation in space, exile, displacement in the new space, return, search for answers) underscores the Borgesean leitmotif and reminds us that life is cyclical and repetitive. As the character Madá states, “nesta Cidade a vida das pessoas não tem enredo nenhum. Tudo se repete de forma absolutamente previsível” (15) (in this City people’s lives have absolutely no plot. Everything repeats itself in the most predictable way). To which Jamil, a homosexual—and as such an outsider—replies that, indeed, there is something about the City that is unchanging, “immutable”: “Caíam os regimes, substituíam-se os governos, industrializava-se afinal a Cidade—as novas autoridades terão um comportamento parecido com as anteriores e uma doçura incurável permanecerá sob a fumaça das chaminés das fábricas. Mas há outras coisas para se dizer sobre a Cidade—há o seu lado místico e misterioso” (17) (Regimes may fall, governments may be replaced, the City may finally become industrialized—the new authorities will behave similarly to the previous ones, and an incurable sweetness will remain under the smoke from the factories’ chimneys. But there are other things to say about the City—there is its mystical and mysterious side).

Through Jamil’s comments, Coutinho points to a characteristic associated with Brazil’s supposed “cordiality,” and that has perhaps contributed to the permanence of the status quo: “doçura,” which means sweetness, but also implies docility. Madá elaborates on what this status quo has meant for women: a certain life pattern that determines who a woman will marry, her (limited) social role, and the social environment to which she will be confined. The husband will inherit his father-in-law’s line of business; he must be white, in order to produce light-skinned children, in a

city where most of the population is of African ancestry (15–16). Women like Renata, Madá, and Tânia, upper-middle-class women repressed by the expectations of their social group, or Celeste, also a woman from the upper-classes, who dates Milton, a successful Black university professor, pay a high price for defying the status quo: displacement, exile, and social stigma.

In *O jogo de Ifá*, the critique of gender relations is deeply intertwined with a critique of racial relations in Salvador and, by extension, the whole country. The various references to the ethnic groups that contributed to the formation of Bahia (Indians, Africans, Portuguese, and other Europeans who fought to colonize that region), and to historical events related to the uprising of African slaves, define the ideological frame of patriarchy that has excluded Blacks as much as women, homosexuals, and other minorities. The short narrative, structured on repetition and circularity, creates a narrow textual space that highlights the identification among these minority groups. Even Renato, a white male from an economically decadent middle-class family, serves to represent the exclusion of women from the social space of patriarchal power by living experiences very similar to those Renata goes through. In addition, Coutinho inverts the traditional positions of male and female in the “penis envy” complex. In *O jogo*, Renato is jealous of the love and attention his father grants his sister and even considers castrating himself in order to partake in the space of patriarchy:

Só não contei nunca aquela manhã no banheiro, quando—eu tinha nove anos— peguei a navalha do meu pai e passei muito tempo a examinar meu próprio sexo enrijecido, imaginando que ia cortá-lo e assim eliminar de vez a diferença entre eu e Léa, decerto o que me tornava inferior e fazia o velho estimá-la tanto. (26)

(I just never told anyone about that morning in the bathroom when—I was nine years old—I grabbed my father’s razor and spent a long time examining my own, hardened sex, imagining I would cut it and in this way eliminate once and for all the difference between Lea and me, certainly what caused me to be inferior and the old man to love her so much.)

By inverting the well-known Freudian “penis envy” complex, the author frees the female characters from cultural stereotypes associated with women and, through a process of estrangement, forces the reader into a critical perspective of societal expectations. The same happens through Celeste and Milton’s relationship. Through a Black male character that belongs to the middle-class and is an intellectual and a college professor, a desirable profession, the author controls all the variables, so that there is no question as to the nature of the stigma surrounding Celeste and Milton: racial discrimination.

The City emerges thus as a space of conflict, as a fragmented society wherein its parts live in tension and opposition. *O jogo*, says Coutinho, depicts Bahia's "caldeirão cultural" ("A escrita do Candomblé" 1) (cultural cauldron), and this explains the fragmented structure of the narrative: "Talvez exatamente pela mistura cultural *nem sempre suave, às vezes conflitante*, esse livro é o mais fragmentado dos meus textos, são peças que não se fundem" ("A escrita do Candomblé" 4, my emphasis) (Maybe because of Salvador's cultural mixture—not always smooth, sometimes conflictive—this book is the most fragmented of my texts; made of pieces that cannot be fused). Thus "doçura," as a characteristic associated with Salvador and its inhabitants, and "cordiality" as a trait of "Brazilianness" are ideological concepts that must be critically revised. This is what the author does by inserting references to historical events that evoke destruction, death, and rebellion. Among the many historical references, two must be highlighted: the *Malê* revolt, and the fire that in 1958 destroyed the famous Castro Alves Theater in Salvador's downtown area.

When first built, the Theater was a source of controversy, seen as an elitist project that used up public money (14), and is thus a symbol of the City's class conflicts. Its destruction by the fire, however, seemed to have brought the population together, saddened by the loss of this important cultural monument (26), a public landmark that came to identify the City (and in fact allows the reader to identify the City as Salvador). The Theater is also an allegory for the social struggles of women and Blacks. It was built on Campo Grande, the same square where, in the last part of the nineteenth century, the local government built a monument celebrating the battles for Bahia's independence that took place between 1821 and 1823. This allows for its symbolic association with the social struggles of women, Blacks, and other minorities. Moreover, the images of its destruction bring to mind the immolation of women who challenge the status quo:

Quando as chamas irromperam no grande teatro recém-construído, o clarão foi avistado até o mar. As labaredas saíam por entre as paredes como se estivessem acesas há séculos, mas contidas, e fizeram afundar o grande teto inclinado da edificação, formando uma grande fogueira—o sexo em fogo da Cidade, exposto diante de todos os olhares. (80)

(When the large, recently built theater burst into flames, the blaze could be seen all the way to the sea. The flames came out from between the walls as if they had been lit, but contained, for centuries, and they caused the building's large slanted roof to collapse, forming a big bonfire—the City's sex on fire, exposed to everyone's eyes.)

The images of a bonfire and the exposed sex, and the fact that "Cidade" is a feminine word, thus making the City a female entity, evoke a picture of the

bonfires that during the Inquisition punished transgressive women. The City, divided because of class, gender, and racial conflicts, is punished along with its inhabitants.

Extending the complex system of symbolic associations, the area where the Theater was built had been the stage for the slave uprisings of 1835 that became known as the Revolts of the *Malês*, Islamic Africans taken to Brazil as slaves. It is amidst the convulsion of these events that Renata arrives in the City (66–67), while Renato sees, upon arriving, a procession of Afro-Brazilian gods (35). Fog, shadows, and darkness surround the City as the two characters arrive, underscoring the image of the city as a mythic space in which lies the mystery, the “Pedra Filosofal” (Philosopher’s Stone), the revelation Renato and Renata are seeking about themselves. If Renato and Renata embody two sides of the same human life, they represent on the one hand fragmentation and, on the other, multiplicity. Says Renato: “Vivi várias vidas. Ou talvez seja mais correto dizer—vivo várias vidas. Pois o espaço em que se desenrolaram não foi eliminado” (19) (I have lived many lives. Or maybe it would be more correct to say—I live many lives. For the space in which they unfolded has not been eliminated), a statement the author-narrator later repeats (86). There is then a parallelism that unfolds *ad infinitum*, making Renato’s or Renata’s personal history stand for the history of others—Tânia, Celeste, Madá—and the history of the very space to which they return.

Nevertheless, if the space has not been eliminated, it has proved to be inaccessible except through memory. The book that narrates the city is, as Renato Cordeiro Gomes says, a “book of memories” and a book written from memory (Gomes 37). Memory is labyrinthine; it is a puzzle. The city to which Renato and Renata return does not offer definitive answers, but rather opens itself up like Borges’s *Aleph* (cf. *O jogo* 64, 93). The narrative (Coutinho’s, the author-narrator’s) intends then to reorganize a “carrousel of images” (93), everything ever seen and experienced. That the City remains a puzzle to be solved is evidenced in an elliptical passage in one of the last chapters of the novel. In it disjointed phrases and sentences from previous chapters are enumerated; for example:

os filhos da noite não abandonaram os refúgios perdulários do
tempo como a brisa é lenta o mesmo cardápio de dez anos
atrás, sopa de verduras o relógio de pêndulo o silêncio do
entardecer da Cidade, belo em excesso saio para dar uma volta
sensação de deslumbramento (88)

(The children of the night haven’t abandoned their refuges those
wasteful of time how unhurried is the breeze the same menu
from ten years ago, minestrone soup the pendulum clock
the silence of the sunset in the City, excessively beautiful I go out

for a stroll a dazzling sensation)

The passage again suggests an Aleph, as it does also a dream-like state. In both cases, the City offers itself as a kaleidoscope of images, memories, feelings, and experiences that traverse time, making Renato's, Renata's, and the author-narrator's displacement, spatial as well as temporal.

Coutinho's depiction of Salvador renders it in all its complexity. The City is mystical (17) and mythical, but it is also a dystopian space divided by a deep social and racial chasm. Its cityscape alternates houses with crystal candelabra and winding, dusty streets where miserable but smiling people walk (30). The small and colorful colonial houses and the "turquoise-blue" sky are being destroyed by rapid industrialization, replaced by an ever-growing number of new skyscrapers, which is slowly turning the City in a desert, announcing a new era without trees and without shade (36). In this way, the City shows the signs of urban changes that threaten to erase its original mystery, to rob it of its identity, while accentuating all of its social problems—racial conflicts, economic disparity, and social exclusion. In this sense, it is a micro-cosmos representative of the problems Brazilian cities face today.

O jogo de Ifá, as I have stated, narrates a search for the original space. This is the space to which the characters return in hopes of finding in their past, in their origins, an explanation and a definition of their identities. But *O jogo* is also a return to the origin of the Brazilian nation, for it is there in Bahia that the nation began. The author traces these origins through fragments of Brazilian history, and by doing so situates Salvador as the navel, the center from which Brazil grew and expanded, and in this way subverts the dichotomy between center and periphery. Coutinho displaces the center from the metropolitan spaces of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and, additionally, expands the national borders by inscribing the characters' and the country's histories in a continental context. "Mulher, sim, e latino-americana" (18) (Yes, I am a woman, and Latin American), thinks Renata; and Renato: "soy latino-americano yo" (43) (Me, I'm Latin American).⁶

O jogo de Ifá stages what Josefina Ludmer has described as "la borradura de la referencia a la nación;" in other words, "la progresiva borradura de la idea (y no solamente de la idea: del imaginario, de la referencia, de la política) de la nación [la cual] se acompaña, dice [Roberto] Schwarz, de la desintegración de la 'modernidad' y sus conquistas" (Ludmer 9) (the progressive blurring of the idea—and not only the idea, but also the imaginary, the reference, the politics—of nation, which takes place at the same time as the disintegration of modernity and its conquests). The cityscape Coutinho depicts retains some of its mythical quality, but appears at the same time as a dystopian postmodern space characterized as fragmented, multiple, a present-day Babel of conflicting voices. Among

these, emerges the voice of a female subject who has stepped out of the enclosed domestic space to wander the streets and the realm of infinite possibilities:

vejo Renata como a heroína que eu gostaria de criar para meu livro, uma espécie de protótipo épico da Mulher Liberta do Terceiro Mundo, saindo do dolorido útero da América Latina, . . . do soturno mundo rural/feudal/patriarcal para a avançada vida urbana dos grandes centros onde, rompendo todos os tabus, vence, se impõe . . . Eu traçaria então o itinerário pessoal de Renata . . . Mostraria Renata entre índios ferozes, Renata caçando na selva amazônica, . . . Renata deusa urbana, . . . pilotando aviões caça-bombardeiros, . . . recitando Dylan Thomas . . . em Copacabana, possuindo sucessivamente mil homens, qual Mae West ou Barbarella indígena. Verdade e mito, uma nova heroína brasileira. (*Ifá* 79)

(I see Renata as the heroine I would like to create for my book, a kind of epic prototype of a Third World Liberated Woman, coming out of Latin America's wounded womb, . . . from the gloomy rural/feudal/patriarchal world to the progressive urban life in the large urban centers where, breaking free of all taboos, she makes it, asserts herself . . . I would then trace Renata's personal itinerary . . . I would show Renata among fierce Indians, Renata hunting in the Amazon forest, . . . Renata, urban goddess, . . . piloting fighter-bombers, . . . reciting Dylan Thomas . . . in Copacabana, successively making love to a thousand men, like an indigenous Mae West or Barbarella. Myth and truth: a new Brazilian heroine.)

It is this heroine, the new Brazilian woman, that Coutinho will depict in her subsequent novels, walking the streets of Copacabana, looking for love, pleasure, and self-realization, but always returning to the original space of Salvador.

Conclusion: The Murderous City

The same tropes and themes explored in *O jogo de Ifá* are present in *Atire em Sofia*, *O caso Alice*, and *Dora Diamante*. Like Renato and Renata, the protagonists of these novels experience travel, displacement, exile, and the return to their original space, which in the three novels is again Salvador. The city's status as protagonist changes, however, as the narrative becomes less fragmented and the characters more fully developed. At the same time, the focus shifts from Salvador in *Atire em Sofia* to Rio de Janeiro in *O caso*

Alice, and to a fictional town, Solinas, in *Dora Diamante*. Solinas shows many aspects that allow the reader to identify it with Salvador, including the sea, the beachfront avenue and its houses.

The representation of the urban space is more fully developed in the first of these novels. Salvador's many facets are depicted: a labyrinth and a mystical space where time is circular (85), and where history remains alive; a city of "animal-like sensuality" (83); a space of class and economic conflict, characterized by chaos, decadent homes (19) and litter-filled streets (24); a "White" and prejudiced city (24) that refuses to accept the social ascension of the Black population, and where racial discrimination leads to physical violence against Blacks. There are also many references to Afro-Brazilian gods, especially Iansã, goddess of the tempests, with whom Sofia is identified. The patriarchal society that reacts with violence against Blacks' social ascension and the city's Africanization (*Atire em Sofia* 35) reacts too against women who, like Sofia, have transgressed the imposed social norms. The opposition between Salvador and Rio de Janeiro is also present in these narratives, and underscores the changes in lifestyle the characters undergo. The influence of the urban space on the female subject is made explicit in *Atire em Sofia*, and the protagonist is shown as having experienced an identity split, thinking of herself as "a Sofia do Rio" and "a Sofia da cidade" (168) (Sofia from Rio and Sofia from the city). Rio de Janeiro is most clearly represented in *O caso Alice*, as a chaotic and violent city (*O caso Alice* 136) marked by murders, disappearances, robberies, and drug traffic, as well as slums, trash on the streets and open sewers. Nevertheless, just as Salvador in *O jogo de Ifá* and in *Atire em Sofia*, Rio de Janeiro is also shown in the beauty of its Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, its sea and mountains. Moreover, at the very end of the novel Rio de Janeiro is described as a female entity, referred to as "Ela," She, with a capital S (*O caso Alice* 171).

Both Salvador and Rio de Janeiro, then, are represented in their beauty as much as through the problems that assail Brazil's urban spaces today. Both cityscapes stage the disintegration or the breakdown of modernity's apparent conquests mentioned above. These conquests were achieved through the exclusion and marginalization of certain social segments, the same segments—women, racial minorities, homosexuals—whose struggles appear in Coutinho's fiction. Sofia, Alice, Dora, and Tessa, from *Dora Diamante*, are representative of a new generation of women, as is Renata, the new Brazilian heroine described in *Ifá*. They are women who have left their city of origin for the metropolis where, alone, they live out their sexuality and independence. The original city, however, holds for them punishment: murder, for Sofia and Tessa, and sexual abuse for Alice. The three novels are crime narratives. *O caso Alice* is also a mystery novel, where one of the main characters attempts to solve the mystery of Alice's disappearance and her involvement in a murder. *Dora Diamante*, in turn, is a more traditional detective novel, with the protagonist playing the role of a

journalist-detective who investigates Tessa's death. The author's choice of the crime narrative and the detective novel reflects the increased chaos and the increased number of dissonant voices speaking in the contemporary Babel. It reflects also a new degree of urban violence, never before seen in Brazil. If the city remains labyrinthine and mysterious, then, to unveil its mysteries has become less of a puzzle, and more a game of life and death.

Notes

1. All translations from the Portuguese are mine.
2. For a discussion of the demystification of the Brazilian "sensual mulatta" in Coutinho's *Atire em Sofia*, see Ferreira-Pinto Bailey, "'Compulsory' Whiteness."
3. Very compellingly, "home" may often be the scarce space of an insignificant apartment in the overpopulated buildings of Copacabana: "... o apartamentinho de um só cômodo, com uma minúscula varanda dando para a área interna mais escura e esfumada de Copacabana" ("Na penumbra" [In the Shadow] 31) (the small one-room apartment, with a minuscule verandah over Copacabana's darkest and smokiest service area).
4. The urban space is here the narrated city as much as the postmodern urban text. The illegible quality of the city is discussed at length by Renato Cordeiro Gomes, and is mentioned also by Regina Dalcastagnè, André Bueno, Rogério Lima, and other critics.
5. "Jogo" in Portuguese means game, from the verb "jogar," to play or to throw. "Jogo de Ifá" is the name of an Afro-Brazilian divination practice in which shells ("búzios") are cast and read according to their formation on the table. Quinlan discusses the origin and practice of Ifá divination in her "Divination: The Possibility of a New Order." In "A escrita do candomblé" (The Candomblé Writing) Coutinho explains that the title *O jogo de Ifá* refers "to the game of human destiny" (2).
6. There are also many references to historical events in Latin America, such as the military interventions that in the 1950's and 60's began dictatorships in Argentina, Bolivia, and Guatemala (cf. *Ifá* 72–73, 74). In addition, Renato, displaced to Washington, D.C. to work as a journalist, is there perceived as an arrogant "little-shit Latin American journalist" (38).

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