

Adriana Lisboa

Stops: **Brazil, France, Japan, New Zealand, United States**

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(1970- )



(photo by Sierra Nichols)

Adriana Lisboa is one of the most distinctive and prolific voices among a generation of Brazilian writers that came of age at the turn of the millennium. Her first novel, *Os fios da memória*, was published in 1999 and was a finalist for the José Saramago prize, which she then won in 2001 for her second, widely acclaimed novel, *Sinfonia em branco*, translated and published in a dozen languages and countries. Since then, she has published another six novels, two story collections, and the book-length essay reflecting on memory, mortality, and grief, *Todo o tempo que existe* (2022), selected by the *Folha de São Paulo* for its list of books of the year. In 2014, she made her public debut as a poet with the publication of her collection, *Parte da paisagem*, which was followed by another three books of poetry, including *Deriva* (2019), semifinalist for the both the Jabuti and Oceanos prizes. She has published another half dozen books for children and young adults, and she also works as a literary translator from French, English, and Spanish, having translated works by Cormac McCarthy, Marguerite Duras, Maurice Blanchot, Emily Brontë, and José Lezama Lima, among others.

Lisboa was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1970. She studied music at university and worked as a singer in France, and flute and music theory teacher in Rio before dedicating herself to writing and translation. She completed masters and doctoral degrees in comparative literature at the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro. She was a visiting research fellow at the Centro Internacional de Estudos Japoneses – Nichibunken and the University of New Mexico and also writer in residence at the University of California-Berkely and the University

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of Texas-Austin. Since 2007, she has lived in the U.S., first in Colorado and then in Texas.

Her work is expansive and varied in the timely and timeless themes and questions it engages with – legacies of dictatorship and patriarchal violence, animal rights, memory and mourning, Buddhist philosophy, climate and environmental change, intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships, among others. It is perhaps most consistently defined by its engagement with experiences of diaspora and transnational dislocation, whether taking the form of exile, immigration, or travel. This has been a consistent feature of all of her work, including novels and poetry, since the publication of *Rakushisha* in 2007. This novel imagines the encounter and relationship between a young woman left grieving and disoriented after the death of her child and the disintegration of her marriage and a second-generation Japanese-Brazilian illustrator, who, after being invited to illustrate a Brazilian edition of the work of Bashō, finds himself ambivalently facing his very limited knowledge of Japan and interrogating his hyphenated identity as a Brazilian of Japanese descent. In a moment of radical curiosity about and openness to the stranger – another structuring motif of much of Lisboa's work – they agree to travel together from Brazil to Japan, seeking solace and self-understanding in the writings of the seventeenth-century haiku poet and travel diarist.

Beginning with *Azul-corvo*, published in 2010, the U.S. becomes, along with Brazil, one of the locational and identity vectors of Lisboa's work. This novel narrates the journey of the teenage Brazilian-American protagonist from Rio de Janeiro to Colorado and New Mexico, following the death of her mother. She is placed in the care of her mother's ex-husband, a Brazilian immigrant and exile, one of very few fighters to have survived the failed Araguaia guerrilla resistance against the military dictatorship, and she is befriended by a boy, the child of undocumented Salvadoran immigrants, who becomes something of a surrogate younger brother. Together they travel in search of information about the girl's biological father, reconstructing or reinventing family ties, identity, and forms of belonging in the aftermath of a constellation of dislocations. This immigrant story and the social and physical geographies it spans largely unfolds through subjective registers of memory, perception, and knowing – and the gaps within them – and the introspective exploration of emotional and cognitive

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responses to the real. Regarding this quality, Renata Ribeiro considers the novel as an example of what critic Karl Erik Schollhammer calls affective realism, a narrative approach that reaffirms exploration of the interior life of characters as part and parcel of the connection between reality and representation.

Likewise, *Hanói*, published in 2013, tells an immigrant story, or a confluence of immigrant stories, that span diverse types and geographies. This time, the protagonists and settings are centered in Chicago, with a physical dislocation in the form of a trip to the novel's title city coming only at the end, as a sort of pilgrimage and denouement. Still, the two protagonists' identities and internal lives, as third-culture Americans, are shaped and fragmented by the origins, experiences, and stories of their parents – from Mexico and Brazil, the U.S. and Vietnam, respectively – and social forces and historical events, most centrally the American military interventions in Southeast Asia but also the beginnings, in the 1990s, of large-scale migration of Brazilians to the U.S. Marguerite Harrison considers the novel and its characters through the concept of map-bending, or the act of folding a map to establish “a meeting point within non-bisecting points” (102), creating, as Lisboa puts it, an “estalo de proximidade” (qtd. in Harrison, 102). Through these characters, and through the fortuitous encounter and transformative, even if tragically brief, relationship that develops between them, a Chicago neighborhood intersected with Hanoi meets Chicago as intersected with Governador Valadares. While the characters embody the transnational, this is also manifest through music as one of the novel's themes, with references and reflections on the musical world inhabited and cultivated by one of them, the Brazilian-Mexican-American who is also a jazz trumpeter.

Lisboa's most recent two novels continue to unfold this exploration of variations on transnational connections and dislocations, and they share in common an exploration, both topical and philosophical, of the distances, proximities, and interconnections between humans and their non-human others, between human and more-than-human worlds. In *Todos os santos* (2019), a narrative that transits between Rio de Janeiro and Oceania, the Anthropocene is thematized both through the protagonist's research on trans-Pacific bird

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migration and ominous scenes of turbulent waters connecting Guanabara Bay and New Zealand's Manawatū River. And *Os grandes carnívoros* (2024) tells the story of a woman returning to Brazil after serving a prison sentence in the U.S. for her involvement with a group of radical animal rights activists and the burning of a research laboratory. In this narrative, the vectors and factors of dislocation are multiple, including trajectories spanning the U.S., Brazil, and Mexico, but also between the social worlds of family, community, friendships, and activist networks and the relative isolation of prison and the chosen site for the protagonist's return and recovery, a rental house on the outskirts of a small town in the mountains of Rio de Janeiro state. As the protagonist recalls the experiences and decisions that led her there and forms uncertain connections in this new world, the novel interrogates forms and meanings of destructiveness and violence, between humans, against animals, in defense of non-human lives, and against oneself.

The trajectory of Lisboa's work as a novelist is perhaps the most consistently accomplished manifestation of the transnational as a distinctive tendency to emerge in Brazilian literature since the late 1990s, a period marked both by intensified global circulation of cultural artifacts and of Brazilians as travelers, tourists, and immigrants, and the projection of Brazil as a global presence, most markedly during the economic, diplomatic, and soft-power boom years that coincided with the first two terms of Lula's government. The confident and unsettled expansiveness – thematically, geographically, and philosophically – of her writing is expanded further through her poetry. Across four collections of poems published since 2014, Lisboa's worldliness as a writer and thinker is given free reign and fully on display, in poems that engage with fellow writers, artists and thinkers (Pessoa, Goethe, Ailton Krenak, Derrida, John Cage, Taizan Maizumi, Cecília Meirelles, Manuel Bandeira, Hugo Mujica, Karen Solie, Mariana Ianelli, Jim Harrison, Adília Lopes, etc.), topics, beings, images, places, and feelings scattered across time and space, drawn into constellations by a delicate and sharply incisive lyrical voice that interrogates, in shock and wonder, facts and experiences of being in this world, amidst its mundane horrors and its mesmerizing beauty. It is a poetry, among other things, of the many departures from home, striding out into the world and into the worlds of the self, inhabiting the universe and universes of one's own conscious or unconscious

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creation but also haunted by what is lost or left behind, by choice or the inexorable forces of time and transformation. As Lisboa concludes the poem, “Macedônia”, which closes her collection *Pequena música* (2018), even Alexander the Great should have been haunted by the thought, or the failure to think, that perhaps home might have been enough: “por isso as lágrimas / não pela Arábia que ficou faltando / Alexandre / mas pela Macedônia / que nem suspeitavas ser bastante” (85). It is a persistent sense and sentiment given cosmopolitical meaning in “Solastalgia”, the long poem closing her 2021 collection, *O vivo*, contemplating the Earth as home and feeling its losses, present and looming, amidst an inventory of signs of climate change and ecocide, “vivo no mesmo lugar mas / tudo mudou tanto tudo / ao meu redor está tão diferente / que sinto saudades de casa / mesmo ainda estando aqui” (70).

## Quotations

### **O que fica para trás**

O que fica para trás  
não é um hábito um círculo  
de amizades não é a música  
do amolador de facas  
nem o cheiro do mar em dia de ressaca  
nem o guincho amoroso  
do último bonde

fica um tempo  
o que existimos nesse tempo  
descontínuo  
e não se trata de querer voltar  
ou de nunca ter saído

trata-se do esforço

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de recordar dia  
após dia que a vida  
se faz do imprevisto  
e que partir sempre  
é outra maneira  
de ficar.

(*Deriva*: 52)

### **Migrantes**

*Y el extranjero es siempre um sospechoso.*

Octavio Paz

Deixam a casa  
levam na mala o idioma natal  
por necessidade ou hábito  
como um documento de identidade  
a comprovar  
que são aquilo que deixam  
e por inferência que deixam  
aquilo que são

mas agora desancorados já não sabem  
em idioma algum o que deixam  
nem o que são  
nem o que somam  
nesta viagem que é um longo  
e lento aprender a flexionar  
sinais de subtração.

(*Idem*: 53)

Num saquinho de papel se embaralham nomes e palavras: Albuquerque, Copacabana,

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Londres, Araguaia, LIFE. IS. GOOD. Amazônia Colorado Guerrilha. Texas. Namorado Americano Lugar Nenhum. Algumas das palavras dizem respeito ao presente, outras vêm do passado, outras podem pertencer a algum futuro. Estão ali, confundidas. É um saquinho de papel que Vanja vai levar, sem saber, na mala com as coisas importantes, quando fizer sua viagem de volta ao país onde nasceu e onde o grito de ordem a-vida-é-bom se escreve assim: life is good.

(*Azul-corvo*: 52)

Fernando já tinha dado tantas voltas depois de sair de casa que já não lembrava mais qual o caminho. Claro: a casa já não estava mais lá, portanto o caminho não podia estar. E não é que a casa estivesse, agora, em toda parte – não, isso é para os cidadãos do mundo, para os que viajam por esporte. Para os que nunca se arrastaram sobre a lama congelada na China e nunca correram o risco de ser devorados pelos ursos na Alasca. Não é que a casa estivesse em toda parte: a casa não estava em parte alguma. (*Idem*: 73)

Uma expatriada desde o berço, 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.

Duas gerações depois, o que é que Alex tinha a ver com isso?

Uma lua de distância da história de Linh e Huong e Trung, o que David tinha a ver com isso? Guerras em países distantes, e ainda por cima em décadas passadas, eram para os livros de história. Eram para alguém fazer um documentário de tempos em tempos. Eram para os pesquisadores dos departamentos apropriados nas universidades.

Não eram para deixar nosso corpo desassossegado, como se fosse conosco, Alex pensou.

Não era conosco. Certo? (*Hanói*: 181)

Voltei à nossa casa na rua Te Awe Awe após aquele longuíssimo voo, do Rio a Buenos Aires, de Buenos Aires a Auckland, de Auckland a Palmerston North. Tanto tempo que a alma teria de recuperar. E o trecho mais longo de todo o trajeto foi o de carro do pequenino aeroporto de Palmy até a nossa casa. Dez minutos, se tanto. Você ao volante e eu mordendo os lábios por dentro até tirar sangue.

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Era um dia da chuva forte. O rio estava gordo. O Manawat-ū, belo e triste, a poluição invisível, inchado feito um bicho que estivesse engolindo a presa. Você foi até a janela. Apesar da chuva e do frio, forçou a tranca meio emperrada, abriu a vidraça. As águas de lã despendendo do céu. O céu despendendo, sei lá. Isabel tinha me contado, em algum momento, que para os ianomâmis era isso que aconteceria quando os xamãs todos morressem. Não haveria mais ninguém capaz de sustentar o céu. (*Todos os santos*: 135)

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