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Of blood and laughs: The Brazilian Periphery of Letters and the concept of universality

Abstract

The objective of the following paper is to present the UERJ/Fiocruz extension program called "Literary History in citizenship education in peripheral territories – articulations with the *Brazilian Periphery of Letters* (PBL)" and to problematize the idea, and the crises, of the concept of universality. The work of Antonio Candido has served as a basis to defend literature as a universal concept. However, several authors have seriously questioned the practices and meanings that bolster the concept of "universal", and others that come from it, like "humanity" and "civilization". Consequently, there has been a destabilization of these concepts based on the idea of universality, compelling us to think once again about the universal right to literature and its social functions, making it worth asking what the consequences are for literary history and with this right, in such an epistemological framework, and in search for answers with PBL itself.

If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (1597)

1. The project "Literary History in citizenship education in peripheral territories – articulations with the Brazilian Periphery of Letters (PBL)" is an extension program developed in the Department of History of the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) that seeks to bring together academic knowledge and the cultural production of literary collectives active in urban peripheries of various Brazilian cities, namely those involved in the *Brazilian Periphery of Letters* (PBL) and the *Bando Editorial Favelofágico*,[1] organised by Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz). The PBL is a network of literary collectives active in favelas and the outskirts of urban centers. Including 13 literary collectives, through the *Bando Editorial Favelofágico*, this network operates in 8 Brazilian state capitals: Recife, Fortaleza, Salvador, Brasília, Belo Horizonte, São Paulo, Porto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro. With its roots in Health Promotion, Fiocruz aims to foster cultural public policy for areas with high social vulnerability. With this outreach proposal, the extension program intends to construct a transdisciplinary space for both active listening and knowledge exchange, that allows us to comprehend what peripheral subjects do with literature and how

[1]We will use the Portuguese abbreviation PBL from now in the text. The "Bando Editorial Favelofágico" is a publisher team whose name brings the idea of a "gang" that works with a typical "cultural anthropophagy" (a concept proposed by the Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade) made in the favelas (slums). For more information: https://periferiabrasileiradeletras.org/ and on instagram @pbl_uerj2023. The outreach work and research for this paper receive support from ProCiência/UERJ, APQ1/FAPERJ and Social Cooperation of the Presidency of Fiocruz.

they do it, taking into consideration the way they see and determine themselves, how they perceive their social and historical positioning, what literary form and content they choose and how they construct and edit their texts. From this, we seek to reformulate and fine tune the *modus operandi* and the adequacy of academic content that will be exchanged, to mobilize epistemological vectors that guide the individual and collective subjects in the universe of words, temporality and sociability in their territories.

In this case, understanding a periphery is fundamental. Especially, in the framework of this article's debate, the PBL dialogues with human rights and with concepts such as universality and civilization, stressing the importance of a project that aims towards a solidarity-based society and, if possible, towards a horizon of equality and equity. Solidarity is an aspect significantly present in favela culture (Eugênio, 2013), but fear and vulnerability are also a constituent feature that require our attention. Focusing on debates about social and historical formation, such extension program makes possible, for both the PBL and the University, situations of mutual creation and learning, towards the broadening of citizenship, through critical knowledge, historical consciousness, and active participation in cultural production. This strengthens, consequently, the relationship of solidarity between the academic world and society.

We understand, furthermore, that a "*Brazilian Periphery of Letters*" lies in critical dialogue with national Literary History, as the latter includes a canon of works and authors considered to hold the necessary qualities to be seen as "historical". Moreover, the PBL clearly means an incision in the structure of the distinguished Brazilian Academy of Letters, founded by Machado de Assis and José Veríssimo in Rio de Janeiro, in 1897[2]. It seems opportune, therefore, to accompany certain discussions that are underway in the field of historiography that, in some way or another, involve PBL and support this extension program.

2. In the last decades History has experienced what has been coined an ethical-political shift (Rangel & Araújo, 2015) that has consolidated with the increasing pressures of anti-intellectualism, historical and scientific denial and the "post truth" practices, which dissolve the possibilities of valid knowledge or the existence of reality itself. In this context within Historiography, without abandoning the connections between knowledge and power that should be fought against, we have seen theoretical and methodological transformations, which at the same time maintain rigor in the construction of knowledge and make disciplinary protocols more flexible. This allows for the renovation of the historic field, involving transdisciplinary approaches and methods that make educators and the general public closer to the knowledge academically produced and vice-versa.

One of these renovating axes resides in the relationship between History and Literature, about how much it served as a pillar in the formation of a corpus of authors, works and readers, aimed at thinking about the country, its social and cultural characteristics, its numerous problems inherited from the colonial process and/or generated by the interference of the capitalist modernization. Before the creation of an academic discipline, it was the lettered who thought about an independent Brazil, who analyzed its social, economic, and political formation, who created its lettered culture, who fought for what they considered to be a civilizer process, and for the "right to literature" (Candido, 2006). Such literary commitment deeply influenced the participation of Literature in the cognitive and political dynamics that comprised a so-called "national formation", as well as the debates about its origins, (im)possibilities, historical devel-

[2]Academia Brasileira de Letras (ABL). Available at: http://www.academia.org.br (accessed: July 25, 2023).

opments, and even its end. *Mutatis mutandis*, these issues have remained alive and pertinent until today in the context of transdisciplinary relations that entwine historical and literary dimensions, both regarding its theoretical reflections and its educational and social praxis.

In this frame of reference, the work of Candido fulfilled a seminal role, whether because of his ponderings on the "forming of Brazilian literature" in general, and about texts and authors in particular, or through the broad range of methodological and theoretical issues that he discussed so acutely. Both literary creation and accomplishment are understood as necessary aesthetic experiences to the establishment of a national, regional or local literary system – that consolidates itself when it is composed of a solid group of authors, works and public –, also necessary for a social formation strictly speaking. In the framework, therefore, where literary phenomenon are defined in relation to national cultures, what has to be taken in to account are the historical problems derived from colonization, from the tense relation between metropolises and colonies, before and after their independences, and from the search for autonomy, not only political, but also cultural/literary. Fully aware of this, Candido developed two concepts, "two-edged literature" and "dialectic between localism and cosmopolitism" (Candido, 1989a, 1989b), within which the issue of universality as a criterion of aesthetic quality is also included. One could say, risking being unduly brief, that his main references were the debates between Silvio Romero and Machado de Assis at the end of the 19th century, and the modernist proposals of Mário de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade, among others, in the first half of the 20th century. The ideas of cultural ingurgitation of Oswaldian anthropophagy added, in Candido, to the analysis of the later works of Machado de Assis, with an emphasized space also for critical articles like "Instinto de Nacionalidade" (Nationality Instinct), in which Machado defends that Brazilian literature united potently the language and the aesthetics of Portugal (the colonizer), with the content's "local color", as the Romantic Nationalism of Brazil in the 1800s wished for. In other words, the lettered Brazilian's possessed cultural "nest egg" that took them beyond a mere imitation of Europe, an imitation that Silvio Romero's gaze was limited to (Pinha, 2012; Schwarz, 1987). All this enabled Candido to consider, with Machado de Assis, that the Brazilian literary system was well established, despite not being able to say the same about social formation – which maybe never could be complete (Arantes, 1992; B. de M. Vieira, 2022). Thus, a national work in the fullness of its literary quality could also be considered a universal work.

Candido, moreover, was always concerned about the general public's access to literature, especially in a country with a strong colonial inheritance and legacy of slavery, where illiteracy and social inequality are bitter historical scars. The problem is discussed in various texts, like "Perversão da Aufklarung" (Aufklarung's Perversion), and in "Direito à literatura" (Right to Literature) (Candido, 2002, 2011) in which Candido writes an explicit defense of literature as both a universal value and right:

> I will call literature, in the broadest sense possible, all creations with a poetic, fictional or dramatic touch on all levels of a society, in all types of culture, from what we call folklore, legend, jokes, until the most complex and difficult forms of written production of the great civilizations. // From this perspective literature emerges clearly as a universal manifestation of all men, of all times. There is no people and no man that can live without it, that is, without the possibility of entering in contact with some type of imaginary creation. Like everyone dreams every night, no one is capable of passing twenty four hours of their day without surrendering some moments to the fabled universe [...] However, if no one can get through twenty four hours without diving into the universe of fiction and of poetry, literature understood in a broad way as I referred to

> seems to correspond to a universal necessity that needs to be fulfilled, and its fulfilment is itself a right [...] As it is not possible to have psychological balance without dreams during sleep, perhaps there is no social balance without literature. Therefore, it is an indispensable factor of humanization and, moreover, confirms man in its humanity, because it acts in the most part in the subconscious and unconscious. [...] Every literary work is first and foremost a type of object, a constructed object and the humanizing power of this construction, as a construction, is considerable. // Indeed, when they elaborate a structure, the poet or narrator proposes a model of coherence, created by the force of the organized word. [...] If we clearly perceive it or not, the character of a literary work as an organized thing becomes a factor that makes us more capable in ordering our own mind and feelings; and consequently, more capable to organize the vision we have of the world. (Candido, 2011, pp. 176–179)

And, furthermore:

> I have just focused on literature's relation with human rights from two different angles. First, I confirmed that literature corresponds to a universal necessity that should be fulfilled, under penalty of mutilating personality, since it gives form to feelings and to our world vision it organizes us, frees us from chaos and thus, humanizes us. To deny the fruition of literature is to mutilate our humanity. Secondly, literature can be a conscious instrument of unmasking, due to the way it pinpoints situations where rights are being restricted, or even denied, like misery, servitude, and spiritual mutilation. On both levels it has a lot to do with the struggle for human rights. // How a society is organized can restrict or broaden the fruition of this humanizing asset. What is serious in a society like Brazil is that it resolutely continues to stratify possibilities, treating many material and spiritual heritage that are incompressible as compressible. In our society fruition is organized according to class to the extent that a common man is practically unable to know of the existence of and enjoy reading Machado de Assis or Mário de Andrade. (Candido, 2011, p. 188)

These long quotes are justified by the fact that these thoughts are central to the PBL and *Favelofagia* projects, that have the "Right to Literature" as one of their pillars, or in other words, the notion that the popular classes, specifically those that live in the peripheral areas of large urban centers, including favelas, can participate and do participate in the experience of creation, circulation and public reception of literature, despite all of the physical and symbolic violence that exists in these areas. The effects of this, together with their problematization, will be discussed below.

3. If the concept of universality for Candido has two faces, both cosmopolitism and the right to the power to organize the chaos through imaginary creation, for many other thinkers, however, there are serious issues with the practices and meanings that support the concept of "universal", and others which come from it, like "individual rights", "Nation-State", "citizenship", "civilization", etc. The concept is detrimentally marked by its origin in the Enlightenment and its use by European countries' imperialism and colonialism in the 1800s, with goals of domination over other peoples, territories, and their cultures, as well as for exercising social control over the poor and workers, class struggles and intersectional conflicts within each country. The issue of universality is as old as history itself and the debates are central for Historiography and for all of the Humanities, because it involves the problem of commensurability of human beings among one another – between individuals, groups and cultures – and human species with other beings. As there are almost infinite debates, we will try to be strict here.

Within the field of Historiography, the problem of universality/singularity has been fundamental in the theoretical and methodological debates at least since the 18th Century, especially with the advent of the Enlightenment. Its permanence until today is due to numerous appropriations and reformulations, both through liberalism and through left-wing views which anchored the issue in political clashes fought in the heat of the revolutionary processes. In these, as in the case of the Paris Commune, the meanings of universal/singular did not previously exist, but came from the necessity to respond to the practical problems about the territorial organization of the anti-bourgeoisie struggle and the transnational links of solidarity: the communal imagination proclaimed a Universal Republic in which "local autonomous unity, within an internationalist horizon" were combined (Ross, 2021, p. 22). In the 20th century, the I World War meant an existential storm that completely disturbed the experience of time and entailed the loss of credibility of almost all the vital categories of historical interpretation – including *Geist* and *Kultur* – , in other words, the concepts of spirit (of time, of people) and of culture that had sustained the historiographical operations of temporal and spatial simultaneity, and of local identity and national political unity[3]. More recently, at the core of European historiographical discussions, the dynamics of globalization and the advent of "Global History", in dialogue and opposition with the weather-beaten "World History" or "Universal History", generated questioning about the idea of "universal time", observing, overall the dynamics of the interaction between local and global, uniformization and differentiation[4]. This can be noted since the 1980s in numerous mobilizations, in copious places, with their demands for memory, for identity/acknowledgment and for heritage, including "universal heritage of humanity" promoted by UNESCO, being clear that no one contemplates "reactivating temporal schemes mobilized by the universal histories connected to the philosophy of history of the 19th century and the imperial colonies" (Hartog, 2013, pp. 165–178).

It is undeniable that in contemporary times, Adorno's reflections are referential, especially about the impact on, or even the fracture of, this commensurability provoked by capitalism and by fascisms, with the Great War (1914–1945), including the extermination and labor camps, but also the atomic bombs, as the signpost of the catastrophe, of contemporary reification and barbarism, affecting the forming of subjectivities, the world of labor, the Arts, and aesthetic, political and economic thought. Throughout his work, based on Marxian considerations about the ideological character of human rights and the capacity of capital to shape individualities and temporalities, he criticizes the abstraction of the concept of universality and defends the historical concreteness that allows its praxis and gives substance to such a concept. In *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Adorno observed that the ideas of necessity and universality from the bourgeois perspective show a "formula of history", in the sense that "mischief comes from thought as might [*Gewalt*: power, violence], the shortcut of the path which finds the generality solely through what is impenetrable, whose theoretical content [*Gehalt*] is preserved in impenetrability itself, not in the derived congruence of various objects" (Adorno, 1992, p. 66).

[3]For Lucian Hölscher, however, History in the 20th century was not, and could not be, experienced as a whole – both meaningful and continuous – as had happened in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the notion of simultaneity had made it possible for the Enlightenment thinkers to conceptualise a connection between events in space and time, and conceive a "non-simultaneity of the simultaneous" that enabled thought about the temporal order in a universal/world sense, and then position the civilisations (Hölscher, 2014).

[4]For a reading of Global History from the perspective of Latin America and its exclusion/inclusion in international debates, see Serulnikov (2020).

Refuting Schiller, in the 94th aphorism he emphasizes the increasing impossibility, within the fascism, of the representation of what is historical; he considers that connecting an alienated history to the heart of human beings would be the pretext to legitimize as human and understandable the dehumanization of history (Adorno, 1992, p. 126). In *Negative Dialectics*, this reflection is anchored in the problem of social pain, which requires concepts that are not abstract or constructed a priori, but constructed through the materiality of life, from suffering and the necessity for emancipation: "Its agony is the world's agony raised to a concept. Cognition must bow to it, unless concretion is once more to be debased into the ideology it starts becoming in fact" (Adorno, 2009, p. 14).

The question of universality/commensurability is not recent and has gone down intra and inter-disciplinary, both straighter and windier roads, most notably in Philosophy, Anthropology, Psychoanalysis and their numerous debates with Historiography, due to the imbalance and indeterminacy between what is universal, general, transtemporal, trans-spatial, structural, and what is singular, local, contingent, temporal and spatially situated. This has been observed from the debates between Structural Anthropology and History – when Lévi-Strauss denounced the racist and ethnocentric character of the European historians, whose focus drunk on social evolution stopped them from seeing that societies have different forms of existing in time, and that civilizations are formed less through a continuous and cumulative route and more like a game of chess where sometimes you win sometimes you lose (Hartog, 2013; Lévi-Strauss, 1970) –, to the Subaltern Studies in which Said (2005), Chakrabarty (2021) and Spivak (2010), to mention just a few, seek to deconstruct the Western philosophical and historical knowledge discourses to demonstrate how much the core of their said universal truths were ideological, Eurocentric, authoritarian, domineering and ambiguous. For Frantz Fanon, the violence of the colonizing processes resulted in the breaking of bonds of solidarity previously existent in the dominated territories, promoting Machiavellian exploration of rivalries and tearing deep into feelings of belonging and communality, which results in a collective psychic illness and, consequently, in low esteem and in the psychological introjection of prejudice and hierarchies of class, race and gender, transmitted by the colonizer (Fanon, 1968).

In the Brazilian context, what have been named "identity movements" of women, indigenous and black people, presents nowadays important criticism of universalizing ideas. Géssica Guimarães' *Ensaio feminista sobre o sujeito universal* [Feminist essay on the universal subject] is about what is called an abstraction, an invention, or fiction, that is, the construction of the image of "man" as a "universal subject" that has worked as a model for all of humanity, generating a conception of normality, and a so called correct norm for social roles to be performed by individuals of different genders and ethnicities. Instead of being plural and diverse like humanity is, the universal subject plays home to a one-dimensional image of a white European man, because it emerges from the world-system formed by the European Naval and Commercial Expansion of the 16th and 17th centuries, which was later affirmed with the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries. Such an image receives an aura of indisputability and is called on in the most diverse cultural, political and scientific manifestations:

> It presents itself as a human form in its absolute character, consummated, almost an essence, whether in its present condition or in its projection to the past and future. Its presence is perceived in the most diverse spaces of life, because it works as a parameter of what is considered legitimate as humanity, like a prototype of a human being that has all the items of quality and, because of

> this, serves as a model for everyone else. Although the universal subject is not someone of skin and bone, a historical person or something of that type, it is an ideal showing what humanity should be like. (Guimarães, 2022, p. 33)

In this way, the problem resides in that

> this abstraction is completely impregnated in our historical imagination, in our cultural practices, in our social relations, in the State structure itself, and in public policy. Consequently, most laws, scientific hypotheses and the way that we produce knowledge still allude to a subject that is supposed to be universal. (Guimarães, 2022, pp. 17–18)

The clearness of her voice as she stands up as a woman "against such a universal subject", joins, and at the same time opposes in its tone, the indignant voice of the indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak when he talks of the tragedy that has befallen the indigenous communities of Brazil, either due to the interests of capital in the medium and long term, or due to the perverse negligence during Bolsonaro's government (2018–2022) translated in actions of genocide. In his texts and public interventions, Krenak mobilizes, sometimes contradictorily, according to what his argument and struggle needs, the universal ideas of "humanity" and "civilization"[5]:

> Throughout history, humans, in fact, this exclusive club of humanity – that is in the universal declaration of human rights and in institutional protocols –, have devastated everything around them. As if they have chosen a caste, humanity, and everyone that is outside of this are a sub-humanity. This does not just include the *caiçaras*, *quilombolas*[6] and indigenous peoples, but every life that we deliberately left on the roadside. And this road is that of progress: this awaited idea that we are going somewhere. There is a horizon, we are going there, and we leave along the way everything that does not interest us, what is left over, the sub-humanity – some of us are part of it. (Krenak, 2020, p. 10)

Krenak provides a discerning analysis of what is going on in Brazil and in the globalised world, under the destructive order of capital, making use of the resource of detachment, as a place of equidistance in which he, as an indigenous person, can change perspective "kaleidoscopedly" and defend the identity of his "relatives" while criticising the Brazilian identity; he can praise the indigenous civilizations whilst condemning the western-European civilization; he can use reason while calling out abuses carried out in the past in its name; he can support democracy whilst he reproaches its very limits… making it possible to know, without obligatorily acknowledging, Brazilian history, so many times misplaced in the body and in ideas and that give everybody the elements to, simultaneously, love the country for its beauty and, maybe, hate it for its structural violence.

Nevertheless, we can find a different standpoint when observing Black people's perspective: Sueli Carneiro's classic thesis relates the issue to the deteriorated life conditions of the Black population in Brazil, scarred by racism, by poverty, by the difficulty to access education, by violent death. In a country that hides racism, between its complete denial and its relative or total

[5]For a discussion between Anthropology and History, in the middle of the 20th century, see Braudel, where we can find: "there is *a civilisation*, conception that puts up for discussion the whole of humanity, and *the civilisations*, scattered in time and in space." (1992, p. 236).

[6]*Caiçara:* name given to the indigenous communities that live on the coastal regions of the south and southeast of Brazil. *Quilombola*: who lives in *quilombo*, name given in Brazil to the communities organised by fugitive slaves during slavery. Contemporary *quilombos* are communities of poor black, indigenous and mixed-race people still in an act of resistance in today's Brazil.

acceptance, she says that disputes around the problem of race are unveiled both in theoretical plan and in political action. These disputes today reach high levels of polarization, crossing the initiatives for the implementation of public policies that could guarantee universal rights and act in the reversal of the unfavorable life conditions experienced by a large part of the Black population (Carneiro, 2005). From Cida Bento's point of view, in *O Pacto da branquitude* (*The Whiteness' Pact*), a white invisibility, unnamed social practices, the silence and pacts of protection, including the idea that universality belongs to the white group, must be renounced:

> it is urgent to make silence speak, to think and debate, to not condemn society to repeating indefinitely similar anti-humanitarian acts. It is about the inheritance inscribed on the subjectivity of the collective, but that is not acknowledged publicly. The white heir identifies with other white heirs and benefits from this inheritance, whether concretely or symbolically [...] the pact suppresses the memories that evoke suffering and shame, because they are related to slavery. (Bento, 2022, pp. 24–25)
>
> Analysing the European's view about the non-European, it can be concluded that the former won in force and in identity, a type of substitute, clandestine, subterranean identity, placing himself as the "universal man", in comparison with the non-Europeans. // So, at the core of the colonial process in which whiteness was constituted, the Europeans, the white people, created a common identity that used Africans, black people, as their main contrast. The unequal nature of this relationship allowed white people to stipulate and disseminate their own meaning and of others through projection, exclusion, denial and acts of repression. (Bento, 2022, pp. 28–29)

In brief, what is on the agenda is a "politics of viscerality" (Duke Franklin Humanities Institute, 2016)[7], because the problem of commensurability and solidarity, not without contrasts and controversies, is embedded in the relation between what would be "universal", "singular", "cosmopolitan" and "local". In these dynamics history and historiography were constituted, generating complex situations for the socio-political experience, the intercultural exchange and the construction of knowledge in the colonized countries, that remain scarred by colonialism and slavery in many temporal dimensions and durations.

4. Despite contradictions, or just because of them, the social practices and correlative concepts founded in the idea of universality have become unstable, which demands assessing once again the universal right to literature and its social function. What happens to literary history and to this right, in such an epistemological framework? And with the dialectic between localism and cosmopolitism that, according to Candido, formed the Brazilian literary system?

The anecdotic episode in which Schwarz has found a Machado de Assis' book translated into French on a "universal works" shelf, in a bookshop in Paris (!)[8], provides us with ideas about this problem. It is doubtless that Machado's book was there because of the aesthetic quality of his literature, the very quality that is one of the criteria for national and international canons. The fact that the poor black boy had become one of the founders of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, very aware of the hierarchies and perversities that slavery engendered in national daily life, without giving up his search for ascension and social status (TV Obra Aberta, 2002), made Machado familiar with these power relations, which does not mean that he could break them at the international realm... How can we penetrate the relations of power that are strongly

[7]Mbembe means the problem of the colonized's answer to the colonizer's violence: if repeating this violence or refusing any, or searching for something else. We think that the "semiotic guerrilla" during the military dictatorships in Latin America belongs to this framework, as well as the *Favelofagia*.

[8]In a Seminar held in the Literary Studies Department at UFRJ, on September 25, 2012.

pervaded by eurocentrism, racism, chauvinism, sexism, colonialism, that structure the World Republic of Letters (Casanova, 2002), and, contrary to the proposal of a communal universal republic, are not aligned with relations of solidarity?... The three following examples demonstrate that the issue is also recurrent in the field of Literary History, Theory and Critique in Brazil and Latin America, where the problem of "universalism" and the debates about the local, universal, and cosmopolitan, remain.

In a comparative study about Argentinian and Brazilian avant-garde art magazines in the beginning of the 20th century, Elaine Queiroz addresses visions of various Latin American theorists and literary historians about the so-called dilemma between the cosmopolitan and nationalist orientation of the region, observing that "each author, in their own way, seeks not only to criticize the state of dependence of Latin American literature, but also to find an exit for this cultural dependency. Their interpretations convert into flags for contra-hegemony" seeking to solve the specific problems of the subcontinent (Queiroz, 2018, pp. 33–34). The debates of these intellectuals, added to the vanguard authors themselves, mean a political positioning and an intervention in their present, and, in the middle of a "mosaic of paradoxes" with "contrasting positions and opinions" the heterogeneity of voices presents a common element: the tension between the European models and the national/regional characteristics. The questioning of the notions of imitation, copy, influence, original source leads to new paradigms that emphasise the transcultural character or the notion of peripheral modernity in Latin American culture. Instead of "dialectic interpretation followed by many", or in other words, the localism x cosmopolitism dialectic or "universal-European x singular/Latin American", the author prefers the notion of a pendular movement, or a "tension", as more adequate to study Argentinian and Brazilian vanguards (Queiroz, 2018, pp. 33–34).

In the case of Argentina, Siskind resumes the role of Jorge Luís Borges in opening "a place of cosmopolitan-marginal enunciation", from which he would have dismantled "the antagonistic formation of the literary-world field organized around the notions of cultural difference, where the cosmopolitan Latin American writers localize the origin of their exclusion", and from where they seek recognition and inclusion in the "imaginary and indifferent territory of a cosmopolitan literature" (Siskind, 2016, p. 18). Considering, therefore, that the "world" is this cosmopolitan and imaginary discursive space, normally defined by a radical exteriority in relation to Latin American singularity, he sustains that the concept "cosmopolitanism" is better than "universalism", based on the argument that:

> it is necessary to read this differential affirmation of a cosmopolitan and disruptive aesthetic identity, not within the framework of a cultural politics of singularity, but as a strategic literary practice that forces its way towards the realm of the universal; but it is not a question of a universal *qua* universal but of a marginal universalism, a markedly non-universal universalism from which it is possible to denounce both the hegemonic structures of Eurocentric exclusion and the self-marginalization that results from the nationalist normative discourse. (Siskind, 2016, pp. 18–19)

Natali (2006), in direct dialogue with Candido's text "Right to Literature", returns to Marx to criticize the abstract content of this universalistic claim. Natali sees the presence of Goethian *Weltliteratur* in Candido, as a world literary system that sets up a universal heritage of humanity; whilst also Anthropology had brought him closer to popular and folkloric forms of literature, allowing him to broaden his notion of literature to include different forms of orality and even

popular song. It happens due to a democratic longing, based on an educational and performative model of democracy. Therefore, the author says, the humanization through literature is carried out through thought, reason, organization of words, endowment of meaning – this places Candido near the Enlightenment, or even the Liberalism, if one sees in him the combination of universalistic humanism and human rights on one hand, and "superficial multicultural tolerance" on the other, in the name of a common good that is really a liberal proposal of inclusion through modernization, having its ultimate standard in capital. So, humanization through literature brings with it a modernizing proposal, within which the abstraction is correlated to the exchange of merchandise in the capitalist market: "universal" is an abstract value that abstracts real work, something characteristic in bourgeois society. Natali turns to Chakrabarty, for whom universality is not possible in the historical forms of capital – and therefore, literature is not universal, but the phantasmagorical abstraction requires that singular discursive practices are translated to the universal concept of literature. "All of these discursive practices, however, will always exist with the universalizing impulse, like the worker in the factory in relation to abstract work" (Natali, 2006, p. 42). Thus, it is up to comparative literature to meet the materiality of the singular texts and discourses, recognizing the ruins of the comparison of literature universalized by abstraction.

It is clear this is a central issue in Latin America, and numerous other authors could be mentioned, above all after the current "decolonial shift", that revisits Fanon's thinking, the "epistemologies of the South" and the concept of "coloniality of power and knowledge" of the Modernity/Coloniality group (Quijano, 2005; Santos & Meneses, 2009). It draws attention that (almost) all maintain the polarity or dialect universal/singularity and the search for a concept that at the same time can tackle the problem and substitute the concept of "universality", whether it be a "pendular movement", "tension", "cosmopolitism", "transnationality", "transtemporality", "transculturality"[9]...

But a question remains to be answered consistently: do other cultural groups, non-Europeans, nonwhites, those not tied to the Enlightenment, have a notion, concept or another tool that operates the meaning of universality, without its mark of origin? The anthropologist Viveiros de Castro sought in the perspectivism of the indigenous cultures studied in Brazil a route beyond the traditional categories that organize knowledge dually – human/animal, objective/subjective, body/spirit, etc. –, in aid of the relational content of cosmological categories. It is, then, *in relation and in perspective* that the percept (not the concept) of what is human and what is not is constructed, and in a possible meaning for the universal would reside not in the structural anthropological fact, but in the collective-relational reality that presents propensity towards a "trans-contextual stability of form"[10]. Even if it is a possible answer, the question remains open for the research of other cultures, in other times and spaces. This is why our

[9]During the 2023 Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Congress, the roundtable called "Other epistemologies and the question of universalism", on the 26th May 2023 with the organisation of Maxwell A. Cameron (University of Bristol), brought heated debates about David Lehman's (Cambridge University) recently launched *After the Decolonial*. In a very brief way, the criticisms of the book sought to define that "decolonisation is not a metaphor", but an experience of struggles for returning the land to indigenous peoples, as well as differentiating "transversal effects" of a "false universalism" that in fact excludes.

[10]From the perspective of an animal in relation to a person, the human is him and the person is the animal. Viveiros de Castro quotes Weiss: "humanity is the primeval substance from which a lot, if not all categories and beings and things of the universe emerged" (Viveiros de Castro, 2002, p. 245).

project asked the members of the PBL and the participants of the workshop entitled: "Was it Machado de Assis that discovered Brazil?!", which happened in June 2023.

5. What does the literature produced in urban peripheries, as we have seen through the projects of PBL and the *Bando Editorial Favelofágico,* have to say about the concept/percept of universality and about the relation between history and literature? What does this destabilization of the concept of universality mean for PBL, if it's guiding star is Candido's text "Right to Literature", as a universal right, and if the issues of aesthetic quality and the relations of power of the Republic of Letters are based in criteria of universality? The collection of answers, still underway, reveals a varied spectrum, from the response of someone surprised when discovering they belong to the Brazilian and world history, to the mistrust of the political content of the concept – who created it, what were their intentions, their take-aways? –, passing through the demand for a "scientific" base for such.

For the PBL coordinators, the crisis of the universal as a valid concept does not undermine the experience of this network of literary collectives guided by the idea that literature is a human right. It guides the PBL because it was set up in Brazilian peripheries. It would be very different if these literature collectives were not peripherical. There is a particularity in the challenge of doing political and cultural resistance through literature in areas like favelas. What should be considered urgent regarding human rights in an area where injustice and social inequality are a feature of life? Should we ask how the condition to create literature is directly and negatively affected? The answer is yes. But because literature, in these areas, has shown itself to be more a strategic tool of struggle, than a right.

And here is one of the main contemporary aspects of a periphery. Violence in the favelas could be associated to barbarism as a condition of socio-political existence. And this condition is only possible with a partnership with State authorities, because armed violence in the peripheral areas is not only due to drug and weapon trafficking, but also illegal police activity. Not always direct and explicit, necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018) acts as a State project, without which, paradoxically, the existence of favelas would not be viable. Therefore, fear is a concrete element in the life of those who live in favelas. It does not mean that everyone is always terrified; but the system of fear and terror curtails the idea of freedom: freedom for dissent, for litigation, without assuming that their bodies, their lives are at risk.

How can you produce literature from this locus? The fact is that, apparently, literature still receives an invisibility cloak in the favelas, given a certain idea of a "perfumery" that has always been attributed to the arts: something inconsequential or unimportant in changing or influencing reality. Regarding this point, through its critical mobilization of people, the PBL has managed to tackle situations where fear is forged. In the case of the periphery, the right to literature is mistakable with the right to fight for more rights. In both we are talking about the pursuit of a certain connection with the universal that should be guaranteed: the right to literature as something broad, a legacy of humanity and of other peripheral areas that readers and authors should be able to receive and exercise freely. It is appropriate to emphasize the importance of the pursuit for universality for those that are not included in humanity comprised in the human rights declarations.

Overthrowing canonisation is maybe an ongoing struggle, also by the writers from the peripheries. And this is another aspect of the universal: the struggle to reach what is called canonical, always questioning: what is canonical for literature from the periphery? Here the *Bando*

Editorial Favelofágico and its ongoing literary aesthetic come in: the idea of *favelofagia* was born in 2014, in the favela of Manguinhos (RJ), searching for the possibility of a literature that breaks with local determinism. Or in other words, that authors from the periphery can have a literary project never limited within their daily experience of the periphery. Rather, it is up to the author's pen to create a magnificent contour of narrative, through the act of writing, for any imaginable content. *Favelofagia* is the search for a literature that, within an intersectional vision, constructs an aesthetic of black and working-class authors, who, coming from favelas, produce art and manage a subversive perspective. It is no doubt that through short stories and novels, *favelofagia* has sought Machado de Assis' lessons. Authors and publishers, in their majority black and from the periphery, want to manage to subvert tragic places to create something that is not determined by pain and scars, despite never denying them.

It is maybe about the desire to create a new canon, because it is important to reach this place of the universal: which helps a large number of people to access *one* perspective. And in this case, we are putting a pledge on the perspective that separates it from prejudice, from authoritarianism, that repels fascism which is also present in art. *Favelofagia is close to the discussion about universality because it questions what is being put as universal today*. And as an aesthetic project, it has the ambition to reach many people, the most diverse of people, because it believes that it is putting in perspective, in the projection of the future, a broadening of knowledge and of sensibilities, fighting against stereotypes about those who live in the favelas. A literature that fights against the effects of fear with solidarity, this is what is hoped for.

6. The destabilization of the concept of universality, as can be perceived from the oldest and more recent criticism, has not meant that it has been totally overcome. This possibly will not happen, because there is the risk of tearing the bonds of solidarity that help vulnerable populations to survive and that allow living together with respect to differences. *In extremis*, there is a risk of fracturing the very commensurability that makes it possible for the human species to exercise and understand itself as humanity.

During the last decades, the studies about the environmental crises and the Anthropocene have once again made intellectuals and social movements closer to the idea of universality, given the need to bring people and countries together on a global scale to face the problem that requires increasing urgency, as we can see even with a critic like Chakrabarty (Hall Centre, 2017). Likewise, in combating classic Cartesian reason, Vieira confirms that it is "in this very context of the breach of the human being-nature solidarity that today's ecological crisis is posed as a great challenge for humanity" (L. Vieira, 2023). To these, we can add the terrible humanitarian challenges that are underway, including forced immigration, hunger, genocide and ethnocide, and femicides, the murders, State violence, etc.[11].

It is true, there are many violent deaths in the Brazilian peripheries, every day, every night, in homes, in the streets, in the nooks and crannies of life. They are areas inhabited by the racial-

[11] According to data from the *17th. Brazilian Public Security Yearbook* (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, 2023), rape cases increased by 8% in Brazil in 2022, with 88.7% of victims being female. Data indicates that the Brazilian police killed 17 people a day throughout 2022. The Violence Monitor portal shows that Brazil broke a record for feminicides in 2022, with a woman killed every 6 hours adding up to 1,400 deaths motivated by gender, and black women represent 61.1% of the group. (Velasco et al., 2023). The BID study carried out with the Igarapé Institute of Brazil (2018), the Latin American and Caribbean region was shown to be the most violent in the world with only 9% of the world population, being the only region in the world where the main cause of death is murder (52% of deaths). The region concentrates 39% of global murders and 41 of the 50 most dangerous metropolises (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

ized, turned into monetized subjects by capital, but without the money necessary for reasonable economic articulations, scapegoats who become "killable" because of their race, gender or class. They are "territories of exception" because of their exposure to interpersonal and police, physical and symbolic violence, and for its total disadvantage in relation to the access to public assets, in comparison to the middle/upper class neighborhoods – it is common to hear that, in these areas, "the military dictatorship never ended". All of this worsened during the violent years of Bolsonaro's government, which took apart what was constructed during the process of democratization since 1985. Conceptions like exceptionality, necropolitics, killability (Franco, 2021), "precarious lives" to whom the right to grief ("grievability") is not possible (Butler, 2019), are very applicable here. It is also applicable to Butler's idea of feedback between vulnerability and resistance in social and political praxis, in such a way that the concepts do not have "pure" meanings, but instead are cut across by precise social-historical situations and diverse mediations. The very struggle of racialised groups, like the Black Lives Matter movement, goes beyond the purely singular meaning of identity and reaches a universal dimension that defends life *per se*: all lives matter (LA Review of Books, 2015).

Similarly, it is what happens in the PBL collectives and the *favelofágica* literature. The collection of short stories *Grãos Imastigáveis: contos favelofágicos*, and the novels: *É quase como voltar para casa*, by Janaína Abílio, *Tudo o que prometi ser*, by Daniel Brazil, *Carniça*, by Rafael Simeão, and *Chã de Dentro* by Dani Ribeiro[12] were published by the Bando Editorial Favelofágico in 2022, in Rio de Janeiro, with its afterword-letter written by the Fiocruz presidency, signed by Nísia Trindade Lima, today Minister of Health of Lula's government (2023–). They fulfill the project's goal of freely creating and maintaining literacy, with tears and laughter, with a tragic sense and acid verve, as well as humor, irony, and some wit. Amidst the violence and vulnerabilities, the authors resist and elaborate a "rhapsode quilombo" in which singularity and universality, realism and fantasy, intertwine inextricably.

In face of all this, we consider that the destabilization of the concepts of universality, humanization, civilization, refer in fact to the evident necessity that the universal must be concrete, and not abstract; that it comes about materially in everybody's lives, in all times, places and cultures. In other words, we consider pertinent the general criticism of the universal concepts, but emphasize the importance of the preservation of a central nucleus, i.e., that which joins the human species (or genus) as such, allowing the idea of "humanity". Without this a rupture could be caused, a break with what metaphorically can be called "solder" or "alloy" that makes possible the acknowledgment between different individuals, groups and cultures. Consequently, it would fracture the link that potentially guarantees that they are considered and respected as "humans" and "non-killable", just the opposite of what is happening in the peripheral areas governed by necropolitics (Franco, 2021). It seems to us to be a search for what Adorno called a "non-concept", aiming at a conceptual coinage that is not cut across by identification with the pretense of universality, relative to a world that turns lopsidedly, but instead a cognitive dynamic attentive to a singular-historic moment that shelters real, vital, painful, but authentic, existence (Adorno, 2009)[13]. It is a dynamic related to the struggle for emancipation and for the

[12]The suggestive titles could be understood as: *Unpalatable Grains: Favelophagic Tales*; *It's almost like coming home*; *Everything I promised to be*; *Carrion*; *Topside*.

[13]Braudel, instead, raises the issue: "Towards a modern humanism – In truth, today would we have the need for a new, a third world, outside culture and civilisation, with which we would no longer have to create a scale of values? In this half of the 20th century, we have an insidious need, like in the middle of the 18th century, of a new

end of suffering; if it sounds utopian on one hand, on the other it is urgent facing the globalised violence and the destructivity of capital that threatens vulnerable peripheral areas and life on earth. The Brazilian Periphery of Letters and *Favelofagia* are part of this struggle.

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word to conjure possible danger and catastrophes, to speak our tenacious hopes. [...] Humanism is a way to hope, to want humans to be fraternal with each other and that the civilisations, each one on its own, and altogether, save themselves and save us. It is accepting, wishing that the doors of the present open widely to the future [...]" (Braudel, 1992, p. 288).

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