

Speaking for themselves: Observations on a “marginal” tradition in Brazilian Literature

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In 1970, sociologist and literary scholar Antonio Candido analysed the early 19th-century Brazilian novel *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias*² (*Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*) by Manuel Antônio de Almeida (2011 [1854]) – a work that has become one of the seminal papers in Brazilian literary criticism. Candido proposed a novel interpretation of Brazilian social and cultural formation, and highlighted the book's importance in building a portrait of the dynamics of social customs in 19th century Rio de Janeiro. The main character, Leonardo Pataca Filho, was the very first *malandro*³ to appear in the national novel writing tradition. He was portrayed as an astute, adventurous and resourceful individual with multiple faces.

The *malandro's* ability to use adverse situations to his advantage puts him in a malleable, somewhat slippery social space, where various codes coexist and where he manoeuvres to prevent conflicts from erupting or to bring them under control – always for his own benefit. This oscillation between order and disorder, a two-way exchange between the opposing spheres of accord and rupture, is a dialectic Candido (1995, 2006) identified as the formal concretisation of social relations in literature – that is, the aesthetic formalisation of socially significant circumstances. Thus, *malandroism* is

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² The Portuguese version was published anonymously in the *Correio Mercantil do Rio de Janeiro*, between 1852 and 1853, and in 1854, as a book, but this time with "a Brazilian" instead of the name of an author.

³ The “*malandro*” is a character that emerged from a nearly folkloric tradition with a kind of vulgar and comical urban atmosphere, and later rose to the status of a national symbol, mainly thanks to Mário de Andrade's classic book *Macunaíma* (2008) published in 1928.

depicted as not only a cultural trait of Brazilian men, but also a behaviour that is historically entrenched in the structure of class relations in 19th-century Brazilian society (Otsuka, 2007).

A revealing excerpt in the essay "Dialética da Malandragem" ("Dialectic of Malandroism") on the moral foundations guiding the novel shines light on the logic of symmetric equivalence between antagonistic poles, whose permeable relationships dissolve the extremes and eliminate the narrow definition of the notions of law and order. This creates a "moral no man's land", in which transgression is but one shade in the grey zone between obeying and breaking the law. The critic says:

One of the greatest efforts of societies, through their organization and ideologies that justify them, is to establish the objective existence and real value of antithetical pairs, between which it is necessary to choose, expressed as licit or illicit, true or false, moral or immoral, just or unjust, the political left or right, and so on. The more rigid the society, the more strictly defined the terms and the more constrained the choice. For this reason, accommodations of a casuistic type are developed in parallel, which make hypocrisy a pillar of civilization. And one of the great functions of satirical literature, of demystifying realism, and of psychological analysis is to show, each in its own way, that these pairs are reversible, not watertight, and that, beyond ideological rationalizations, the antinomies coexist in a curious twilight zone (Candido, 1995: 97).

However, as noted by João Cezar de Castro Rocha (2004, 2005), after several adventures where the protagonist – the *malandro* – oscillates between the two antagonistic poles

(going back and forth from reconciliation to conflict) in the novel’s universe of social relations, his destiny is defined by his co-optation and integration into the world of order and agreement. Through a favourable marriage and an unexpected promotion, Leonardo becomes a militia sergeant, and as a result, inserted into the universe of social laws and order.

Even though one of the characteristics of Almeida's novel is the tension between the poles, this tension constitutes the fundamental principle of the “dialectic of malandroism”. In this dialectic, the figure of the *malandro* uses a generic wisdom for survival to suspend conflicts or overcome them (Schwarz, 1987), and universal laws and the sphere of personal relationships, as well as the rigid hierarchy of rules and the flexibility of everyday life are all mixed together (Da Matta, 1987). Or, while the pendulous logic between licit and illicit is subordinated to issues of personal vendetta (Otsuka, 2007), violence and disruption are kept under control through reconciliation with compensation, or, in other words, an advantageous arrangement.

In 2004, Rocha published the article “A guerra dos relatos no Brasil contemporâneo. Ou: a ‘dialética da marginalidade’”, in which he brought to light a different way of symbolising Brazilian reality and the changes in the relations between social classes. He noted that differences and conflicts (social, racial, ethnic, gender) could no longer be concealed by the mask of a friendly, *carnavalesque* pact that is typical of malandroism art⁴. Thus, Rocha (2005) proposed a different approach – one that was to be complementary and not antagonistic to the one developed by Candido – for analysing modern Brazilian society and, more specifically, contemporary cultural production. The author’s hypothesis is that the dialectic of malandroism, as originally

4 An early Portuguese version of the paper was previously published in the Caderno MAIS! in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper on 29 February 2004 with the title “Dialética da marginalidade (caracterização da cultura brasileira)”. It can be found at: www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/mais/fs29022_00404.htm. The English version entitled “The ‘dialectic of marginality’: preliminary notes on Brazilian contemporary culture” is available at: [www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/sites/sias/files/documents/Joao %20Cezar%20Castro%20Rocha%20062.pdf](http://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/sites/sias/files/documents/Joao%20Cezar%20Castro%20Rocha%20062.pdf).

formulated in Candido's seminal paper, has been gradually and partly replaced – or, at least, challenged – by a "dialectic of marginality". The latter is apparently based mainly on the principle of overcoming social inequalities through direct confrontation rather than concealment and reconciliation. It therefore exposes violence and social conflicts, rather than concealing them or relativising their impact.

Hence, instead of a light, optimistic and cordial narrative form, which keeps violence under control when dealing with historical injustices, one finds a negative dialectic in part of the recent cultural production. This dialectic reveals the poles of conflict in a more methodical way in order to address certain social dilemmas strongly present in the metropolis' geographical margins (violence, exclusion, racism) directly and make them more explicit. In this context, the dialectics of *malandroism* and marginality are said to compete – or to put it differently, to be engaging in a "symbolic battle" or "*guerra de relatos*" (war of tales), borrowing the term from Néstor García Canclini (1999) – in the process of portraying Brazilian social formation.

The exposure of violence, social conflicts and marginalisation is, then, a common denominator in recent cultural production, and a trend in the interpretation of modern Brazil. According to sociologist and critic Roberto Schwarz (1999: 163), this new way of looking at our constitution as society must be hailed as an "event". The phenomenon has been growing since the early 1990s: from hip-hop – with rap as its musical expression; break dancing in dance; and graffiti in visual arts – to marginal literature. It includes politically engaged theatre in the periphery, samba communities, *saraus*⁵, independent audio-visual productions, *pixação* (tag-art), urban performances and interventions, etc. Over the last 20 years, the number of cultural collectives in poor neighbourhoods have increased and helped a new subjectivity to emerge, which is fundamentally centred on the pride of being from the periphery. The term coined by

⁵ *Saraus* are poetry readings on the outskirts of the city, usually held in neighbourhood bars (see Pardue, 2012).

Tiarajú D’Andrea (2013) to refer to this subjectivity is *sujeito periférico* (“peripheral subject”).

This debate raises several questions: what path can one take to better understand Rocha’s hypothesis that Brazilian cultural production based on the dialectics of *malandroism* is being challenged and gradually replaced by the dialectics of marginality? What are the main elements of this process? What are its ethical implications? How can one reconstruct the vicissitudes of this complex chain of ambivalence and violence that emerged on this path, in which the avatars of *malandro*, *jagunço*⁶ and the *marginal* have taken on new dimensions? The issues are, of course, numerous and they could be the object of a broad research project. For now, however, I would like to focus on a specific element.

To study various artistic worlds and their dynamics in a specific cultural context, Nathalie Heinich (2001) argues that one must follow the agents involved to observe the diversity of their exchanges, productions, practices and discourses. Only then will one be able to describe the dynamics of individual and collective creation and reconstruct the genealogy of representations. As Vera Zolberg (1990) points out, arts are social constructs resulting from the process of negotiating experiences, inherited conventions and changes in styles of art – which may be either reproductive and subversive. Focusing on a “marginal” tradition, this article will present a framework on the aesthetics of marginality in Brazilian literature, while identifying the cultural conventions and experiences the marginal literature movement has inherited from the literary practices of the past. Particular attention will be paid to the thematic and formal displacement of the marginal narrative. An outline of the dialectic of marginality will be presented below to show how some subjects who had been excluded from the universe

⁶ *Jagunço* is a paid thug or mercenary armed guard hired by farmers and landholders in the Brazilian back lands. Although their actions are now considered criminal, they were not considered outlaws back then.

of mainstream literary production in the past have established the necessary conditions for defining their own image, writing process and their own cultural history.

The aesthetics of marginality in Brazilian literature

In the history of Brazilian literature, one can find works in which the authors sought to express the voices and perspectives of the lower and marginalized social classes by using a somewhat systematic narrative form. The aforementioned *Memoires of a Militia Sergeant*, for instance, presents a strong social critique, as it is a representative work that seeks to portray the real dynamics of a historical situation. It was the first time an author had attempted to portray a vital sector of society at the time – one of free men (neither slaves nor masters) who occupied the grey space of non-work, in which one could neither do away with social order, nor live without it (Candido, 1995; Schwarz, 1987).

A key passage of *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)* by Euclides da Cunha (1944 [1902]), also reveals the desire of a certain literary tradition to portray historically marginalised individuals through symbolic creation. The author wrote that the *sertanejo* (inhabitant of the backlands) is a strong and resilient individual:

His appearance, it is true, at first glance, would lead one to think that this was not the case. He does not have the flawless features, the graceful bearing, the correct build of the athlete. He is ugly, awkward, stooped [...], and reflects in his bearing the typical unprepossessing attributes of the weak. His unsteady, slightly swaying, sinuous gait convey the impression of loose-jointedness. [...] When walking, even at a rapid pace, he does not go forward steadily in a straight line but reels swiftly, as if he were following the geometric outlines of the meandering

backland trails. [...] Yet all this apparent weariness is an illusion. Nothing is more surprising than to see the sertanejo's listlessness disappear all of a sudden. In this weakened organism complete transformations are effected in a few seconds. All that is needed is some incident that demands the release of slumbering energies. The fellow is transfigured. He straightens up, becomes a new man, with new lines in his posture and bearing; his head held high now, above his massive shoulders; his gaze straightforward and unflinching [...]; and the awkward rustic unexpectedly assumes the dominating aspect of a powerful, copper-hued Titan, an amazingly different being, capable of extraordinary feats of strength and agility (Cunha, 1944: 89-90).

According to Penna (2015), in literary terms, the portraitist of the War of Canudos (1886-1887) was, in fact, the scribe who was the first to write about our "margin": the space where the huge Brazilian army engaged in conflict with a group of 30,000 settlers. In other words, he was the first to capture the destiny of those who have been historically marginalised and forgotten and, consequently, the criminalization of poverty and their extermination.

There are plenty of examples – just as tragic – in our not-so-young literature. One only needs to take a quick glance at the work *Os Pobres na Literatura Brasileira (Poor in Brazilian Literature)*, edited by Brazilian sociologist and critic Roberto Schwarz, which brings together essays focusing on answering one fundamental question: how has poverty been represented in our literary tradition? At the end of his introduction to the book, the critic suggests that “writers decision to address poverty should be considered a radical aesthetic issue” (Schwarz, 1983: 8). Maybe it is not that radical, since there have almost always been mediators portraying the poorest. Those who had been historically

silenced for a long time had not been able to occupy a privileged position in literary production process. As they had never had sufficient means and mechanisms to influence the rules of the political-cultural game, they were unable to take ownership of the writing process in order to have their voices legitimately recognised as important. The literature that speaks of marginalized people does present and represent poverty: at times, it uses a picturesque tone, as in the case of *Memórias*, or allegorically, in *Macunaíma*; at other times, with a rustic and racist bias, as in the case of *Os Sertões*, or by portraying them as victims, as Monteiro Lobato did in some of his short stories – for example, in *Urupês* (2012 [1918]). However, there are mediators who represent them and give them substance from a privileged position to create.

To be fair to exceptions, there are literary works that have, to some extent, extolled the physiognomy of our literature by using aesthetics that may not be radical as Schwarz suggested, but are at least progressive and concerned with the deconstruction of essentialism and the establishment of distinctive “regimes of representation”, as advocated by Stuart Hall (1996). That is the case, for instance, of black writer Lima Barreto, who was thrown into *marginalia* (Resende, 1983: 73) due to a number of factors governing the rules of the literary field at the time. Though seen today as a skilful narrator of urban life in the period prior to Brazilian modernism, Barreto was ostracised by the "mandarins of literature" of the time. However, it was these same rules that allowed the author to choose to remain allied to popular classes and at the margin of the hegemonic polo of production.

This was also the case of Maria Firmina dos Reis, the first Brazilian female novelist. In her astonishing book *Úrsula* (2004 [1859]), her goal is to deconstruct the ethnocentric, male, white literary history. The work is not only the first abolitionist literary text in our national literature, but also the first Afro-Brazilian novel – that is, of black authorship – which talks about black people. Written from an insider and political

perspective, it seeks to describe what it was like to be black in Brazil at the end of the period of slavery. There is also the example of poet, novelist and playwright Antônio Gonçalves Teixeira e Sousa (1977 [1843]) who was the author of the first Brazilian novel, *O filho do pescador (Son of the fisherman)*, an avant-garde work from 1843.

To the list of authors, one might add the poet Lino Guedes, son of former slaves and activist of black movement, whose work was also underrated by critics. He was strongly influenced by abolitionist romanticism of Castro Alves and Luis Gama's influential voice in the republican and abolitionist movements. Guedes adopted popular narrative forms such as *redondilha*⁷ and *cordel*⁸ to writing and blended social and activist concerns with an insightful interpretation of situation of black people in Brazil into his writing style. With an outstanding ideological component (black cultural revival, self-awareness and self-confidence), he was one of the forerunners of negritude in Brazilian poetry. "Novo Rumo" ("New Direction"), from the book *Negro Preto Cor da Noite (Black Night Black Colour)*, from 1936, is one example of the racial utopianism present in his work:

Black Negro colour of the night / Never forget the whip / That has
crucified your race. / Only in the name of our race / Do what is
necessary so our people / May one day become a people! // Black
Negro, Black Negro, / Be a righteous man / Like a stallion with its head

7 Poetic form made up of strophes of four verses, each one with five or seven syllables, with the first rhyming with the last, and the second with the third. It was often used by the great Portuguese poet Luís de Camões.

8 It is a very popular literary form in north-eastern Brazil, often written in six or seven-line strophes that rhyme. This form has its origins in oral stories (folk tales, poems and songs) that deal with fairy tales, adventures or love stories. Then, they are printed as booklets or pamphlets and sold in the streets.

held high! / Only from your behaviour / will certainly be born / the
new star to guide us⁹.

As for authors in the dominant Brazilian literary canon, *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*) by Graciliano Ramos (2013 [1937]) also belongs to the tradition in which the “other” – poor, subaltern, underprivileged, marginal, excluded – acquires a certain level of significance in the narrative. The novel tells the story of a family of five from north-eastern Brazil who were forced to migrate to the southeast in a poverty-stricken and arid context. Ramos registers the modest means of survival of the migrant family – vilified by absolutely miserable material conditions – and the humbleness of their symbolic resources and truncated, impotent, choppy and sometimes cyclical language full of gaps. According to Bosi, narrating need, as Ramos did, is to symbolically remake the shape of a cycle. Between the narrating consciousness that sustains the story and the fact being narrated – the migratory route of *sertanejo* and its vicissitudes –, “a disenchanting thought is at work that presents the daily life of poor people as if it followed the rhythm of a pendulum: from rain to drought, from days off to neediness, from well-being to depression, always going from the last state back to the first one” (1983: 149).

Raquel de Queiroz and Jorge Amado are also important representatives of the second generation of Brazilian modernism – the neo-realist or modern regionalist novel. Authors from this literary movement addressed some important socio-political issues, such as internal migration flows and the cruel life of migrants from the arid regions of Northeast Brazil; social inequality; the remnants of slavery and “coronelism” (heavily based on land ownership), which were superimposed on the picturesque and

⁹ Author's translation. The original version is: “Negro preto cor da noite, / nunca te esqueças do açoite / Que cruciou tua raça. / Em nome dela somente / Faze com que nossa gente / um dia gente se faça! // Negro preto, negro preto, / sê tu um homem direito / como um corcel posto a prumo! / É só do teu proceder / Que, por certo, há de nascer / a estrela do novo rumo”. See: www.quilombhoje2.com.br/blog/?p=257.

stereotypical biases from long ago. In the subsequent phase of modernism in Brazil, known as the "Generation of 1945", names such as Ariano Suassuna, João Guimarães Rosa and others appeared. One often finds in their works ambiguous characters who are on the border between different character types, such as *jagunços* (armed hands or guards hired by big ranchers in the Brazilian back country), *cangaceiros* (a kind of "social bandit"), *capangas* (bodyguards employed to protect members of the oligarchy), bandits, outlaws, some prototypes of *sertanejos malandros*¹⁰ (such as the famous Lalino Salathiel and João Grilo), and others types of bullies. These writers organised the Brazil's turbulent regional scene into a coherent narrative in which violence went hand in hand with an occasional, malleable and circumstantial code of honour. However, while *malandros* are frequently characterized by their ability to survive due to an astuteness often used to walk the fine line between legal and illegal, those anomic shady figures who inhabit the structures of power founded on clientelism never survive, "inevitably being killed by the same firearm that defines them" (Penna, 2015: 53).

Clarice Lispector also has one essential work that is considered part of this literary tradition: *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*) from 1977. In this book, she addressed the problems of hunger, poverty, social exclusion and their impacts on the character's psychological well-being. The protagonist is a young migrant from the Northeast named Macabéa. Lispector portrays her struggle to survive while living in a hostile "city that's entirely against her" (1998, 15). The story is written from the eyes of the narrator, Rodrigo S.M., the author's alter ego. Having given in to being meaningless, the main character is categorised as the personification of negativity, the lack of resources, the sickliness and emptiness of a marginal existence. Her tragic fate is a synthesis of the result of material deprivation and misery, which marks not only

10 An inhabitant of the backlands with his own art of surviving the most difficult situations.

Macabéa's life, but also the lives of many others who survive in a situation of misery, exploitation and social marginalisation in Brazilian society.

The suburban characters created by João Antônio, Ana Cristina Cesar, Isabel Câmara, Antônio Fraga, Plínio Marcos and other independent novelists, poets and playwrights are just as violent. The setting is the underworld of big cities, namely São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It serves as a backdrop for an interesting hybridism, in which *malandros*, *jagunços* and *marginals* are jumbled together to give life to other unreliable types. These hybrid characters may be considered just as, or even more, complex than their predecessors: pool players, pimps, prostitutes, clubbers, snitches, bouncers, drug addicts, murderers and the homeless. The raw material of experience appears on stage. Bosi (1975) defines this trend as being representative of a certain kind of "brutalism". Candido (1987) classifies it as "fierce realism". It is basically an aesthetic movement that tends to give priority to the immediacy of violence and the direct transmission of experiences in urban centres. The new paradigm also included the specificity of the language spoken on the street in order to portray what is as real as reality itself.

Some of these authors were members of, or have been close to, the so-called Mimeograph Generation (or the Marginal Poetry Group) of the 1970s in Brazil. At the time, "marginal" was a label used by critics to designate literary texts produced in an artisanal way (or "do-it-yourself", as they used to say), which were frequently sold by poets outside the editorial system. The so-called "marginal poets" managed to get on the national arts scene. Although they were white middle class and despite their school backgrounds and resources, they set out to write on violence, prostitution, urban issues, inequalities, racism and the underworld of Brazilian metropolises – all subversive subjects during the dictatorship¹¹.

¹¹ The group was strongly influenced by modernist ideas, *Tropicalismo* and counterculture. They preferred to use colloquialism, spontaneity, rhythmic experimentation, parody and a realistic representation of urban life in poetry.

In the tradition presented above, the authors acted as the “narrators of exclusion” who skilfully manipulated various discursive strategies to represent the excluded and marginalised social groups. Given that they kept a certain distance from the groups (in both the mimetic and political senses), it was inevitable that some misunderstandings, distortion or misrepresentation would occur. In short, they tried to speak *in the place of* and not *from the place of* marginalised people. As John Beverley said, the presence of such a marginalised voice and the place of annunciation is important because it allows one to hear “the voice of a real rather than fictional person” (1993: 76). It also indicates the desire to not be silenced or defeated, but rather to impose oneself on an institution of power such as literature.

What has changed in Brazilian literature so that certain marginal social actors are finally able to tell their own stories and narrate their own experiences? What happens when they say that their experiences are worthy of consideration, and therefore deserve to be narrated, no longer by mediators, but by themselves? What are the main characteristics of marginal literature, which has been developed mostly by individuals who are victims of exclusion, racism and the marginalisation process to which they refer in their own works? To answer these questions, I will discuss how the movement was and has been able to bring the margin itself to the centre of its production to *speak from* and *about* the margin.

Marginal Literature in Brazil

Carolina Maria de Jesus is perhaps the author who was the most successful in creating a kind of literature that had never before been published. Her works contain the experiences of members of marginalised groups in the mid-20th century. Therefore, she can be considered the first black woman from the *favela* (slum) to register in

autobiographical annotations the daily routine marked by hunger, poverty and scarcity. Carolina was a slum-dweller who wrote the famous *Quarto de Despejo: diário de uma favelada* (*Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*), first published in August 1960, among other works.

The diary was translated into several languages and became a bestseller in North America and Europe. Many experts consider it to be an early source and one of the forerunners of the dialectic of marginality's paradigm, as it is possible to observe in her autobiographical narrative a detailed description of the grim reality of her life and surroundings. "I classify São Paulo this way: The Governor's Palace is the living room. The mayor's office is the dining room and the city is the garden. And the favela is the backyard where they throw the garbage" (Jesus, 2003: 24). Later, she says, "When I am in the city I have the impression that I am in a living room with crystal chandeliers, rugs of velvet, and satin cushions. And when I'm in the favela I have the impression that I'm a useless object, destined to be forever in a garbage dump" (Jesus, 2003: 29). As such, the writer is already advancing toward the classification of slums and their shacks as a marginal universe:

I have a mania to observe everything, tell everything, and note down the facts [...] We are poor, and we live on the banks of the river. The riverbanks are places for garbage and the marginal people. People of the favelas are considered *marginals*. No more do you see buzzards flying the riverbanks near the trash. The unemployed have taken the buzzards' place (Jesus, 2003: 47).

The margins of the city are full of garbage and buzzards, but that was where she established her own place of enunciation in order to observe, tell and note down the

facts around her. In fact, Carolina demonstrated that literary form can also be representative of peripheral spaces, which must be understood and represented not as stigmatised areas excluded from urban planning, but as an important place for speech and a worthwhile knowledge production.

The contribution of Carolina Maria de Jesus to Brazilian literary history still cannot be properly measured. It is, however, undeniable that her diaries have served as inspiration for and exerted an important historical, cultural and aesthetic influence on "marginal authors". In addition to Carolina, one can find other black writers who follow the same criteria of this literary "tradition" and play important roles: Solano Trindade, Cuti, Eduardo de Oliveira, Oswaldo de Camargo and Miriam Alves, especially in the second half of the 20th century in São Paulo. Seeking to create literary forms for popular empowerment and agency, these authors have tried to address collective strategies for cultural action and aesthetic creation in their practices and writings. They also aim to shine light on black people's presence and voice in peripheral neighbourhoods by bringing fundamental topics such as violence, racism, prejudice and social marginalisation into the narrative.

A glance at recent literature by marginal writers from the outskirts of São Paulo – agents of the dialectic of marginality, as it were – allows us to identify the historical and cultural backgrounds and conventions that help to understand this phenomenon better. Hip-hop has been one of the main forms of musical expression in São Paulo's outskirts since the 1980s. With groups such as *Racionais MC's*, *RZO*, *Facção Central* and *Sabotage*, hip-hop has served as a positive source of inspiration for more recent poetic compositions. The same applies to the *narrativas do cárcere* ("prison literature") from the 1990s, by authors such as Luis Alberto Mendes in *Memórias de um Sobrevivente* (*Memoirs*

of a Survivor), André Du Rap in *Sobrevivente (Survivor)*, Jocenir in *Diário de um Detento*¹² (*Diary of a Detainee*) and Humberto Rodrigues in *Vidas do Carandiru (Carandiru Lives: real stories)*. The latter have put an emphasis on testimonial content, thereby offering the current marginal literary movement a new and alternative approach to addressing real experiences of violence in a narrative form¹³.

Nevertheless, a paradigmatic jump toward what Tânia Pellegrini (2005) once called "ethnographic realism" was made with the novel *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*. In the novel, the characters and situations were taken from a world in which the author Paulo Lins originated and which he wanted to discuss. In his essay mentioned above, Rocha (2005) explored this case and the impact that Paulo Lins's book had on our contemporary literature. This novel¹⁴ marked the moment when the “marginal” took control of the production of its own image and raised its voice to reach and influence a broad national audience, while articulating a new vision on the roots of inequality. Published in 1997, the book was one of the great novels of the decade, as it depicts the growth of organised crime in the Cidade de Deus, a suburb in the west zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro, between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. Not wanting to be black and/or marginal – at least literarily – the writer “[had] to deal with the drama of being socially both”. In so doing, he was able to write “an impactful novel on different aspects

12 Some time after the publication of the book, the group *Racionais MC's* and Jocenir composed the song *Diário de um detento*, which portrays the tension in the lead up to the rebellion of 1992 in the Carandiru Penitentiary, São Paulo, where 111 prisoners were killed by the police.

13 I will not dwell on each case of this heterogeneous series of influences, whose rhetorical, formal and thematic universe has already been discussed by several scholars, for instance: Patrocínio (2013), Nascimento (2009, 2011), Pardue (2012, 2013), Silva & Tennina (2011), Silva (2011), Salom (2014), Eslava (2004), Zibordi (2004), Seligmann-Silva (2006), and others. However, the influence of Solano Trindade, João Antonio and Carolina Maria de Jesus seems to be quite noticeable, particularly in the politically engaged rhetorical universes of certain contemporary writers such as Paulo Lins, Marcelino Freire, Conceição Evaristo, and Ferréz.

14 The ethnographic material was gathered during research Lins did for anthropologist Alba Zaluar on the drug trafficking circuit in Rio de Janeiro. At the time of its publication, it had the editorial support of Roberto Schwarz.

of social inequality in Brazil, with a fine level of literary creativity that few writers (black or non-black) have ever achieved" (Silva, 2013: 592).

Paulo Lins was chosen to participate in the closing ceremony of the International Frankfurt Book Fair in 2013, in which Brazil had been invited to establish the guest of honour exhibition. During his address, the author cited a poem from his youth in which explained the internal tension of the new dialectic of marginality, in clear violation of protocol:

I was an ugly foetus made in the womb of Brazil / I'm ready to kill / as I have always been ready to die / I am the animal illuminated only / by the light of streets / stealing to kill what I am / and kill to steal what I want. / As I was born ugly, I am feared. / As I was born poor, I want to be rich / And so my body hides others / who when they saw me stripped themselves of voice. / Voice swelling to a scream. / Screams and shots are disputing intensity. / I am the owner of the street. / The king of the street buried alive in the deck of this card game. / The king does not reveal himself / Neither as hearts nor as diamonds. / Nothing is revealed when I am free / Re-nothing when I am caught / Post-nothing when I am released. / I am thus a hero of the nothing. / From time to time I reveal the emptiness / of being the brother of everything and everybody against me. / I am the bomb that grew up / in the flower in the heart of misery, / between alleys and narrow streets / where something crazy is always about to happen. / I am your enemy. / Bandit heart is hit on the sole of the foot. / So long as I am alive, / everyone is to die. / I am the one who steals your morning / for a necklace / for a penny / for a no. / I measure myself and throw myself at life / assuming a mortal position. / I

would rather die at the blossom of my youth / than as the stone of old age. / Without knowing it, I become an insistent anacoluthon, / an indigent in the metaphors of your vulgar language, / which did not commit / because my word – inaugurated in the man's mouth, / the greatest lady of the social artifice – / has lost its voice. / A voice without hearing is merely a breath without phonemes. / It is dead voice buried in the throat. / And the word life, muted in the legal world, makes me your marginal¹⁵.

In 2000, Brazilian author, rapper and cultural activist Ferréz¹⁶ depicted the violence of daily life in the periphery of São Paulo in *Capão Pecado*. It is considered one of the first works of marginal literature, and perhaps even the most important one, as it was the first to indicate that it is possible to speak from a subaltern social position in a sophisticated literary form. It also was an attempt to break down the fences that render invisible and deny the existence of culture produced by/on socially marginalised people. Schwarz made a relevant commentary on the emergence of such a genre, and on

15 Author's translation. The untitled poem was read at the Frankfurt Book Fair (in 2013): revistamododeusar.blogspot.com.br/2013/10/o-poema-que-paulo-lins-leu-no.html. The original version reads as follows: "Fui feto feio feito no ventre-Brasil / estou pronto pra matar / já que sempre estive pra morrer / Sou eu o bicho iluminado apenas / pela luz das ruas / que rouba pra matar o que sou / e mato pra roubar o que quero. / Já que nasci feio, sou temido. / Já que nasci pobre, quero ser rico, / e assim meu corpo oculta outros / que ao me verem se despem da voz. / Voz indo até o grito. / Grito e tiro disputando intensidade. / Sou eu o dono da rua. / O rei da rua sepultado vivo no baralho desse jogo. / O rei que não se revela / nem em copas / nem em ouro. / Revela-se em nada quando estou livre / re-nada quando sou pego / pós-nada quando sou solto. / Sou eu assim, herói do nada. / De vez em quando revelo o vazio / de ser irmão de tudo, e todos contra mim. / Sou eu a bomba que cresceu / na flor do cerne da miséria, / entre becos e vielas / onde sempre uma loucura está pra acontecer. / Sou teu inimigo. / Coração de bandido é batido na sola do pé. / Enquanto eu estiver vivo, / todos estão pra morrer. / Sou eu que roubo teu amanhecer / por um cordão / um tostão / um não. / Meço-me e arremesso na vida / lançando-me em posição mortal. / Prefiro morrer na flor da mocidade / que no caroço da velhice. / Sem saber de nada me torno anacoluto insistente, / indigente nas metáforas de tua língua vulgar / que não se comprometeu / pois minha palavra – inaugurada na boca do homem, / a dama maior do artifício social – / perdeu voz. / Voz sem ouvido é mero sopro sem fonema. / É voz morta enterrada na garganta. / E a palavra vida, muda no mundo legal, me faz o teu marginal".

16 The stage name of Reginaldo Ferreira da Silva.

Ferréz's book in particular, in relation to the formation of new readers who had been previously excluded from the sphere of consumption:

I bought the book written by Ferréz, *Capão Pecado*, and left it on the table at home. The housecleaner saw it and said to me, "Sir, may I borrow it?". She took the book, read it and three days later told me, "That's exactly how it is". A restructuring of potential readers is going on, because this young woman is now a potential reader (Schwarz, 2004: 19-20).

It appears that it is not a matter of only artists seeking integration or consecration into the Brazilian literary field. Instead, it seems to be organic social and cultural phenomena that play significant roles in the field of literature and that are connected to the experiences of historically marginalised people.

Today, Ferréz is a leading figure in the Brazilian marginal literature movement. He affirms that the place of enunciation is a place of resistance and the need to change the dynamics of the production of literary goods:

Going against the grain of the massification process that increasingly dominates and alienates the so-called "socially excluded", and to make sure that the people from periphery/slums/ghettos have their own place in history and no longer remain five hundred years in cultural limbo in a country that loathes its own culture, *Caros Amigos/Literatura Marginal* has come to represent the authentic culture of a people made up of minorities, but who, when added together, constitute a majority. And we have a lot to protect and show. We have our own vocabulary, which

is very precious, especially in a colonized country even today, where the majority is not culturally and socially represented (Ferréz, 2001: 3).

The process that gave great publicity to marginal literature as a literary movement began with the launch of three special editions of the *Caros Amigos* alternative magazine. Entitled *Literatura Marginal: a cultura da periferia* (*Marginal Literature: the culture of the periphery*), they were organised and edited by Ferréz, now a big name in the movement, in 2001, 2002, and 2004. The first edition sold over 15,000 copies and enabled the magazine to produce the other two. The three issues brought together a total of 48 writers and 80 articles that reported on the situation of both writers in the periphery and their production. These issues are landmarks in the history of contemporary Brazilian literature (see, e.g., Muniz and Oliveira [2015], Nascimento [2009], and Zibordi [2004] on this subject), as they pointed out the thematic connection between marginal literature and other movements of the past and gave legitimacy to this new cultural phenomenon, born and consolidated in the outlying areas of the city.

When explaining his work as a writer, marginal author Dugueto Shabazz says, "This is the written version of this kludge we call music, which echoes outlaws, fuels racial tension and brings the underworld into the light. From these pages, bullets fly and scratches are torn. Issues of the periphery are now central, jugular" (2006: 15). In other words, the writing style proposed by the poet is in line with the socio-political dimension consolidated by rap, which is considered its biggest influence. It was based on this complex, diffuse and heterotopic configuration that the literary movement began to act like a "jugular" vein in the periphery, especially with the literary apparatus being used and reframed as a mechanism that reflects and represents social reality in which violence and inequality in slums are adopted as both the setting and object of the narratives. What is more, these authors have reversed the negative, stereotypical and

sometimes prejudiced connotation of the term “marginal” and/or “peripheral”, as they redefined the misappropriation of the word and turned it into a source of pride.

There are several texts, chronicles and poems that refer to the strategies used by authors to overcome prejudice towards their cultural expressions and practices. An excerpt from the autobiography of one of the biggest names in the movement, Sérgio Vaz – in which he tells the story of the *Sarau da Cooperifa*¹⁷ – emphasises some of them:

The periphery – which has always been the place of working people and supposedly a nest of violence, as the authorities want us to believe – gained, at the expense of its own pain and its own geography, a new poetry: the poetry of the streets. Unique poetry, born from the same shed as Carolina Maria de Jesus. It springs up from empty pots and pans, minimum wage, unemployment, illiterate schools, the police raid at dawn, the violence that no one sees, from corruption and the brick houses jammed into the alleys and narrow streets of the outskirts in the southern part of São Paulo. A harsh, dry, outspoken poetry, sometimes with accents missing, other times without a comma, but even so poetry, with the smell of gunpowder, with the taste of blood, with the pus from a disease without medicine, bare foot, afraid, but with courage, fighting, with sugarcane molasses and the damn pipe, but that goes to the right address: the other's heart. Poetry has taken to the street and it will never be the same. The academics? Let them eat brioches! (Vaz, 2008: 115).

The force of the negative – which lies in its ability to make itself positive – has the power to make one a subject: the subject who decides how he will call himself, who represents

17 *The Cooperative for Culture of the Periphery.*

himself and his group, incorporates whatever he gets from society and inverts the bias that previously treated him as less. Penna (2015: 62) says that "the marginal is no longer an allegory of Brazil, but rather a machine of war against the Brazil that once marginalised it and a diagnosis on the Brazilian way of marginalising".

The most traditional and canonical models of literary criticism are showing signs of being incapable of analysing the innovations brought by this kind of literary production. In general, analysts have not yet realised that what is needed to study the works generated by the marginal literature movement are new analytical tools (see Rocha [2005]; Dias and Glenadel [2004]; Patrocínio [2011]; Dalcastagnè [2002, 2007]) and not merely noisy repetitions of analyses that only aim to preserve their own understanding of literature. This aesthetic production demands to be interpreted in a special way. As poetically suggested by Argentine critic Lucía Tennina (2014: 26), it should be read "with the speed of relief, a voice that breaks up from time to time, the slow pace of the North-eastern way of speaking, the back-and-forth of the rhyme of an Afro-Brazilian chant, a half-smile that finds pleasure in the small moments and details, and distress due to imminent danger". In short, with all the wailing stuck in the throat for years, it invokes a lost past that has almost never been narrated.

For Regina Dalcastagnè (2008: 78), echoing Beverley's description of testimonial-like texts, the silence of marginalised people often emerges, but only to be covered by other voices that overlap the forced silence and that seek to speak on their behalf, as has always happened in our culture. However, even though the marginal literature movement had emerged in a context of social and spatial segregation and the general absence of cultural options, peripheral writers have been breaking with the logic that silences them and generating important tensions in the literary field. These agents are doing so by occupying a position "between the 'authenticity' of testimony and the (socially constructed) legitimacy of literary work; between the writer's voice and the

representation of the group; and even between the elitism of the traditional literary field and the need to democratise art”. An attempt at defiance and self-determination, it is a matter of writing for themselves, rather than having someone *speaking/writing for* them. In recent years, they have turned the literary field into a territory of dispute or a symbolic space in which passionate power struggles between over- and under-represented individuals and groups take place.

Therefore, marginal literature today is the one that *talks about* the periphery and *comes from* the periphery. The “marginal” title has been reclaimed by writers who are part of the movement and who seek to interrogate the position occupied by residents of the outskirts in the cultural, social and urban context. This position is defined in opposition to the “other” – that is, someone who is not from the periphery – and the “centre”. Therefore, the peripheral position these individuals occupy geographically is analogous to the position marginal writers occupy in the Brazilian literary field and in the dominant canon. In fact, the marginal-periphery expression that defines the literature from decentralised circuits of production is used to indicate that the movement is made up of writers from geographical, social, and cultural margins who have been launching their works in the publishing market since the late 1990s -early 2000s with works that deal with singularities of their own trajectories within these urban spaces.

Despite the arguments of some old-school critics, what makes the marginal literature a phenomenon that should be celebrated is the capacity to *talk for* individuals who occupy the same social spaces and share similar life experiences, which becomes evident when one looks at the issues addressed in the chronicles, novels, short stories and poetry. Marginal writers always seek to establish close ties to the social reality in which both authors and readers are inserted to ensure identification with the work. As a result, common topics in marginal literature are: police violence, poverty, politics, social

struggles, inequality, racism, consumerism and the lack of cultural facilities and incentives.

Therefore, these people share a common experience in both the production and reception of literary goods. As Antonio Candido (2006, 2004) argued, for one reason or another, as one goes back through the history of our literature, one has increasingly the impression that there is a collective aspect present in the works of art. Such a characteristic requires there to be a certain communion of subjects and styles, which suggests that knowledge production is a fundamental dimension of art world. This communion, in turn, creates an environment that brings authors together at a level that is beyond the uniqueness of and differences between each one. Even when a story is narrated from the first person, using "I", meaning it is based on one's life experience, the community, the collective subject, is also implicit as the ethical basis of the narrative and as a critical agent of social change. The experiences are the link between the one who narrates and those to whom the narrative is refers. The factor that distinguishes this recent literature the most from its predecessors is, then, the collective nature implied in such production. So, what is at stake is the attempt to create a narrative with a "truth-effect" (Beverley, 1993) – that is a mechanism that offers a sense of *experiencing* real situations in peripheries and engaging people through a narrative that represents the experience of a community.

Another fundamental aspect of the movement is its defiant attitude toward the canon, as it proposes a rupture with the usual way of producing literature. By doing so, writers are contesting the fact that the voice of the marginalised has always been mediated by the voice of the "other" – the other being someone who occupied a privileged position in the universe of creation and portrayed those who, until then, had been excluded from the process of producing their own self-representation. The demand

of this group of literary experiences, which value a new kind of "social realism"¹⁸ and a collective subject, is that it is up to the excluded to speak for themselves and, more importantly, that they be the ones to define the ways and means to do so. This is the "event" and the "extraordinary artistic adventure" that Schwarz made a point of saluting. I would not use the word "adventure", since this literary movement, made up by "minorities", seems to be creating perhaps irreversible tensions in the Brazilian literary field and forcing critics to review their outdated parameters. They cannot operate anymore using the same analytical elements. It would perhaps be interesting to explore in another paper some of the arrangements that have been making the consolidation of this literary production possible, as ever since it first appeared, one can perceive tensions in the dominant literary field regarding the work of this group of writers.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to trace the evolution of a "marginal" tradition in Brazilian literature. Even though such a tradition had found important precursors in the heterogeneous aesthetics movements of the past, only the recent marginal literature produced in the outskirts has been able to represent and communicate most strongly both poverty and marginalisation, as well as to launch an effective challenge to the Brazilian literary field. It would appear that its purpose is to build an alternative form of literary narrative to strengthen an aesthetic of marginality based much more on the exposure of real social problems and contradictions regarding the periphery, instead of disguising and concealing them. However, according to Rocha (2004, 2005), the goal is

¹⁸ Karl Erik Schøllhammer (2009: 53-54) says: "no one is comparing their style to the past realists, because there is no going back to *descriptive verisimilitude* and *narrative objectivity* techniques. What we can find in these new authors is a will or an explicit goal to depict the current reality of Brazilian society, often from the point of view of the marginal or the periphery. [...] 'New realism' is expressed by the will to link literature and art to the socio-cultural reality from which it emerges by incorporating it aesthetically into the art work and establishing artistic production itself as a transformative force".

to reflect contradictions in the Brazilian social system as a whole, which acts as a perverse machine of exclusion that makes false promises to dwellers of the slums and urban peripheries.

Composed by individuals who call themselves "outsiders", do not use the more traditional spaces of consecration and whose literary goods do not "fit" into the canon, this literature gives life to the dialectic of marginality. Once the artists started to mobilize the resources they obtained through their experiences with many cultural groups throughout the city, their innovative strategies became visible. These strategies are intensely marked by the affirmation of collective identities rooted in being from the periphery and the valorisation of life experiences, testimonies and the authenticity of discourse, which implies attempts to create a narrative based on the right to speak for themselves.

Moreover, there is the categorical affirmation of the importance of the place of enunciation, which invariably affects the resulting narrative, including the viewpoint that makes its elaboration possible. In such a narrative they can be subjects of their own stories and history and control how they are represented, rather than appearing in the fragments of someone else's work. In the Brazilian literary field, they endeavour to gain legitimacy by positioning themselves as spokespersons of the "marginalised" and assuming the identity of "poets from periphery" and protagonists of their own narrative interventions.

Nonetheless, how was the emergence of these new marginal writers possible? Which spaces did they have to conquer to make this viable, given that, at least initially, it was believed that poor people could not produce literature? Would this not be a historical opportunity to forge a truly popular literature, extending access to literary practices to an even larger contingent of the lower social classes? These questions are left for another time and could be used to guide those who are concerned with the tensions

generated recently in the Brazilian literary field by the entry of groups of historically marginalised individuals onto the country's cultural scene.

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