

LIMA BARRETO: FROM THE MARGIN OF THE MARGIN

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I shall argue, therefore, that there is no such thing as a “third-world literature” which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge. There are fundamental issues — of periodisation, social and linguistics formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literature production, and so on — which simply cannot be resolved as this level of generality without an altogether positivist reductionism
(Aijaz Ahmad 4)

Afonso Henriques Lima Barreto (1881-1922) attended the celebration of the Brazilian slavery abolition on May 13th 1888 by the hands of his father. On the same day he turned seven years old. In spite of being himself a “mulato”, the boy Lima Barreto, fascinated by that moment, watched the historical event as a mere spectator, as he remembered much later in his book *Feiras e Mafuás*¹ (256). Because of the free condition of his family and the ever-decreasing number of slaves in the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro, he did not have to directly deal with the indignity of the institution of slavery. However, shortly thereafter, living in a new Republican political system, strongly influenced by the positivist postulations as well as by the racist ideologies from the end of the 19th century, Lima Barreto, as a poor Afro-Brazilian, came to realize that, yes, he was profoundly involved with the issues highlighted on that festive day.

In this article I base my argument on the assumption that Barreto’s recognition of race marked his literature as not only engaged but also militant. In what follows I will discuss the ambiguity and the variety of features that the term “subaltern” can embrace in the Brazilian environ-

ment of the turn of XXth century. Analyzing the particular contribution of Lima Barreto, a writer which recognition as part of the Brazilian literary canon was considerably delayed, I claim that the plurality of his interaction with such social, political and cultural scenario defy some of the established terminology and assumptions prevalent in current circles of cultural and literary studies. Especially, following Ahmad's critique of Fredric Jameson,² those which tend to view a so called "third world literature" in an oversimplified reading.

In this essay, first, I will trace a brief historical perspective of Lima Barreto's times. Then I will discuss the extent to which subalternity in literary studies may apply to Lima Barreto, a marginal voice in a marginal country as Brazil.

Historical Background

Just one year after the abolition of slavery, in 1889, the military and the Republican Party assumed political power in Brazil defeating an empire regimen. The new system of government, complicated by a range of different interests, but under the label of the modernity, inaugurated a period strongly influenced by European ideas, such as social Darwinism inspired by evolutionists as Spencer. Also, theories of biological determinism, espoused by the likes of Gobineau and Agassiz, among others, were widely read and reinterpreted in Brazil. Of course, as Brazilian historian Costa notes, the Brazilians in power chose carefully the kind of ideologies that attended to their needs (239). In this way, it was possible to justify, with the help of the most advanced theories, the unfair situation of black and *mulato* people in Brazil. Not a hard task, after all, considering the habit developed during over three centuries of slavery. As a Republic obsessed by the concept of modernity, such theories of reason were in fact very useful, as demonstrated by the positivist slogan: order and progress (*Ordem e Progresso*), which was promptly appropriated as part of the new Brazilian flag.

Under this model of society, it is natural that a man like Lima Barreto was in principle out of place in a defined Brazilian *intelligencia*.

Actually, other *mulatos* had reached important positions in the society before in Brazil, and some of them contemporaneous to Lima Barreto's time. Among the most known names were that of the writer Machado de Assis and of the prominent engineer André Rebouças. Perfectly adapted to the elitist society, they had in common the acceptance of the game's rules. They represented what popularly was defined as the "black of white soul." This means that the Brazilians could categorize someone whiter or darker depending on the convenience and the situation.

Distinguished by the good education during his youth, Lima Barreto prepared himself to embark on a career of engineering. However, economic circumstances and family trauma forced him to substitute such aspirations with employment in a low-paying public job. Nevertheless, his difficulties never prevented him from being an avid reader of the classics and an acute observer of his time. Lima Barreto's perspective challenged those of his intellectual contemporaries, yet it was not enough to assure him any kind of recognition or stable position. As an Afro-Brazilian, poor, and resident of one of the marginal neighborhoods around Rio de Janeiro, this admirer of Dostoyevsky seemingly could only be understood as a representative of a common set of social-economic conditions. Lima Barreto appeared doomed to a cultural depravity indexed by his ascribed social role. Rather than abandoning such realities, he shaped his discourse around his social condition and ethnic origin in order to provide critique and reveal contradictions.

It is important to remember that, in the beginning of the XXth century, in a moment when nationalities and race were exhaustively discussed and enacted in Europe, Brazil was still trying to create her own identity. The subject, that would be the basic material of the Modernist school inaugurated in the 1920's, was a problematic one in a country where in 1870 just 40% of the population could be defined as white (Costa 239). In face of such reality, it was necessary to create a mechanism in order to be in accordance with the current paradigm of race, but at the same time legitimizing the obvious evidence of a mixed population. This was especially delicate because many of the so-called

whites in positions of power in Brazil could not be sure of their racial "purity" themselves (Costa 239).

In this sense, a politics of "whitening" adapted white superiority ideas to the Brazilian scenario. In 1911, João Batista de Lacerda, then director of National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, presented a paper in the First Universal Races Congress, in London. The main idea was that by the means of *miscigenação* (racial mixture) in a hundred years the *metis* or "mulatto" would disappear in a process that he called "ethnic reduction". This theory persuaded a great many in light of the continuous flux of European immigrants and the widespread belief that the white race was more fertile and thus more durable than black and mixed races (382). In the same year, in Rio de Janeiro, Lima Barreto, a product of mixed races according to Lacerda's definition, started publishing in a newspaper chapters of what would be his most important work: *Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma* (The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma³). The main character of the novel already compared (Oliveira Lima 13) to a Brazilian Quixote, was a patriot citizen disappointed with the Republican dream. In his book, Lima Barreto reinforced his criticism of the Brazilian society and the ways in which the country was being governed. The irony of coincidence involving the International Conference on Race and the published release of Lima Barreto's book, demonstrates clearly the uncomfortable situation of the writer and helps one understand possible reasons for the belated recognition of his contribution to a "national" literature.

Unlike Machado and Rebouças, Lima Barreto appeared to his contemporaneous not as an example of "mulatto", a "halfie" on his way to becoming white, but as representative of a social problem. Contrary to the European concept purported by the Republican government and of the elite, Lima Barreto criticized the view of science as a panacea, attacked furiously the idea of cosmopolitanism and discredited the Parnassian writing style in vogue. According to his own definition he was a "*mulato sem disfarces*" (an upfront mulatto).

In a country desperately searching for a national identity, where the goal was exactly to "disfarce" or to blur the black features of the

population, Lima Barreto was more than a dissonant voice. He represented, in fact, an image of a nationality that did not fit in (and, in fact, continues to disrupt) the projected, and carefully constructed idea of a Brazilian. The conflict is that he explicitly represented the majority of the population, itself not white, poor and marginal through his literary characters.

Subaltern's voice

Lima Barreto is one of many examples of voices positioned in opposition to the hegemonic one — a subaltern voice relegated to the margin. As Ania Loomba reminds us: “The desire to articulate the standpoint of the downtrodden is of course not new — Marxists, feminists, and even liberal historians have all attempted to amplify the voices of sections of the oppressed” (232). She explains that “subaltern was a military term used for officers under the rank of captain and its origin is somewhat inconsistent with its current usage, borrowed from Gramsci, as a shorthand for any oppressed person” (51).

One of the persistent debates surrounding subaltern studies is the position of the author and his/her claim to authority and authenticity. In her famous article, Spivak asked: “can the subaltern speak?” or alternatively, is the intellectual a legitimized voice to represent the subaltern? Spivak presents a vigorous criticism to postcolonial scholars and historians, warning against an oversimplification through which the author artificially flattens out the heterogeneity of the colonized subject.⁴

To this short sample of the debate I add the issue of defining the intellectual as the “colonized subject.” This supposed antagonism needs to be reevaluated when studying Lima Barreto. Particularly, in this reading it is important to highlight the diverse national identity formation of Brazil. In my opinion, this dichotomy between “intellectual” and “colonized subject” or “oppressed” obfuscates the post-colonial Brazilian situation within the gamut of post-colonial studies in general.

Sociologists Lloyd and Thomas summarize a set of Gramscian definitions of the intellectual: “traditional intellectuals have no single

class origin and often imagine themselves to be above or beyond the usual class divisions. Not being organically tied to a class—even to a class in the ascendant—traditional intellectuals tend to be at best aloof from, and at worst antagonistic towards, its interests” (25). In this sense, it is hard to resist the temptation of employing such a distinction and classify Lima Barreto as a legitimate voice of the oppressed, an organic in opposition to a traditional intellectual. It is clear that in his work he presents a perspective of an underprivileged class; nevertheless, it would be contradictory to make uniform the oppressed or the colonized subject. The poverty that he represents in his literature has multiple faces. As Sevcenko points out, the motif of Lima Barreto’s work includes historical movements, social and racial relationships, socio-economic and cultural changes, social, moral and cultural criticism, philosophical and scientific discussions among many other subjects, which practically embrace all of the most relevant issues that the reality of his time offered: “Everything [in Lima’s work] joins to compose an enormous, rude and turbulent mosaic that deprives the *Belle Époque* of its ornaments of opulence and frivolity.” (Sevcenko 162)

In addition to his subjects, the gallery of Lima’s characters are still today one of the most varied in Brazilian Literature. It is important to note that at that time, characters of novels were mostly from the elite, just as the writers themselves and the lower classes in Brazilian Literature were represented in a simplified way. To the contrary, in Lima Barreto’s work, bureaucrats share space with representatives of petty bourgeoisie, military, inhabitants of the “suburbia”, drunkards, prostitutes, policemen, politicians, crazy men, foreigners, athletes, married and single women, servants, adulterers, criminals, low-wage employees and other social types that composed the fabric of Rio de Janeiro. All of them, reinforces Sevcenko, Lima Barreto deployed with a clear function of consecrating his literature as destined to be a militant one (162-3).

Militant discourse and aesthetic

If Lima Barreto did not contribute to the romantic idea of the *Belle Époque*, he also did not concede to idealizations about his “subaltern” characters. In the view of Osman Lins, he was a “creator full of discernment” (23). He did not rely on generalizations and self-commiseration. Furthermore, the influence of strong nationalism did not affect his creation. He avoided a mystification of patriotism. On the contrary, his discourse was poignantly critical. In his personal notes transformed in the book *Diário Íntimo*, he commented on the Brazilian and American participation in the First War:

If the bloodshed is already spreading, I judge that it is going to become even more widespread. Everything that is revolting and rude goes under this as the pretext of fatherland. It causes horror, as much the strong bourgeoisie want, taking advantage of the state of spirits, to kill the individual in benefit of the “state” that is actually themselves. Spencer was right: the world goes backwards. The utilitarian scope killed the entire ideal, all charity and wants each “beast” in its manger.⁵ (191)

Polícarpo Quaresma, possibly his most famous character, illustrates the trajectory of naïve nationalism. He is an idealist that gradually confronts the violence of the very government that he supported. Quaresma also reveals impotence to change what needs to be changed and an awareness of the pathetic nature of exaggerated patriotism. The character Quaresma, in spite of his caricatured features, suggests a rereading of *clichés* and preconceived ideas surrounding Brazil, such as the richness of the soil, the mystic happiness of the man from the countryside in opposition to the urban population, and the belief that people preserve their cultural heritage (Figueiredo 93).

In fact, Lima Barreto demonstrates that the majority of the population was marginalized in the process of modernization since they were not citizens in their own country. He claims the Brazilian citizen then

felt as a foreigner inside a still forming fatherland. Textual passages denounce this reality. In his novel, *Recordações do Escrivão Isaías Caminha* (Recollection of the Clerk Isaías Caminha) there are at least two passages of this kind. In one of them, he discusses through the young “mulato” Isaías the class differences inside the army hierarchy as if they belonged to different countries: “the officers seem from one country and the soldiers from another. It was like a battalion of Siripaios or of Senegalese snipers. [...] the battalion passed completely, and even ‘our’ flag passed, and left me perfectly indifferent.”⁶ (84)

In another moment, after being denied a job by a baker only because of his ethnic origin, Isaías reflects: “in the Machado Square, I contemplated during some moments that church of Greek façade and Doric columns and I had the feeling of being in a foreign country (128).⁷ In his allusion to the architecture, he ironically realizes the no viability of his citizenship. In other words, he translates the feeling of “otherness” under the limits of his own country.

Lima Barreto’s biographer Francisco de Assis Barbosa affirms that his readings from youth were predominantly in French, an influence he never rebuked (19). Lima Barreto admitted to inspirational sources from classic authors such as Maupassant, Dickens, Swift, Balzac and Daudet, among others. However, he does not simply reproduce a foreign episteme. Through an acute historicity and experience Lima Barreto sifted through an international set of raw material and processed it under his own creative system. He strove to construct a unique discourse, both critical and referential to foreign models.

Another identifiable uniqueness of his discourse to the time was the aesthetic. Targeted as an author not concerned with a refined language, which is, for example, a mark of Machado de Assis, it is important to highlight that his style was in itself a statement. Santiago points out that Lima Barreto’s isolated and intriguing position in Brazilian Literature can be explained by his declared popular aesthetic. The Brazilian context fortifies such a statement upon consideration that the criteria of legitimating of fiction had been always given by an erudite reading (166). Therefore, for Santiago, Lima Barreto’s novel opened itself to a

wider readership and the author did not compromise himself with what he calls *crudite bad faith* in face of the popular text (167). The artifice of the literary creation was in itself his attempt to even the score and recompose his own dignity (Prado 74).

Actually, Barreto demonstrated an explicit aversion to what Carmem Figueiredo defined as "*o fetiche do saber*" (46), "the fetish of knowledge". In spite of being educated under the patronage of an empty rhetoric, which during decades manifested itself in unintelligible speeches and excessively affected language, Lima Barreto always denounced such underlying questionable content, recognition and privilege in Brazilian literature as a way of manipulation and covering of mediocrity. Lima Barreto employed irony, parody and caricature of some public figures in many of these characters, as well, most intrinsically, his style of deliberately simple writing. In this sense, his style presents itself as a subversive complement to his militant ideas. His aesthetics reveals rather defined colors than nuances (Sevcenko 181).

He attacked the excessive concern with form present in his contemporaneous works and demanded from them more social commitment. This was clear in most of his critical articles, but it is exemplar in the caustic critique of Coelho Neto, one of the writers that best represented the status quo of Brazilian Literature in the turn of XXth century. From his book *Impressões de Leitura* (Impressions of Reading), Lima Barreto wrote the following about Neto⁸:

He maintained political, religious and moral cogitations of his century entirely strange and distant. In such years, the maximum mental concern that interested the intelligentsia in any manner was a social and moral reform. Mr. Neto did not ever care to examine this tragic anguish of his time. He did not lend a little from his considerable talent to the study of presented solutions neither was interested in knowing the positivism that could have revealed to him ample horizons [...] currently, at a time of militant literature, full of political, moral and social concerns, Mr. Neto's literature remains purely contemplative, an aesthetician, without any

other questioning other than poetic art, consecrated by the big bourgeoisie embodied by money.⁹ (75-77)

As discussed by Stuart Hall in his article “Gramsci’s relevance for the study of race and ethnicity”, the structures of inequality are many. There is not in fact one racism, but multiple kinds of operational racisms (435). This assumption contextualizes my conclusion: namely, that the forces that acted conjointly or in isolated ways to shape the subaltern character of the intellectual Lima Barreto inside his own country should not be dichotomized. However, even though there were many factors marginalizing Lima Barreto from a so-called Brazilian *Belle Époque* and hence from the literary canon of the time, I strongly believe they are tied to the issue of nationality. In his task of narrating the nation through difference and heterogeneity, Lima Barreto was elided by the Brazilian elite.

As Prado concludes, Lima Barreto registered in his works the conflicts of an existence on the margin (73). In essence, he was relegated to the margin because his discourse as well as himself and his life depicted too much the real face of the Brazilian that nationalist discourses tried so desperately to suppress.

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NOTES

¹ Eu tinha então sete anos e o cativoiro não me impressionava. Não lhe imaginava o horror; não conhecia a sua injustiça. Eu me recordo, nunca conheci uma pessoa escrava. Criado no Rio de Janeiro, na cidade, onde já os escravos rareavam, faltava-me o conhecimento direto da vexatória instituição, para lhe sentir bem os aspectos hediondos (*Feiras e Mafuás*, 256). All the translations on the text are on my own.

² See the debate between Jameson and Ahmad in *Social Text* 15 and 17, respectively. See in “Works Cited”

³ This book was translated into English in 1978 by Robert Scott-Buccleuch, under the title *The Patriot*.

⁴ See “Can the Subaltern Speak”, by G.C. Spivak, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 271-313.

⁵ “[S]e a sangueira já é grande, julgo que ela vai ser ainda maior depois. Tudo o que é revoltante e grosseiro vai por baixo disso tudo, sob o pretexto de pátria. É de causar horror, tanto mais que os fortes burgueses querem, aproveitando o estado dos espíritos, matar o indivíduo em proveito do Estado que são eles. Spencer tinha razão: o mundo retrograda. O escopo utilitário matou todo ideal, toda a caridade e quer cada “besta” na sua manjedoura” (*Diário Íntimo*, 191).

⁶ “Os oficiais pareceram-me de um país e as praças de outro. Era como se fosse um batalhão de sipaios ou de atiradores senegaleses [...] O batalhão passou de todo; e até a própria bandeira que passara, me deixou perfeitamente indiferente...” (*Recordações do Escrivão Isaías de Caminha*, 84).

⁷ “No Largo do Machado, contemplei durante momentos aquela igreja de frontão grego e colunas dóricas e tive a sensação de estar em país estrangeiro” (*Recordações* 128).

⁸ In 1915, the writer Coelho Neto led the *Liga da Defesa Estética* (League of the Defense of Aesthetics).

⁹ “As cogitações políticas, religiosas, morais, do seu século, ficaram-lhe inteiramente estranhas. Em tais anos, cujo máximo problema mental, problema que interessava todas as inteligências de quaisquer naturezas que fossem, era uma reforma social e moral, o Senhor Neto não se deteve jamais em examinar esta trágica angústia de seu tempo, não deu para o estudo das soluções apresentadas um pouco do seu grande talento, nem mesmo tratou de conhecer o positivismo que lhe podia abrir grandes horizontes [...] em anos como os que estão correndo, de uma literatura militante, cheia de preocupações políticas, morais e sociais, a literatura do Senhor Coelho Neto ficou sendo puramente contemplativa, estilizante, sem cogitações outras que não a arte poética,

consagrada no círculo dos grandes burgueses embotados pelo dinheiro” (*Impressões de Leitura*, 75-77)

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