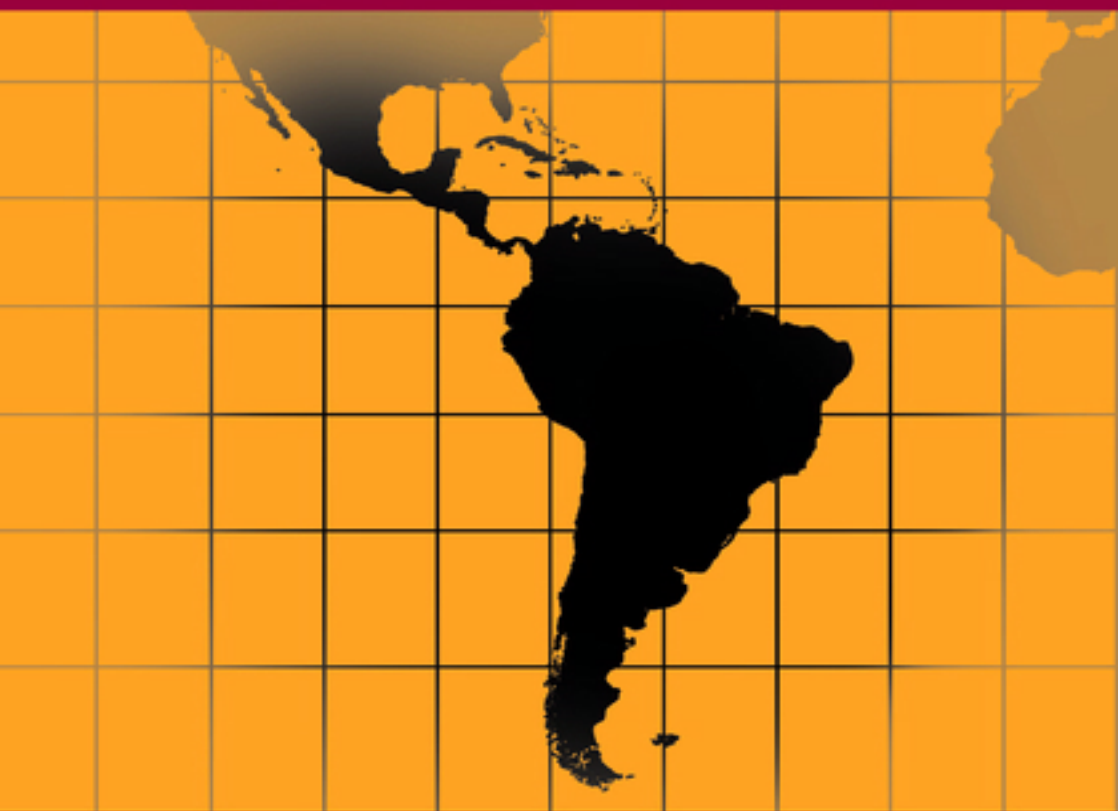


LATIN AMERICA: INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES



# SUBALTERN WRITINGS

Readings on Graciliano Ramos's Novels



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# Preface

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“Trá caminhando às apalpadelas, batendo nas paredes. E talvez acerte. Acertará, sem dúvida.”

Graciliano Ramos, “O moço da farmácia”<sup>1</sup>

The question that I am about to put forward is somewhat odd, not to say downright absurd. Let us imagine a certain someone, sitting at his desk, pen in hand, about to jot down a few words, a few sentences. He pokes his brain, and yet nothing comes out of it. That is to say, nothing that he would deem worthy of putting down on paper. Not that he doesn't tell himself stories, for he does.<sup>2</sup> But constant fantasies, constant daydreams are not stories that one writes down, perhaps not even confess to anyone. Inner scenarios and dialogues do not make up written stories. So there it is: the blank page, almost as if it were facing him, questioning him. “Soooo . . .” “So what? What do you expect from me?” He knows the horrors of the blank page, which begs to be filled up with words, words, words. A moment in time—the tip of the pen touching the surface of the paper, motionless—but a moment that keeps repeating itself, ghostly, a phantasm that haunts the writing subject. If it is true, nonetheless, that repetition is not a mere reproduction of the same—and I believe it is not—then the odd question somehow emerges, formulating, this time clearly, the question that the blank page only vaguely suggested: “How did I *not* become an author?” He, who had barely written anything, hears the

question very distinctly, for he knows that certain questions comprehend us; they interrogate our existence; we hear in them the questioning to the answer which we had been living all along, in the practice of being somebody, day after day.

"How did I *not* become an author?" Such is our writing scene, and what had been so far mere scribblings, words following words, sentences following sentences, amounting to a less than half-written text, turns out to be *the* opportunity, the long awaited one, and perhaps even the only and last one. He, who cannot exist within the symbolic construction that written language is, and particularly fictional language, now has his chance: he may write about his own mode of existence—outside that symbolic realm—about his struggle with writing and, in the long run, about not being able to write. By *not* being an author, he may now engender a text and become himself and his Other. However, this opportunity also slips through his fingers, for he cannot get himself to lower his hand, press the pen against the paper, and write. Write until the words and sentences form a cohesive text, page after page bound together: a book, with a name on the cover. His—he is an author.

Not having become an author yet, he keeps on writing. Even if words jumble up and if sentences do not follow sentences, he has the compulsion to write. *Cacoethes scribendi*. For him, writing is not simply a matter of living in and through language, a sort of (meta)physical ontology that is expressed in the writers' hand movements, in the sounds of words ingrained in their voices, or in the traces they leave before themselves, in their very eyes. Not being an author, he senses in writing a matter of becoming (or not). His risk translates into this "or not," which threatens the writing subject with a void that the authorial name, lacking, cannot fill in. For even if the author never writes again, he cannot erase his own name. He *is* an author: open *his* book, turn the pages, read the words, and reconstruct *his* sentences. Even if the author discovers that the author's name is not quite his anymore and that such a name only empties him of any subjectivity he might recognize as his own; even if he becomes disillusioned with the authorial name's promise of a heightened sense of his existence, he cannot stop the authorial name's signification, its indication that someone, who answers to that name, has once written. For the one who cannot write, however, there is no such sign, and his compulsion to write may verge on the nothingness of an untraceable existence, a subalternity he cannot quite undo with writing. Facing the risks implicit in becoming, the subaltern wannabe writer can only hope for the better while he figures out how he may, in the long run, recognize himself as a writing subject even if he may never quite become an author. Along the way, he hits the walls of the literary establishment—to use here Ramos's image—and feels his way around, having recourse to experiences that do not necessarily pertain to the literary. Ramos's fictionalization of subalterns' approach to the culture of writing—which involves hitting walls and feeling one's

way around, referencing literary traditions but also having recourse to a disparate array of non-literary practices and discourses—constitutes the focus of this book.

In chapter 1, I propose that the subaltern subjectivity Ramos construes in his novels is defined by an annihilation of social existence. Subalternity as social annihilation is thus akin to notions such as Bourdieu's "lesser Beingness" and Althusser's "interpellation," constituting the potentially absolute Nothingness to which subalternity tends when subject-formation unfolds negatively. The first chapter is an incursion into a more strictly theoretical terrain whereas the second one focuses on Ramos's own views on how subaltern subjects, which populate his volume of *crônicas* titled *Viventes das Alagoas*, approach dominant practices within the social-cultural field and engage in linguistic production, be it oral or written.

After these two introductory chapters, in the following ones I engage in readings of Ramos's novels *Caetés* (1933) and *Angústia* (1936). In the first novel, the protagonist Valério, a bookkeeper, attempts to write a historical novel while at the same time engaging in a love affair with his boss's wife. In the end, his boss commits suicide and pardons his backstabber while Valério seemingly gives up on writing (and on his affair with Luísa) as he becomes the heir to his boss's firm.<sup>3</sup> The other novel, *Angústia*, is the story of Luís da Silva, an heir to the decadent landed oligarchy of Brazil's Northeast region. The narrative we read are the notes Silva has taken, recounting his trajectory from a lost dominant social position to orphanhood, misery and an insignificant, mechanical job as a government clerk. Silva's poorly balanced world is torn asunder when Julião Tavares, the son of a well-to-do businessman, invades his home and steals Silva's soon-to-be wife, Marina. Fearing his Nothingness, Silva murders Tavares, has a psychotic break that results in his being bedridden for a month and then gradually attempts to regain, even if minimally, his own life. All through the novel, the protagonist faces different forms of writing and inscriptions.

My readings of these two novels entail, at times, reconstructions of the literary and cultural possibles (in Bourdieu's sense of the term) that delimit subaltern attempts at writing. At other times, my readings take into consideration the subalterns' own engagement with a form of symbolic production that, because they are socially excluded from it, can only take place by means of a juxtaposition with other discourses and practices. Readings, in this sense, are divided between the reconstructions of two complementary *loci*: the ones from where, as possibles within the cultural field, subaltern writers might envisage themselves as writers but constitute, more often than not, a drawback to writing, for they are the sites where subalterns are spoken about (not where they speak); and those *loci* from where subalterns put into play their own modes of approaching writing and literary discourse.

Readings on *Caetés* include chapters 3, 4 and 5. In the first chapter on this novel, I analyze the protagonist's approach to writing a text (the historical novel) by means of a heterodox appropriation of Romantic Indianism and of the reconstruction of an originary indigenous past. I see Valério's appropriation as a form of lay archaeology. Chapter 4, in turn, analyzes the entanglement of the literary and writing with the erotic feminine and its death sentence in both Santa Rosa's cover for the first edition of the novel and in Ramos's text. I pursue, in chapter 5, the persistence of writing and of the protagonist's primitivism (oftentimes negated), even in face of his final "decision" to become a businessman and abandon writing altogether, thereby abiding by the rule that literature and commerce do not mesh. Yet, Valério is able to keep traces of writing where it does not apparently belong and acquires modes of existing as a cultural agent that are akin to those of his contemporary "primitives."

Subsequent chapters develop readings on *Angústia*. In chapter 6, I explore how one of the protagonist's legacies, inherited from his grandfather's rural world of the landed oligarchy, is a communicational model that draws speech close to action. Such mode of communication encompasses an array of speakers and speaking situations, such as cowherds, prayers, *coronéis* and theatrical performances. Capable or not to put this model into practice, the protagonist Silva might actually be closer to the "barbarian" that Brazilian literary discourse has constructed. As a literary *locus* for a subaltern like Silva, this figure, as well as a Modernist attempt to overcome the Brazilian artist's distance from modern "barbarians," constitutes my focus in chapter 7. A "barbarian" who is, moreover, anachronistic in terms of his literary production—for he writes rhymed verses after the Modernist revolution in the arts—Silva embraces his death as a public writer. In chapter 8, I examine Silva's death as a poet, which involves ghostwriting and his fantasized, but failed, re-emergence as a speaking subject by means of domestic writing. Chapter 9 turns to another possible speaking *locus*, the one construed by Communist revolutionaries, and, in chapter 10, I read Silva's solitary act of murdering Tavares as his entrance into the antinomy between the modern, impersonal written law and the bodily inscriptions that should tell the tautological "truth" of identities. Incapable of producing inscriptions in the old-fashioned way, Silva engages in games, which imprint letters and names on Tavares, and in fantasies of a notable book. Yet, it is as notes taken that his writing may finally hold for him a *locus* from whence to speak.

Notes that are an almost unconscious overflow of words being thrown out on the paper; fragmentary, unfinished excerpts of a novel that never gets completely written—Valério's and Silva's writings call for readings that acknowledge precariousness not as a sign of mediocrity or psychosis, but rather as a mode of cognition. Readings, in *Subaltern Writings*, are not devised to elaborate a sociological or anthropological theory of subaltern writing, taking as source and a starting point

Ramos's novels. Readings on subaltern approaches to writing constitute, on the contrary, an irreplaceable, unrepeatable exercise whose objective is to extend us readers into the unforeseeable, always already renewed task of learning to speak to the historically muted subaltern, as Spivak proposes ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 267). Valério's and Silva's narratives are, in this sense, only two examples, or, more specifically, examples without any exemplarity, inasmuch as they do not constitute models. One must, in order not to revert to the "clear-cut nostalgias for lost origins," as Spivak suggests, "proceed by way of . . . example[s]" and develop an "unlearning" project ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 281; 268).

Reading the examples of Valério's and Silva's approaches to writing and learning to "unlearn" from them, I have devised *Subaltern Writings* as chapters that may be read separately and that are somewhat independent from each other, in a fashion similar to the structure Ramos used for *Vidas secas* (1938). Although they all run upon the same "family" and illuminate its different angles, the chapters in *Subaltern Writings* cannot forge the illusion of a thoroughly cohesive discourse, for in such a discourse the subaltern can never speak. Opting for the precariousness of writing is thus a necessity, an imposed choice that accompanies an investment in another precariousness, that of reading. As a form of production in itself, reading, even if it "arranges events, . . . does not compose a unified set," as Certeau observes (174). Instead, it is "dispersed in time, a sequence of temporal fragments not joined together but disseminated through repetitions and different modes of enjoyment, in memories and successive knowledges" (174–75). Forms of writing and reading that allow for fissures and discontinuities, as in Ramos's *Vidas secas*, are thus attempted modes both of counter-reading (at times against the author and alongside the characters) and of speaking to the subaltern, pursuing examples of subaltern approaches to writing. Valério's and Silva's are just two of them, and they are not merely a matter of failure due to mediocrity or psychosis.

