



# “THE VISION OF THESE MONSTROUS DEFORMITIES”: RURALITY, PERIPHERAL CAPITALISM, AND NARRATIVE VOICE IN BRAZILIAN FICTION

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**Abstract:** The article debates the relationship between rurality, modernity, and the the dynamics of capital accumulation, with a particular focus on the Brazilian author Graciliano Ramos’s novel *São Bernardo*. The main interest of this study is in exploring what happens when the narrative device of the voluble, domineering first-person narrator that various critics – such as Roberto Schwarz, Franco Moretti, or the members of the WReC – have identified as a frequent device in peripheral literary works – is transposed to Brazil’s own peripheries, its rural hinterlands.

**Keywords:** world literature, global/peripheral capitalism, narrative voice, Brazilian literature, Graciliano Ramos.

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In much of the debate over the past two decades around the concept of world literature, the work of the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz has been an important touchstone, particularly for materialist studies that aim to reconstruct world literature in terms of its relationship to global capitalism. Schwarz’s “The Importing of the Novel to Brazil,”<sup>1</sup> for example, is central to Franco Moretti’s analysis of the dynamics of the “world literary system” in “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000),<sup>2</sup> the essay that did so much to galvanize interest in the field. In the Warwick Research Collective’s *Uneven and Combined Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (2015), meanwhile, Schwarz’s readings of Machado De Assis’s *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* provide an exemplary methodological lesson in how to discern the dynamics of the capitalist world-system in the forms, styles, and imagery of peripheral literatures. WReC highlight Schwarz’s claim that “the heterogeneity and bewildering multiplicity” of narrative modes in Machado’s *Memórias* should be read “neither as inconsistency nor as baroque exhibition, but as a figuration

of the contradictoriness of Brazilian sociality, ‘slave-owning and bourgeois at the same time.’”<sup>3</sup> Schwarz describes his own methodology as an extension to the cultural field of arguments developed by a group of scholars of his teachers’ generation at the University of São Paulo:

“This group had reached the daring conclusion that the classic marks of Brazilian backwardness should be studied not as an archaic leftover but as an integral part of the way modern society reproduces itself, or in other words, as evidence of a perverse form of progress. For the historian of culture and the critic of the arts in countries like ours, ex-colonies, this thesis has an enormous power to stimulate and deprovincialize, for it allows us to inscribe on the present-day international situation, in polemical form, much of what seemed to distance us from it and confine us to irrelevance.”<sup>4</sup>

Understood thus, Schwarz’s analysis of the correspondence

between Machado's style and Brazil's uneven development aims at illuminating not only the peculiarities of the national situation, but also the wider logistics of global capitalism.

Central to his reading of Machado is what Schwarz calls "misplaced ideas": the phenomenon whereby the affirmation in nineteenth-century Brazil of the ideas and ideals of European liberalism – an ideology that in Europe at least corresponded to appearances – was wholly incongruous in a society based on enslaved labour. These imported ideas became "ideologies of the second degree" and as such stood in for "the conscious desire to participate in a reality that appearances did not sustain."<sup>5</sup> It is Machado's great achievement to give literary expression to this phenomenon as it manifested itself in the behaviour of Brazil's ruling class. This class, writes Schwarz, "had to inspect and absorb the relevant culture of its time, so that it could, in patriotic fashion, acclimatize it to the country, that is, associate it to the institution of slavery, whose kernel of discretionary personal domination, however, mocked pretensions to civilization and was no longer publicly sustainable." One consequence of this mis-match was "the unusual combination of eagerness for and, at bottom, indifference to intellectual novelties, and the rapidity and wide embrace of these twists and turns."<sup>6</sup> This intellectual volubility served as something like ideological cover for the ruling class's contradictory combination of bourgeois liberalism and patrician authoritarianism. As Schwarz puts it with reference to the eponymous narrator of Machado's *Dom Casmurro*:

"Casmurro's universal scepticism, with its different intensities ranging from tolerance to ferocity, and equipped with all the paraphernalia of modern intellectual progress, serves him as rational cover for his disobedience to the demands of bourgeois dignity; or, rather, it authorizes – without marring the civilized atmosphere – the brutality of the uncouth property owner."<sup>7</sup>

Having initially tried to indict this attitude from the perspective of its subaltern victims, Machado's artistic breakthrough came when he "took to imitating it in the first-person singular." Thus, what "had hitherto been the central problem of his fiction as content, the amazing class substance of the shifts, becomes [in his later fiction] its form, the inner rhythm of the narrative."<sup>8</sup>

The voluble lyricism of Machado's prose, therefore, in expressing the despotic caprice of the narrator-character, functions as "the 'structural reduction' of a motion or course imposed on the Brazilian ruling class" by the country's dependent, (semi)peripheral position within the world-system.<sup>9</sup> My interest in this essay is in exploring what happens when the narrative device of the voluble, domineering first-person narrator is transposed to Brazil's own peripheries, its rural hinterlands. Machado's most famous oligarchic narrators – Brás Cubas and Dom Casmurro – are both based in Rio de Janeiro. As Schwarz points out with regards to Casmurro, when

"the novel opens, [his] father, a plantation owner and deputy in parliament, is already dead, and the family, having sold his lands, is living off rents. In this way, the political and economic activity of the owners is excluded from the novel, which devotes its space to the intra-familial sphere, where the relations of paternalist domination and subjection will be examined in a chemically pure state, so to speak."<sup>10</sup>

But what of literary texts that turn their attention to those hinterlands Machado deliberately excludes from his novel – the cash-crop frontiers where Casmurro's father acquired his fortune? What new or different insights might such texts from the rural peripheries of a peripheralized nation generate about the uneven and contradictory dynamics of capital accumulation?

In his seminal essay "Literature and Underdevelopment" (1970), Schwarz's compatriot Antonio Cândido describes the emergence of what he terms a "catastrophic consciousness of backwardness" in Latin American literature.<sup>11</sup> This consciousness corresponded to a growing awareness of underdevelopment not as a transitional step towards full development, but as a specifically structured mode of life that would persist if not actively overcome. For Cândido, the "consciousness of underdevelopment followed the Second World War and was manifested clearly from the fifties on." However, he continues,

"there had been, since the thirties, a change in orientation, which could be taken as a thermometer, given its generality and persistence, above all in regionalist fiction. It then abandoned pleasantness and *curiosity*, anticipating or perceiving what had been disguised in the picturesque enchantment or ornamental chivalry with which rustic man had previously been approached. It is not false to say that, from this point of view, the novel acquired a demystifying force that preceded the coming-to-awareness of economists and politicians."<sup>12</sup>

Although Cândido is speaking of Latin American literature generally here, the "regionalist fiction" he has in mind above all would seem to be that from Brazil's Northeast. It is to an example of this fiction that I turn in what follows. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the Northeast had been a leading economic force in Brazil, its wealth predicated on export agriculture. In the immediate aftermath of independence, for instance, sugar produced in the northeastern provinces dominated foreign trade. Following the proclamation of the First Republic in 1889, however, the region found itself increasingly peripheralized relative to the coffee-growing provinces of the Centre-South. Focusing on the novel *São Bernardo* (1934) by Graciliano Ramos, I examine how his use of a voluble first-person narrator acquires a "demystifying force" when it comes to the brutal exploitation of human and nonhuman natures typical of the Northeast's cash-crop frontiers. The contradictions of Ramos's narrator-character, Paulo Honório, not only embody the uneven and combined



development of the Northeast, but are also key to the text's excavation of what Maria Mies terms the "underground of capitalist patriarchy."<sup>13</sup> *São Bernardo*, in short, might be considered exemplary of rural literature in the sense in which it is understood by the contributors to the *Rural Modernism* project: as "a privileged space, able to reflect and likewise deflect the challenges and dilemmas of the modern world."<sup>14</sup>

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By the early twentieth century, Brazil's Northeast had emerged as a specific regional entity, one identified by its distinctive topography (most notably, the contrast between the drought-prone backlands of the *sertão* and the lush coastal plain of the *zona da mata*) and its "problematic if ardent embrace of modernity."<sup>15</sup> Summarizing the impact of the rapid modernization of the Northeast in this period, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque writes:

"Juxtaposed alongside fields of cotton and sugar plantations were now telegraph cables, telephone lines, and railroads. Hudson, Ford, and Studebaker automobiles as well as Great Western railway cars sped commerce but catalysed its detrimental impacts on the environment, as mountains were scraped clean of foliage and smoke darkened the sky. Traditional modes and rhythms of life were transformed."<sup>16</sup>

In response to these changes, as well as to a perceived need to assert the importance of the Northeast in opposition to the growing dominance of the South (not least its economic powerhouse São Paulo), various regional intellectuals produced work celebrating what were construed as the Northeast's distinctive cultural and social traditions. Perhaps the most influential of these intellectuals was the sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who in books such as *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1933) and *Nordeste* (1937) located the essential values and identity of the region in its coastal sugar-cane plantations.<sup>17</sup>

Freyre was concerned by the disruption to social equilibrium caused by modernization, especially as it affected the sugar industry. As a result of a precipitous drop in profits from sugar exports in the late nineteenth century, the industry "began a major change in its productive organization," establishing large new mills or *usinas*, which absorbed "smaller *engenhos* [sugar mills] and brought downward mobility for many in the traditional planter class."<sup>18</sup> As Peter Eisenberg explains:

"From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the traditional *engenho* made sugar from cane grown almost exclusively on its own land. Then the contradictions of market demand and Brazilian supply required improving the product and lowering costs. The attempted solution through specialization – establishing central mills – failed, and almost immediately the essential dependency of mill and cane field led to a new vertical integration, accomplished by having the *usina* own canefields and gradually absorb independent cane plantations. In effect, the *usina* was a

modern reincarnation of the traditional *engenho* on a more complicated and far larger scale."<sup>19</sup>

Freyre was a fierce critic of the *usinas*, regarding them as a socially and ecologically degrading force. His condemnation of their impact, however, was not straightforwardly progressive in its intent. Although he lamented the rapacious logic of the sugar frontier in general – he famously bemoaned the "two running sores of monoculture and slavery" in the Northeast and criticized the fouling of rivers by waste from the mills<sup>20</sup> – his work often seems to want to indict "only the most recent agricultural changes for [sugar-cane's] more grievous offences."<sup>21</sup> This permits the world of the traditional *engenhos* to emerge in his writing as a site of nostalgic attachment. Indeed, Freyre's overall project is marked by its romantic, conciliatory orientation. Against the image of the filthy *usinas*, he posed the *engenhos* – organized around the patriarchal authority of the master or *senhor* – as the embodiment of a past of power and harmony, one that could steer the development of the Northeast in a direction coincident with its 'values.'

Freyre's ambivalence towards the sugar frontier might in turn be said to index the more general condition of combined and uneven development in the Northeast as the region's rapid modernization went hand-in-hand with the persistence of more archaic social modalities – not least relations of personal domination patterned on slavery. This context provides the essential raw material for Ramos's *São Bernardo*, in which the contradictory dynamics of modernization are encapsulated in the ascent of its narrator, Paulo Honório, from farmhand to owner of the titular plantation. The novel has been read as depicting the "development of a bourgeois."<sup>22</sup> And certainly in its portrait of Honório and his relationship to his environment, Ramos's narrative offers a striking depiction of the colonization of social practice by the logic of commodity production. As João Luiz Lafeté puts it in an important essay showing how the dynamics of reification write themselves all over the text: "Everything is transformed – deceptively – into exchange value. And all human relations are transformed – destructively – into a relationship between things, between the owner and what he owns."<sup>23</sup> This dynamic is embodied in the form and rhythms of Honório's narrative voice. From among any number of passages that might be cited, take the following:

"I lost one [worker] in the quarry. The chisel jumped out from under a stone, hit him in the chest, and he bought the farm. He left a widow and tiny orphans. They all vanished: one of the kids fell in the fire, roundworms ate the second, the last had a heart condition, and the wife hanged herself.// To reduce mortality and increase productivity, I prohibited cane liquor.// I finished constructing my new house. No need to describe it. The main parts have appeared or will soon; the rest is expendable, interesting to architects, maybe, but they probably won't read this. Everything was cozy and attractive. I stopped sleeping in a hammock, of course. I bought furniture and other stuff I was too shy to use. There

are things I still haven't used, even today, because I don't know what they're for.// Here we jump five years. In five years, the world turns many times."<sup>24</sup>

Honório's casual brutality and his indifference to those individuals he treats as little more than interchangeable objects of abjection is underscored by the narrative's terse prose and clipped rhythms. Indeed, there is a relentlessness to the narration, an inexorable energy that sees detail piled upon detail, one topic following another with a rapidity and efficiency that matches Honório's practical efforts to "increase productivity" on the plantation. The speed with which he moves between different scenes and concerns gives the prose a fragmentary feel; yet this fragmentation does not produce a sense of variation or contrast since the parts are subordinated to the implacable rhythm and viewpoint of the narrative voice, which invests the whole with a hypnotic monotony. In this sense, the prose recalls capitalism's division of labour on the factory floor, its disarticulation of the production process into a series of isolated actions, which are then reassembled under the authority of the capitalist. The temporal logic governing the passage reinforces this connection insofar as it seems to correspond to the empty, homogenous time of capital and the abstractions of the value-form. For Honório, the past (the story of the worker's woe), present (the construction of the house), and future (the sudden leap of five years) are all of a piece: the world may turn "many times" in five years, but this is purely a matter of quantitative extension rather than qualitative differentiation.

Honório's ascent to plantation owner, as well as the imprint left on his narrative voice by the logic of commodity production, attests to the "new social dynamism" that came with the "consolidation of industrial capitalism" in Brazil in the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The former farmhand's route to bourgeois status, including a prodigious amount of hard labour, is some distance from the world inhabited by Machado's elite narrators – decadent oligarchs for whom work, viewed in the shadow of slavery, is a form of social degradation. This difference finds expression in narratorial style. Consider, for example, *Dom Casmurro*, a novel that *São Bernardo* consciously alludes to, with Honório's jealousy and fateful accusations of infidelity against his wife mirroring the behaviour of Casmurro. Here is Casmurro describing his decision to begin writing the narrative that we are reading:

"I wanted a little variety, and had the idea of writing a book. Jurisprudence, philosophy and politics occurred to me; but I didn't have the necessary energy for such projects. Then I thought I might write a *History of the Suburbs*, less dry than the memoir Father Luís Gonçalves dos Santos wrote about the city of Rio itself; a modest undertaking, but it required documents and dates as preliminaries, all of which would be boring and time-consuming. Then it was that the busts painted on the walls started to talk to me, and to tell me that, since they couldn't bring back times past, I should take a pen and recount some of them. [...] This idea delighted me

so much, that the pen is trembling in my hand even now. Yes, Nero, Augustus, Massinissa, and you, great Caesar, urging me to write my own Commentaries, I'm grateful for the advice, and I'm going to put down on paper the reminiscences that come into my head."<sup>26</sup>

Here we have the familiar volubility of Machado's ruling-class narrators: the insouciant flitting between topics and opinions; the whimsical quality of the narration ("I wanted a little variety, and had the idea of writing a book"); the simultaneous brandishing of intellectual credentials and denigration of intellectual pursuits, especially insofar as the latter require any kind of work (the abandoning of the book on the suburbs because it requires "documents and dates [...], all of which would be boring and time-consuming"). All this, of course, is quite different from Honório's narrative, which evokes a world of privation, necessity, and practical consequences ("To reduce mortality and increase productivity, I prohibited cane liquor"). Where Casmurro sprinkles his prose with classical allusions and claims (absurdly) to be writing on the authority of dead emperors, Honório questions the worth of what he is writing ("the rest is expendable"), suspects it will not be read by the professional classes, and is candid about his lack of class competence ("There are things I still haven't used [...] because I don't know what they're for"). These differences are encoded in the rhythms and textures of the narration: on the one hand, Casmurro's florid, flowing sentences, indicative of his easy self-assurance, but also of a certain fecklessness and lack of direction; on the other, Honório's staccato-like style, testament to his energy and drive, as well as to the jagged edges of a man who has risen to the top but whose habitus still bears the marks of his class origins ("I bought furniture and other stuff I was too shy tThese differences in narrative style appear at first glance to underline the differences between the energy and dynamism of a modernizing, bourgeois lifeworld and the decadence and archaicism of a declining aristocratic milieu. And yet, things are inevitably not as clear-cut as all that. Another look at the passage above from *São Bernardo* reveals that every indicator of bourgeois industry can just as easily be read as signifying a different social logic. Honório's initial discussion of the dead worker, for example, suggests an indifference to his plight in keeping with the impersonal domination of the wage-relation; but the details he provides of the labourer's family suggest a familiarity reminiscent of the relations of personal dependency that structured life and work on the *engenhos*. From this perspective, while the banning of cane liquor serves to increase productivity, it might also be viewed as a form of paternalistic intervention by a concerned *senhor*. At the level of form, meanwhile, the pattern whereby the narrative is simultaneously fragmented and unified by the relentless rhythms of the prose is not only suggestive of the capitalist division of labour. Paradoxically, it also recalls what Thomas Roger's refers to as the colonial planter's habitus of command, his projection of absolute control over the landscape and those labouring within it.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, for all that Honório's arbitrary leaps in chronology gesture to a



world in which quantitative extension has triumphed over qualitative differentiation, they have about them, too, an air of whimsicality – the brutal whimsicality of the patrician planter who can reorder the world he commands at a stroke.

The contradictions in Honório's narrative voice, therefore, establish a connection to the volubility of Machado's narrators: different as he is, Honório shares with them that peculiar combination of bourgeois pretension and authoritarian caprice. This, in turn, discloses the essential concern of Ramos's novel, which is precisely the uneven and contradictory quality of the modernization process embodied in the protagonist's social ascent. Attesting to the persistence of more archaic modes of social domination alongside contemporary bourgeois forms, Honório becomes both capitalist entrepreneur *and* patriarchal *senhor*. As Ana Paula Pacheco points out, his farm uses "state-of-the-art technology alongside semi-slave labour;" his economic success is built on a "very Brazilian combination of physical brutality, the financial system (banks and loans), local politics, usury and theft."<sup>28</sup> This uneven amalgam of social modalities and economic formations speaks both to the general underdevelopment of Brazil's Northeast, as well as to the specific political moment at which the book was written – a moment in which the revolution of 1930, which brought Getúlio Vargas to power and was supposed to overturn the established order, had devolved into a compromise between the old agrarian oligarchs and the new bourgeois industrialists over a share of the spoils of office. But the paradoxical qualities of *São Bernardo*'s narrator and his economic practices also reveal a more general truth about the dynamics of capital accumulation. And they do so, I would suggest, precisely because of the novel's setting in Brazil's rural periphery.

If Machado's narrators combine the performance of bourgeois ideas and manners with the savage brutality of the slave-owner, Honório's experience is slightly different. As a former farmhand who, through a mixture of work, usury, and physical force, has become a landowner personally mired in the violence of plantation agriculture, he lives the contradictions of his situation far more intensely than do Machado's feckless oligarchs. His habitus directly registers the tensions between the different social logics structuring everyday life. These tensions are then decisively implicated in the ultimate tragedy of his existence: the suicide of his wife, Madalena, whose liberal, progressive outlook exposes the limitations of Honório's bourgeois pretensions (such as they are) and underlines his patriarchal authoritarianism. Madalena's death plunges Honório into crisis: his subjectivity unravels, his plantation goes into decline, and he is left in the final chapter admitting that he has "stupidly wrecked [his] life." This moment of self-awareness is immediately followed by a passage in which he acknowledges the degree to which the pressures of his socioeconomic ascent have deformed him:

"I wasn't always selfish and cruel, or so I believe. My way of life made me bad. The terrible suspicion, pointing out enemies everywhere! This way of living made me useless.

It crippled me. I bet I have a tiny heart, gaps in the brain, nerves different from other men's. Not to mention an enormous nose, enormous mouth, enormous fingers. [...] Closing my eyes, I shake my head to drive away the vision of these monstrous deformities. [. . .] I think my mind wandered. I hallucinated swamps, swollen rivers, the figure of a werewolf."<sup>29</sup>

Recalling Marx's description of capital's "werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour,"<sup>30</sup> Honório's recognition of himself in the figure of the werewolf emphasizes his transformation into the fleshly manifestation of the ravenous logic of capital. That he conceives of himself as literally transformed (his "enormous" nose, mouth, and fingers) indicates that this logic is being exposed nakedly here. That is, the ideologies through which the violence and terror wrought by the bourgeoisie are typically displaced or occluded are no longer operative. The "monstrous" quality of Honório's activities in a peripheralized plantation zone reveal starkly the monstrous tendencies of capital accumulation as such, stripped of the socially necessary "illusion[s] supported by appearances" that tend to invisibilize such monstrosity in core zones.<sup>31</sup>

The resonance of the werewolf reference does not end there, however. Like so many facets of Ramos's narrative, this image of capitalist rapaciousness also establishes a connection to its opposite: that on which capital relies to facilitate the profitable exploitation of wage-labour. Historically, capitalism has mobilized gendered and racialized hierarchies, in tandem with the denigration and reification of nonhuman nature, to ensure the devaluation of certain kinds of work – the work of "women, nature, and colonies," as Maria Mies neatly summarizes it.<sup>32</sup> Patriarchal and racist ideologies that position women and people of colour as belonging to the sphere of Nature (as a singular abstraction defined in opposition to Society) serve to justify the demarcation of these groups as less than human, all the better to depreciate or invisibilize their labour. The de-valued – hence, underpaid or unpaid – work appropriated from women, nature, and colonies forms the "underground of capitalist patriarchy or civilized society."<sup>33</sup> Although "pushed down" and "made invisible," it is "the base of the whole:"<sup>34</sup> it both helps to keep the costs of commodity production down and is typically integral to the reproduction of the conditions required for commodity production in the first place (as in, for example, the domestic labour – routinely gendered feminine – necessary to produce the wage-labourer on a daily basis). In *São Bernardo*, the devaluation of the lives and labour of specifically racialized and gendered subjects via their association with Nature is encapsulated in Honório's attitude to his surroundings. Tellingly, he conflates everyone and everything central to the running of his plantation under the category of nonhuman nature. In a passage shortly before his reference to the werewolf, he proclaims: "Animals – the creatures who had served me all these years were animals. There were domestic animals, such as Padilha; wild animals, such as Casimiro Lopes; and tame animals, oxen, who worked the fields."<sup>35</sup> The subsequent apparition of the werewolf not only

represents a coming to light of the violence and monstrosity of the peripheral capitalist's pursuit of profit, therefore; it also suggests the latter's constitutive connection to a different kind of animalization—that inflicted on those forced to service the ruling class. Honório's fear of the werewolf, in other words, is a form of self-recognition that includes an inchoate recognition of the violence done to others in de-valuing and appropriating their work.

Less directly, but perhaps more powerfully, the werewolf is also linked to the exposure of the gender violence at the heart of capitalist accumulation. As noted, Honório's breakdown and eventual self-recognition as a "monstrous" creature follow on from the suicide of his wife. Madalena's "final gesture turns his landowner world upside-down."<sup>36</sup> Her death derails Honório's socioeconomic progress: her ultimate refusal to conform to the role of submissive housewife "becomes an obstacle in his pre-established straight path and causes a rupture in this unbroken subjectivity"; from that moment on, "the farm free-falls into decline."<sup>37</sup> This, then, might be read as allegory of the dangers to capital of any disruption to the strategies through which it appropriates de-valued work from its "underground" trinity: Madalena's suicide signals the crisis precipitated when the gendered work (such as domestic or affective labour) integral to the reproduction of masculine subjectivity and the dominant economic logic cannot be obtained. In addition, as Lúcia Helena Vianna suggests, as "an anti-solution to conflict, rather than the victimization of women, the suicidal act on Madalena's part seems to stand for a cry for freedom that cannot be taken away from a subject opting for their own death."<sup>38</sup> Read as such, Madalena's tragedy also carries within it a thread of hope and the possibility of an alternative to the brutal, reified lifeworld represented and internalized in Honório's narrative: her "cry for freedom" is a cry against patriarchal domination and the logic of the commodity form.

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The literary device of the voluble, first-person narrator, as it develops in the work of Machado and Ramos, internalizes at the level of form the contradictory reality of Brazilian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The pressures generated by this contradictory reality are revealed most starkly in *São Bernardo*. By making his narrator not the descendant of oligarchs, but a farmhand who becomes a plantation owner, Ramos dramatizes the push-and-pull of bourgeois subjectivity and patrician authoritarianism directly through the (under)development of Honório. The "monstrous deformities" produced in the narrator by his "werewolf-like hunger" for wealth and power, combined with his eventual recognition of his own monstrosity, not only index the Northeast's underdevelopment, but also underline the novel's precocious instantiation of Cândido's "catastrophic consciousness of backwardness." Indeed, Honório's voluble, contradictory narrative voice speaks to the rhythms of development and underdevelopment in Brazil more generally

– to the tendency for periods of crisis and upheaval in the country, such as that of the 1930 revolution and its aftermath, to engender what Schwarz calls "retrogressive-modernizing solution[s]" that allow "capitalism to advance, while society continue[s] to indulge in the same old inequalities."<sup>39</sup>

In this regard, we might see *São Bernardo* as speaking also to the present moment in Brazil. It is a moment in which an ongoing economic and political crisis has thrown up a new authoritarian "monster" in the form of President Jair Bolsonaro<sup>40</sup> and a new retrogressive-modernizing "marriage of convenience between neoliberal economic reform and the archaicizing project of *bolsonarismo*."<sup>41</sup> Bolsonaro, whose voluble twitter-stream makes him a contemporary cousin of the narrator-protagonists studied here, embodies the contradictions of this "marriage of convenience" in a manner reminiscent of Honório's personification of the contradictory forces of entrepreneurialism and plantation oligarchy. As Perry Anderson remarks, for instance:

"[Bolsonaro's] nationalism, in expression hyperbolic enough, essentially takes the form of virulent tropes of anti-socialism, anti-feminism and homophobia as so many excrescences alien to the Brazilian soul. But it has no quarrel with free markets. In local parlance, it offers the paradox of a *populismo entreguista*—one perfectly willing, in principle at least, to hand over national assets to global banks and corporations."<sup>42</sup>

The "neo-backwardness of *bolsonarismo*," however, differs in one crucial respect from the retrogressive-modernizing tendencies embodied by Honório.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Honório's "monstrous deformities" arise in part from the tension between an archaic patrician authoritarianism and the *possibility* of modern capitalist development and the ideal of bourgeois progress, *bolsonarismo* unfolds in a context in which this latter possibility – development, or the promise "to overcome underdevelopment" – is off the table.<sup>44</sup> This is a world-systemic as much as a specifically Brazilian problem. Insofar as Bolsonaro's presidency has been marked by appeals to racism, trenchant sexism, and a renewed assault on the Amazon, he represents the fleshly manifestation of capitalism's response to the global economic crisis that began in the 2000s. This response has seen new rounds of violence unleashed against Mies' trinity of "women, nature, and colonies" in an effort to secure fresh streams of de-valued work. But it is unclear the extent to which such strategies can revive a senescent world-economy beyond the increasingly frenzied and bloody maintenance of ruling-class power. In this context, the devastating end of Honório – haunted by his past, his subjectivity unravelling, his plantation in ruins – assumes a more universal, prophetic quality: the world will continue to be littered with carcasses until the "monstrous deformit[y]" of capital and its werewolf hunger are ended.



## Notes:

1. Roberto Schwarz, "The Importing of the Novel to Brazil and Its Contradictions in the Work of Roberto Alencar," in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, translated and with an introduction by John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 41-77.
2. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (2000): 54-68.
3. WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 63-64.
4. Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*, translated by John Gledson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 3.
5. Roberto Schwarz, "Misplaced Ideas: Literature and Society in Late-Nineteenth Century Brazil," in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, translated and with an introduction by John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 23.
6. Schwarz, *A Master*, 23.
7. Roberto Schwarz, "Capitu, the Bride of Dom Casmurro," in *Two Girls and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 2012), 84.
8. Roberto Schwarz, "Beyond Universalism and Localism: Machado's Breakthrough," in *Two Girls and Other Essays*, ed. Francis Mulhern (London: Verso, 2012), 47.
9. Schwarz, *A Master*, 20.
10. Schwarz, "Capitu," 84.
11. Antonio Cândido, "Literature and Underdevelopment," in *On Literature and Society*, ed. Howard S. Becker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 121.
12. Cândido, "Literature," 121.
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