

## IMMIGRATION AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOPHAGY IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** Taken the construct of anthropophagy, Brazilian Modernism discarded from the Other everything that was not interesting, making it possible for the Self to culturally assimilate the Other in a very aggressive form. In the larger cities, along with the economic development between 1950 and 1980, a new cultural context emerged enveloping foreigners as well as the immigrant from the less favored Brazilian regions. The urban culture absorbed "anthropophagically" the immigrant, leaving him without identity. The literary text has been successful in reproducing the fictional characters' state of mind, when in search of their identities. In this paper, having in mind ideas of Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, two Brazilian fiction writers (the northeastern Ricardo Ramos and the Polish-Jew Samuel Rawet) will be studied, for they portrayed immigrant characters lost in the urban gear, daydreaming of their origins, trying to achieve a Brazilian national identity, and thus melancholically remembering their past and culture.

**Keywords:** cultural anthropophagy; immigrant; brazilian literature; urban culture; melancholy.

**Resumo:** A partir do conceito de antropofagia, o Modernismo Brasileiro descartou do Outro tudo o que não lhe interessava, tornando possível para o Eu assimilar culturalmente o Outro de forma bastante agressiva. Nas cidades maiores, junto com o desenvolvimento econômico entre 1950 e 1980, um novo contexto cultural surgiu envelopando os estrangeiros e os imigrantes de regiões mais pobres do país. A cultura urbana absorveu antropofagicamente o imigrante, deixando-o sem identidade. O texto literário tem tido sucesso em reproduzir o estado de alma das personagens ficcionais, quando em busca de suas identidades. Neste artigo, tendo por base idéias de Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault e Michel de Certeau, serão estudados dois contistas brasileiros (o nordestino Ricardo Ramos e o judeu-polonês Samuel Rawet), por haverem construído personagens imigrantes perdidos na máquina urbana, sonhando acordado sobre suas origens, tentando adquirir uma identidade nacional brasileira, e assim melancolicamente lembrando do seu passado e de sua cultura.

**Palavras-chave:** antropofagia cultural; imigrante; literatura brasileira; cultura urbana; melancolia.

### I. THE NEED FOR A BRAZILIAN IDENTITY

The social-cultural context of the first republican years in Brazil, known as Old Republic (1889-1930), was marked by a certain drive for an Europeanization of Brazil, especially in the city of Rio de Janeiro, dictating fashions and behaviors. The architectural reform of the city and the concern with the technology sound out of tune

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with the remaining of the country - the dichotomies city-field and center-periphery became larger, because they created a conflict of ideas and of behaviors. The city brought in itself this conflict, registered for instance in the “crônicas”<sup>1</sup> written by João do Rio and Machado de Assis. The periphery or the almost interior stayed linked to the tradition; the center was orderly, methodical and technologically advanced.

This conflict necessarily created as a response an identity crisis. Who was Brazilian after all? What did this quality give to the country and her inhabitants? Monteiro Lobato’s and Coelho Neto’s texts already registered a critique to this old-fashioned set of behaviors, motivated by the positivist notion of “order and progress” (the motto written on the Brazilian flag) - in other words, contrary to the lack of education and hygiene one would have found in the countryside. Euclides da Cunha also displayed a firm faith in the sanitizing process of the Brazilian population. Lima Barreto registered the idea of a “Brazilian” Brazil, i.e. without the strong trace made by the import of very strict form and content from Europe. As much for the immigration of Germans and Italian as for the influence of the avant-garde models: Pirandello, Picasso, German expressionism, Bergson and Freud, transplanted Europe was in clash with an archaic culture.

## II. CULTURAL ANTHROPOPHAGY

In the 20s and 30s, the Brazilian modernist movement strived arduously in almost desperate search of a national identity. Tempted to destroy the past and the traditional social-cultural structures, the modernists were split between a search of a Brazilian reality and the absorption of the European innovations. A peculiar example is the set of essays which tried to describe the *Retrato do Brasil* (*Portrait of Brazil*) by Paulo Prado, the *Evolução do Povo Brasileiro* (*Evolution of the Brazilian People*) by Oliveira Vianna, the *Raízes do Brasil* (*Roots of Brazil*) by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and the dichotomies in *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*) and *Sobrados e Mucambos* (*The Mansions and the Shanties*) by Gilberto Freyre.

The search of the nationality or the character of the Brazilian people, of which Macunaíma is an icon (ironically the hero without character or face or any other traits), became the great modernist motto. And one can only think about being modernist as an absolute understanding of accepting the past, of not being possible to start over again, as stated by Roland Barthes in his *Le Bruissement de la langue*. Among several artists, Oswald of Andrade had the most important role in the ideological construction of that identity through the concept of the anthropophagy. The fundamental idea in that construc was that the Brazilian culture was cannibalistic, devouring the foreign material and regurgitating a new object, typically Brazilian and original. Several critics have argued there is in this attitude a consciousness of the colonial dependence and at the

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<sup>1</sup> “Crônicas” are short texts normally published in newspapers, written in a very light humored literary style, in the tradition of the French *feuilleton* and the Spanish *costumbrismo*.

same time an anxiety for being authentic. Thus, cultural anthropophagy can be described as a form of absorbing the other, using of the other only what it is of interest, assimilating and annulling him in everything that may stem off the prevalent set. This concept of national cultural identity in the end eliminates the disparate culture that being then usually of European tone.

### III. NEW TIMES, NEW IDENTITIES

With the economical development between 1950 and 1980, countless immigrants came to the greater cities, not only from other countries as well as from other areas of the country, what is perfectly acceptable in terms of human geography. But the prevailing cultural context, in this case, becomes more interesting because it assumes an assimilation process of the immigrant's as necessary, very similar to the acculturation process that took place in the French, British and Portuguese colonization in Africa. The urban-centered culture absorbed the immigrant, discarding of him what was not interesting, using the same process of anthropophagy. It is well-known, for instance, the attitude that prevailed for quite some time in the Brazilian TV news broadcasting, avoiding accents other than that of Rio de Janeiro, imposing a “correct” speech form. To be national, an anchorperson or a street reporter had to pronounce words in the “carioca” way, even if one was educated or brought up and raised elsewhere. This imposed construction of a national identity, of course different from the foreigner or the outsider, came to eliminate or tried to eliminate the regional nuances. Conversely, regional sound and visual images (here perhaps it is wise to talk of sound landscape) aired by radio and television shows do awake in the immigrant his lost identity in the context of the prevailing urban culture. A record of this has been made by literature, especially through the fictional technique of portraying the psychological dilemmas faced by these immigrants, whose reactions are of melancholic and nostalgic tones, as I will point here on based on the short stories by Samuel Rawet and Ricardo Ramos.

### IV. SAMUEL RAWET: WHO AM I?

In 1956, along with *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (*The devil to pay in the backlands*) by Guimarães Rosa, *Encontro Mercado* (*A time to meet*) by Fernando Sabino, and the novels by Mário Palmério and Geraldo Ferraz, one may find the Brazilian Polish Jew Samuel Rawet (1929-1984), author of several important texts, such as *Contos do Imigrante* (1956), *Os Sete Sonhos* (1967) and *Viagens de Ahasverus à Terra Alheia* (1970) and *Que os mortos enterrem seus mortos* (1981). There seems to be a tonic of his work the presence of a certain pondering on identity, already noticed by Fausto Cunha in *Contos do Imigrante*, in which characters constantly deal with despair.

In many of Rawet's narratives, as in *Abama* (1964), a feeling of solitude marks characters wandering through the city details, as if there was the need to understand the world according to space references, and not historical, as one may find in UCLA professor Edward Soja's description of the experience of modernity, in his *Postmodern*

*Geographies: The Assertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989). In other words, in Rawet's characters there is a prevailing anguish or despair, as in Cunha's statement, when focusing their thinking in pitch with the urban context, where the multitude and the solitude prevail. Much to the light of a Brazilian identity that is looked for, but that annuls too many (as a result of the cultural cannibalism), I see the Jewish voice painfully interacting with a Catholic environment, without finding it true or feasible. One of the very few readers of Rawet, Professor Nelson Vieira, of Brown University, has been arguing that there is a certain difficulty for the construction of a Jewish voice in the Brazilian literature, in his article "Ethnicity and Cultural Identity in Latin American Literature" (1998)<sup>2</sup>.

According to Vieira, Rawet's stories would deal with the difficulty of reconciling the Jewish faith and culture with the Brazilian cultural and nationalist norms. In other words, to be or not be Jew in Rawet is a problem permeated by the national ideology of misidentification, or assimilationist ideology, as if there was a large damage if regional identities were accepted. The questions raised by Vieira are very important, in this case, because they depart from reflection about the discourse of the identities (racial, regional, national or cultural), the memory as form of formation e/ou recovery of the tradition individual/grupal, the relationships between individual and group, margin and center or minorities/majority, and low and high brow cultures/literatures. Another larger problem is that of a new ethnicity (along with Stuart Hall's argument), that would contemplate multiple experiences in spite of the space-time dimensions. One may be reminded here of Foucault's heterotopias and his perception of the history of powers.

Rawet's short story "Reinvenção de Lázaro" ("Reinvention of Lazarus") tells about Yehuda Bitterman, who wants to narrate the episode of Tião, pleasantly standing away from the object, manipulating the situation, seeking harmony in the words. When trying to accomplish the pulse, he gets up and goes to the window to contemplate the external world, reiterating the contemplative process one may find in other Rawet's short stories. Walking along the city, Yehuda deals with the possibilities of the writing, with the images that he can reconstruct, he observes the notes that he did on the story to be narrated: to "try to transmit all the confused feelings, the contradictory ideas, diffuse, the inarticulate expression, the impossibility of verbalization, the unconsciousness of certain problems..."<sup>3</sup> (TPQ 131)<sup>4</sup>. Finally, Yehuda feels that he can and he has to tell the story of Tião, when realizing that he himself was Tião.

So, inside the story there is another story – "Reinvention of Lazarus" - whose structure the reader is going to apprehend through the creative process engendered by writer Yehuda. The plot involves some men that transport a marble block to a warehouse where illustrations are carved on the blocks that will adorn graves in the São João

<sup>2</sup> Available in [http://www.brown.edu/Faculty/Faculty\\_Governance/facbulletin/98FacBulHtml/vieira.html](http://www.brown.edu/Faculty/Faculty_Governance/facbulletin/98FacBulHtml/vieira.html). Read on Jun 10th, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> When I use citations, all translations from Portuguese are mine.

<sup>4</sup> Rawet, Samuel. *O Terreno de uma Polegada Quadrada*. Rio de Janeiro: Orfeu, 1969. From here on referred as TPQ.

Batista cemetery, in Rio de Janeiro. Tião, a truck assistant, black, tall and muscular, tired by the effort of the handling the blocks meditates; he tries to understand the atmosphere where he is, feeling himself out of place, half dumb. Two men sculpt marble blocks, each one working with a part of an angel's anatomy. Remembering the infantile past, when he made mud puppets, Tião notices that the work in marble is the real work, it is the work that supplants life, that it wins over the ephemerality. But the perfect statues in their beauty would be to a cemetery - something absurd, although perennial, that remained, that stayed. His work, Tião, was tiny: “What will remain of him”? (TPQ 138).

Tião is losing his strength little by little, trembling, dizzy, and he keeps thinking about himself and others like him, all marginalized. He even comes to think about the rich, but “rich were rich because they were rich and that was the end of it” (TPQ 136). Tião thinks about the uselessness or the absurdity of the mortuary decoration, in shuffled words - all the perfection of the angel with the tender face, the mantle, the wings, but “all that done by a man who dies, for other, that already died” (TPQ 139). The social criticism is made evident in the story, bitterly balancing things in the hour of the death of each one. One has to take into account Michel de Certeau's reasoning in his “Walking in the city” (1984)<sup>5</sup>: “things that amount to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize and orient walkers steps”.

## V. RICARDO RAMOS: CLINGING TO ONE'S PAST

Son of Graciliano Ramos, known as the writer of *Vidas Secas* (*Barren lives*), Ricardo Ramos, from Alagoas (1929), is a short story writer winner of literary prizes by the Brazilian Academy of Letters and the Brazilian Chamber of the Book. In *Circuito Fechado* (*Closed Circuit*, 1972)<sup>6</sup>, perhaps his best known work, Ramos comes to ponder about the urban personal micro-relationships, vulgarized by the anonymity and by the ignorance. This become evident already in the dedication of the book: “remembering Geraldo Santos, that sought the city”. In other words, the city is the great reason of the thirty stories of the book, but Ramos ends up also evidencing the need to seek her, for it is unknown.

More than looking for the *pathos* - in other words, the emotion capable to express to the others what one is, the men portrayed by Ricardo Ramos, take refuge in the absence of sense of the reality. They look in themselves for the *logos* - the rational ordeal of their existence. In this sense, the word becomes essential for this understanding and/or deconstruction of the meaning of life. Ricardo's Ramos stories pluralize the being, a possibility risen from the urban conglomerate, multifaced, oblique, unrecognizable

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<sup>5</sup> De Certeau, Michel. “Walking in the city”. In: Doring, Simon. *The cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Ramos, Ricardo. *Circuito Fechado*. 2ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 1978. From here on referred as *CF*.

while unit, but at the same time they want to unify the different forms of being, plotted by the anguish, by the melancholy, by the exasperated solitude.

The fortuity of being modern, incongruous, mixes itself with a desperate search of sense, a lot of times only accountable for the incoherence. Ricardo Ramos, in his stories, particularly in the five short-story sequence “Circuito Fechado”, stipulates the silence as the mold and the form of explanation of the modern and urban I, desperate, afflicted, destituted, amorphous, giving other meaning to the introspection of man. The individuality rarely appears in Ramos' stories, the characters pretend to be simple coadjutor or so small that does not deserve to have name or his names are of little significance – the only remaining for them is, however, the conscience of themselves.

In the rural environment, as in Guimarães Rosa, the concern was with the metaphysics; in the urban environment, as in Ricardo Ramos, the man is the prospector of his function and of his identity, lost not any more in the tragedy of the fundamental mistakes - unhappy by human mistake, but in the logic of the incomprehension of himself - unhappy by mistake of being. In “A Espera” (“The Wait”), the main character deals with his insomnia. The traditional dilemma field-city permeates the story - the afflicted character tries to build his meaning of life through the metaphor of the road or of the highway. But this construction is more a denial than any other thing: he “looks and he doesn't see”, he didn't “find anybody”, “the others don't notice him or they pretend not to”, they didn't “believe” (CF 18). The highway makes the balance between want and being: the highway that passes on his left side, at first deserted and gray, full of stones that seem to have fallen from the sky, later sided by orange groves, banana trees, the domestic fruits, later melting in blue, arising, disappearing ” (CF 18). The contact with the distant world, with colors, causes laughter to others, but that moment gives to the character another perception: “when remembering and talking, his voice became clearer, and tuned as it was modulated in crystal” (CF 18).

Urban life is filled of roofs and automobiles, but result of an agony, worsened at night: “the sounds increase volume. And the isolation is made larger” (CF 19). The rural night is that of the mystery of the unprotection in face of the unknown natural world - in fact, it is interesting that in the transplantation of the imaginary European, the notion of the mysterious forest remained but the marine world before so frightening was tamed. The urban night is blended with the misfortune and the solitude, perhaps for the absences or for the amplification of safety's sense given by the urbanity. Hope remains: “from the top of the his window, the man doesn't see the asphalt, the buildings, the roofs. He thinks about the green and in the lights, what will come. In spite of being lonely, quiet, he is alive” (CF 20).

The life at night seems to be of great concern for Ramos - in “Asa Branca” (“White Wing”), the storyteller revisits the theme of silence and solitude. The main character is the cab driver Severino, who listens to the radio and rationalizes his world. The announcer's voice on the speaker is his companion in the tiring wait, a time when the city is silenced, dozing, in a foggy drizzling moment.

Severino feels separated, alone, “the music makes him notice his past: “echoes from a fair, of songs, the xenhenhe”; the song makes him remember the migratory bird, the feeling of the retreat, the sadness of having to leave. The taste of the song is familiar, as if the character returned to the past and lived it again. Severino recovers the memory of his being, but now he is in the city, lonely, solitary, foreigner: “there, as a lost one, forgotten even by the streets, stopped without having where to go”. The end of the story is melancholic announcement of the discovery of being foreign in the city: “and he drove his car on the asphalt, nhá, holing the fog, white wing cutting, white, on the big night of winter” (CF 43), as he were the white bird.

The short-story “Modelo 19” (“Model 19”) is founded in old legislation for aliens in Brazil - the article 135 of the Ordinance 3.010 of August 20, 1938, that instituted the identity card for aliens, ever since known as “model 19”. The narrator presents his history as alien in São Paulo - he is northern, gaucho, from Minas Gerais, but he says he is a paulista no matter what. Irineu de Paula e Silva is from Bahia (Irineu, seemingly of Conceição of Coité), but also gaúcho (from the town of Paula, near Caxias in Rio Grande do Sul), and also mineiro, quiet and belonging to the conservative Partido Social Democrata (PSD, which existed from 1945 to 1964). Each one of them arrives in São Paulo by a road - Santos, Bus station, Estação Roosevelt. His multitude is unified, looking for an identity: “I know what I am, not so much what I were, in spite of not having forgotten that” (CF 64). The city becomes the catalyst of this coalition: a smoky, rosy and arlechinal belt; eighteen lines with just a final point, amalgam of the city, showing the confluence of multiple attitudes. When entering in contact with this haste, the character states: “the idea that was us in those days, lived in traffic, it is the one of an accelerated mixture. Glance with some pleasure, with some fright” (CF 64). The time becomes diffuse, marked in each one by an attitude, noticed by the transport stations, adopting and being adopted. The city becomes the great mirror builder of the identity: “With the age, I soured a little, more bitter. It is possible that you see a lot in the city her hard and dry, and cold profile. But I can say of me that I am from here. And I also see where she came from, to where she is ballasting herself in this crossroads. So at end of my world. The truth is that one day, it was night, I realized I was going back home” (CF 64).

## VI. THE CITY AND THE DEVoured MAN

The urban man portrayed by Ramos and Rawet has a conflicting existence, because it is solitary or isolated or lonely. In the absurdity of the metropolitan life, one experiences the absence of family ties or those of neighborhood, and we must again remind Michel de Certeau’s comments on the arts of doing, in his *Practice of Everyday Life*; those ties or practices are very peculiar, and they were part of life in rural areas or small towns or villages. The urban man's psychological construction is thus shown as anguished for his lack of identity lack or connection with his peers. The solitude, the sameness, the tastelessness become the starting point for the dream and the fantasy, in a longing

almost determinist construct of happiness. The urban man needs to digest his flaw, understanding that this frustration is always caustic and harmful to him.

The city is not seen or noticed as pleasant instant of future construction. Both writers tried to evidence the immigrant's illustration, Northeasterner or Jewish, but always a little city dweller, with immense memoirs, callous for the need of adapting. Solitary, he doesn't understand his sense in the city, always trying to embody his past as form of being in the multitude of the urban things. This search leaves him afflicted, lost, imaginative, but perhaps this is the only form of living together with the *logos*, that is, with the necessary ordination of things. This urban man loses the meaning of life in reality, but he finds the pleasure of the dream, perhaps his only closed circuit that is worth some thing.