

AGAINST ALL THE ODDS: GENDER AND CLASS IN GRACILIANO RAMOS'S SÃO BERNARDO

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze *São Bernardo* (1934) by Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos in light of Feminism and Gender Studies, particularly in regards to intersections between the categories of gender and class. By focusing on Graciliano's depiction of the female characters, this reading showcases a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of systems of oppression, in dialogue with other commentators of Brazilian Literature, such as Antonio Candido, Otto Maria Carpeaux, and Luiz Lafetá. Works by Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Silvia Federici, and other Feminist and Post-colonial scholars will constitute this text's theoretical apparatus.

Keywords: Graciliano Ramos. *São Bernardo*. Gender. Class. Feminism.

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What is certain is that, as far as literature is concerned, I'm well versed in statistics, livestock, agriculture, bookkeeping, and useless knowledge of this kind [...]. I don't deal with love, you may have noticed, and it's always seemed to me that women are strange animals, difficult to govern (Ramos, 2009, position 94, my translation).

But there's nothing in the world more selfishly hard than a timorous man in a fright about his "little estate" [...]. A heart permeated by a particular sort of funk is proof against sense, feeling, and ridicule. It's a flint (Conrad, 1920, p. 292).

INTRODUCTION: ON CHECKS AND BALANCES

In a Brazil historically marked by difference and inequality, *São Bernardo* (1934) – a work of Brazilian modernism from the 1930s – functions simultaneously as a historical document and as a witness to the profound social and political transformations of its time. The country was undergoing significant shifts, including the Revolution of 1930, the Vargas era, and the rapid modernization of both agriculture and urban life. As such, the novel forms part of a complex mechanism that, like many other classics, continues to shape and inform the present beyond its own temporal boundaries. It is unsurprising that the majority of critical discourse surrounding the work has focused on the construction of its character-narrator and, to a certain extent, on readings that – despite their Marxist inflections – remain aligned with the characteristics of a localized hegemonic masculinity, a topic extensively examined in feminist and gender studies for decades.

This study seeks to revisit the novel through the lens of contemporary theoretical contributions from these fields, highlighting moments in Ramos's narrative that reveal a nuanced understanding of the intertwined dynamics of class and gender. These analytical categories, informed by an awareness of their constitutive imbrications, allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the subjectivities present in the work. Drawing on the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2019a), alongside key contributions from feminist theorists such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Silvia Federici (2012), I argue that it becomes possible to reread the novel's social critique by examining how Ramos constructs two female characters – Velha Margarida (Old Margarida), an elderly Black woman, and Madalena, a public-school teacher and future wife of the landowner – through the perspective of his deeply biased narrator, Paulo Honório. Before advancing my argument, however, it is necessary to revisit some of the major scholarly voices on the author, which illuminate the critical trajectory that has shaped the reception of this text.

THE ENGINES OF THE CAPITAL: LAFETÁ, CARPEAUX, CANDIDO

In his renowned afterword, "*O mundo à revelia*" (The World at Odds), João Luiz Lafetá underscores the objectivity of Graciliano's writing, which – through

the voice of his protagonist-narrator Paulo Honório¹ – appears to eschew subjectivity, particularly with regard to the aesthetic use of language. Echoing Graciliano's own reflections, author and character converge when he states that "the word was not made to adorn, to shine like fake gold"². The word was created for the purpose of expression. This calculating nature, as identified in the character-narrator (as suggested by the initial epigraph of this article), and the objectivity with which he acts, also shaped the critical reception of *Vidas Secas* (1938), often considered Graciliano's most emblematic novel³. In that work's portrayal of hardship, violence, and scarcity in the Brazilian Northeast, the author claimed to have reached a style marked by extreme deprivation, including the deprivation of love. Carpeaux later echoed this assessment, asserting that Graciliano's lyricism, difficult to classify, was "rather unusual".

Graciliano Ramos' lyricism is characterized by a lack of musicality, dynamism, and movement, as well as a sober and classic sensibility. [...] Rather than seeking to provoke or agitate, he aims to offer a sense of stability and order. He eliminates everything that does not contribute to the creation of his works as a sculptor does, reducing it to ridicule in order to make way for his monuments (Carpeaux, 1999, p. 443, my translation).

In this world of strangeness and minimal room for sentimentality, Paulo Honório asserts that the mere listing of facts – regardless of rigor – is sufficient for his narrative purposes. This hierarchy, grounded in the narrator's claim to discern what is truly significant, signals an initial indication of bias. Indeed, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes his fixation on numerical data. Candido's psychological analysis highlights Honório's "search for the best deal" as a defining feature, suggesting that his constitution is shaped not only by his actions, but also by his way of thinking and being in the world (Candido, 2012). From the outset, the novel presents itself as a process of apprenticeship, or even as a kind of formation, for this self-made man from the Brazilian backlands.

In time, the Brazilian backlands emerge as one of the most powerful and enduring symbols in 20th-century Brazilian literature, functioning as both a geographic space and a cultural metaphor through which writers explored the nation's deepest social, political, and existential tensions. From Euclides da Cunha to Graciliano Ramos, João Guimarães Rosa, and Rachel de Queiroz, the *sertão* became a laboratory for examining inequality, drought, migration, violence, and the resilience of marginalized communities. Far from being a mere backdrop, the backlands shaped narrative form, language, and philosophical inquiry, offering a counterpoint to urban modernity and forcing Brazilian literature to confront the complexities of its own identity, including its constitutive gender politics.

In his own analytical endeavor about Ramos' work, Lafetá (1986) also identifies a metafictional resource that functions as a narrative frame for the novel, guiding the reader through two distinct dimensions that gradually accumulate

1 Throughout this text, I will use both the character's full name and the abbreviation P.H.

2 Quote taken from the back cover of *Para Amar Graciliano: como descobrir e apreciar os aspectos mais inovadores de sua obra*. Barueri: Faro Editorial, 2017.

3 See Otto Maria Carpeaux (1999); Antonio Candido (2012); Luís Bueno (2015).

layers of meaning. Consequently, it becomes necessary to distinguish between the authorial voice – Graciliano’s – and the voice of Paulo Honório, a narrator who undergoes transformations as he watches himself become text. However, as he does not consider himself to be well versed in writing, P. H. enlists a small group of collaborators whom he believes ideal for such an undertaking.

The result is a collective voice that presents his journey in a way that is both comprehensive and nuanced. The reader is presented with a list of names, each accompanied by a description of the individual’s role in the local social fabric. This roster serves to justify their presumed contribution to the narrative: a member of the clergy involved in the political revolutions of the period; a representative of an archaic and declining elite; a figure from the judiciary; and finally, a journalist whose role appears to be that of an allegedly neutral instrument in the narrator’s service. When these assistants fail to meet his expectations – though he does not disclose the reasons – Paulo Honório expresses dismay and acknowledges a first failure. The presumption of his authority over these social actors, coupled with his frustration at their refusal to obey, simultaneously characterizes him as a brute authoritarian landowner and foreshadows the downfall that unfolds throughout the novel.

Ultimately, he resorts to a single collaborator: a local journalist, inherently subservient to the dominant power structure. This reliance yields two wasted chapters, which Paulo Honório deems implausible and excessively verbose. Once again, the text reveals itself through its gaps – cracks in its foundation. Graciliano, through Paulo Honório, formulates a compelling reflection on the nature of language. On one hand, the narrator displays a marked resistance to stylistic and poetic techniques. On the other, the journalist – frequently the target of satire – recognizes that literary works cannot be constructed with the language of “real life.” The divide has already been established. The remaining task is to identify a solution that will resolve all the issues at hand.

Two lost chapters, declares the narrator. Nevertheless, by then, in this act of self-revelation and admission, the author’s stylistic choices are not only highly effective, but also align with the values espoused by the protagonist and with the stylistic conventions of Graciliano’s prose, particularly in the eyes of prominent figures in the Brazilian literary criticism: Carpeaux (1999), Candido (2012), Lafetá (1986). Critical readings consistently highlight the author’s ability to combine Paulo Honório’s pragmatism with an equally objective representation of the world depicted in the novel. The reader is granted immediate access to a plethora of characters who are pivotal to the plot, their respective positions within the narrator’s universe, and even the value judgments he ascribes to each one of them. The novel progresses by employing a reverse chronological structure, utilizing missteps and shortcomings to delineate the trajectory of a journey that the reader has already initiated, albeit unknowingly.

Still, the confessional tone of this introduction and the apparent frankness with which Paulo Honório acknowledges failure should prompt scrutiny over the narrator’s credibility. Marques (2017) notes that this same presentation is susceptible to diametrically opposed readings: it may highlight the resilience and dynamism of an oligarch, but it also exposes his loss of power and diminishing authority. The ambivalence inherent in a first-person narrator-character is, according to Marques, a deliberate strategy. As he observes:

[...] when the narrator is also a character, he can and must be interpreted with distance by the reader. This reading, against the grain, is provided by the novelist – the so-called implied author – an external conscience that is not to be confused with the narrating voice, the writer “inside” the novel (Marques, 2017, p. 55, my translation).

Such an observation helps explain the richness of the novel’s opening chapters, which reveal new aspects of the writer-character with each reading. Paulo Honório evolves from character-narrator to what might be called a “character-writer,” or at least one aspiring to become so. Critics such as Candido’s (2012) and Lafetá’s (1986) – deeply influenced by historical materialism – identify in the novel a persistent focus on capital, surplus value, and, above all, the narrator’s sense of possession and ownership as the forces driving the narrative. These forces shape the plot and imbue the protagonist’s journey with meaning. Candido (2012), in particular, highlights the journey itself as a central element in Graciliano’s oeuvre, allowing the author to reveal the full potential of his writing across rural estates, urban centers, and the backlands alike.

Alongside critical attention to the narrator and his instrumental, technocratic worldview – governed by the exchange value of all things – another figure emerges as decisive in the collapse of Paulo Honório’s subjectivity: Madalena. For Candido (2012), Madalena introduces an element incompatible with the narrative logic of domination. She embodies a form of kindness absent from Paulo Honório’s life, challenging the rigid objectivity that structures his existence. Candido suggests that her “humanitarian goodness represents a challenge to the established hierarchy of property and the moral armor that sustains it” (Candido, 2012, p. 36, my translation). Madalena’s humanity can be considered allegorical, prompting the hero’s *modus operandi* to elicit a reaction from the protagonist that is “against the dissolution of his hardness” (Candido, 2012, p. 36, my translation).

Lafetá’s reading, which does not contradict Candido’s, indicates that Madalena’s entrance into the narrative coincides with a shift in P. H.’s way of developing his own experience. It is no longer limited to observation or objective description. To illustrate, the critic highlights the use of diminutives, which are indicative of a certain affection. Nevertheless, in order to do justice to P. H. and his era, his expectations (physical and psychological) for the ideal woman correspond to common sense stereotypes. In this analysis, Lafetá makes a direct association between P. H.’s journey and the process of reification, which occurs “when the strictly economic aspect of a form of production infiltrates man’s awareness of the world, conditioning his way of seeing, thus, constituting his personality” (Lafetá, 1986, p. 207, my translation).

Madalena’s resistance to alienation results in an impasse, producing a rupture in the capitalist logic that, for the narrator, should govern not only his agricultural enterprise but all aspects of social life. If, from a Marxist perspective, the category of class structures the world – and if its reconfiguration would necessarily transform life – it seems equally reasonable to extend this analytical weight to the category of gender. Gender, too, shapes subjectivity, behavior, and the narrative itself. A world devoid of a class system would differ profoundly; likewise, the development of characters according to (or in opposition to) the expectations tied to their gender identities reshapes the narrative field. Such phenomenon can be further illuminated by the contributions of a feminist lens

as well as the notion of intersectionality, which the next section of this paper shall address.

ACCOUNTING FOR CARE: HILL COLLINS, LORDE, FEDERICI

Given the aforementioned overview of classic readings of *São Bernardo* (1934), which have given fruitful grounds to understand the roots of constitutive dilemmas in Brazil's social fabric, a closer and more precise examination of how Graciliano uses Paulo Honório's voice to characterize not only Madalena but also the novel's other female figures are warranted. In the following pages, an analysis of the novel intertwines gender and class, as already explored by Black and racialized feminists (Anzaldúa, 2000; Davis, 1983; Hill Collins, 2019b; Lorde, 2019) as well as post-colonial intellectuals (Brah, 1996; McClintock, 1995), aiming at exploring how these contributions be added to the existing body of bibliography on Ramos' oeuvre, which has been the subject of analysis since the early years after its first publication.

As Brazilian scholars looked into Ramos' work in relation to notions of class and labor, the very origin of the term "intersectionality" is already apropos, because it was first used by Afro-American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in a reading of labor laws and jurisprudence in the context of the U.S. In her article "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex" (Crenshaw, 1989), the scholar shows that courts frequently treat discrimination as occurring along a single axis – either racial or gendered – so that when Black women experience harms that are simultaneously racial and gendered, the law often fails to recognize this as a distinct form of injury. Their experiences are rendered invisible, since legal and political frameworks are designed around the experiences of white women or Black men. The author further contends that this blindness to intersectionality reproduces structural inequality: by refusing to acknowledge how different forms of subordination intersect, social justice movements and legal systems exclude those most disadvantaged. She calls for a reconceptualization of both theory and policy that centers the complex, overlapping identities of those at the margins.

Expanding on this notion into an even broader idea of the social effects of intersectionality, Hill Collins (2019a) argues for guiding premises that distinguish intersectional approaches within the scope of a "Critical Social Theory". According to the author,

(1) Race, class, gender, and similar systems of power are interdependent and mutually construct one another. (2) Intersecting power relations produce complex, interdependent social inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, and age. (3) The social location of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations shapes their experiences within and perspectives on the social world. (4) Solving social problems within a given local, regional, national, or global context requires intersectional analyses (Hill Collins, 2019a, p. 103).

Intersectional readings thus foreground Black womanhood and Black female subjectivities at the center of critical inquiry, since these positions often reveal how multiple systems of oppression converge to structure experience and access to social recognition. It is thus, extremely valuable that, in *São Bernardo*, the first female character to have an impact on the narrator's life story is "Velha

Margarida”, an elderly black woman whose role is to fill in the significant gap in the protagonist’s formative years. In his brief introduction to the account, we know nothing about P. H. The protagonist’s parents are completely absent from the narrative, as are the circumstances of his birth.

The novel provides virtually no information about Paulo Honório’s parents or the circumstances of his birth; the sole testimony regarding his childhood is the guardianship of this marginalized figure – referred to as “mãe preta” or “mammy.” While this almost-mythical figure appears in Brazilian literature as part of a contested narrative of interracial harmony within an agrarian-patriarchal past (Roncador 2008), Graciliano’s textual treatment of Velha Margarida – her systematic omission from public recognition alongside her endurance – actually accentuates social asymmetries by foregrounding the force of race, class, and gender markers. Velha Margarida’s place in Paulo Honório’s biography reads as an incongruous paragraph in the life of a powerful landowner – at odds with the self-image he seeks to project. Her subject position, which fuses the invisibility associated with gendered reproductive labor and the erasure imposed by racial hierarchies, must be contained, rewritten, and reframed so that Paulo Honório can sustain an image of self-assertion, success, and the utopian promise of the self-made man in the Global South. Once Paulo Honório achieves financial and political relevance, Velha Margarida is confined to the humblest quarters on his estate, living under the surveillance and control of the “once-son-now-master” figure, with only the bare material means for subsistence⁴.

From the dialogues with Velha Margarida, the narrator offers little beyond the perception of conformist passivity and a life marked by the tragic misery of the Alagoas countryside. Yet within Paulo Honório’s evaluative framework, the provision of minimum sustenance can be read not only as charity or reparation but also as an act that satisfies his own accounting of kindness – justifiable insofar as it can be documented in his ledgers. In the opening chapters, he even itemizes the weekly cost of maintaining the woman who had served as his maternal figure. When he recalls their reunion after years apart, at least three textual clues reveal the narrator’s ambivalence: the use of diminutives (suggesting a modicum of affection), “-inho”, “-inha” in Brazilian Portuguese (Ramos, 2009, p. 636); his rare admission of a feeling that “squeezed my heart” (Ramos, 2009, p. 636, my translation); and his reticent response to Velha Margarida’s sole material request.

Having survived by selling sweetmeats, Velha Margarida asks only for a new cooking pot. Paulo Honório grants the request but immediately rationalizes it as unnecessary, noting that at her advanced age she could not make profitable use of the utensil. The episode thus stages an uneasy negotiation between affect and the calculus of capital: the narrator attempts to reconcile a sentimental impulse with the relentless logic of economic utility – a project that the novel ultimately reveals to be failed. Velha Margarida does not function as a subject of History in the novel; she is projected as atavistic, primal, timeless, and objectified while

4 The role of “Black mothers” [*Mães Pretas*] acquires centrality in a number of intellectual works in Brazil, mostly followed by the contributions of Lélia Gonzalez, in her essay “Racism and Sexism in Brazilian Culture”, translated into English in 2021 by Maria Júlia Venâncio, Mateus Mendonça, and Gustavo Segat. Motivated by a psychoanalytical apparatus, Gonzalez’s work focuses on the potentialities that such position to which many enslaved women and black women slavery in Brazil entails. In this case, I believe Graciliano once again relies on the narrator’s way of decoding the world, in a presumed ‘whiteness’ or at least socialized as such in the national context, leaving very little room for Velha Margarida’s point of view to be developed in the narrative.

Paulo Honório retains control over language and discourse. His male, heterosexual identity presents itself as the emblem of progress and modernity, secured by his economic achievements. Therefore, Velha Margarida must be managed to preserve the legibility of the landowner's successful trajectory. Yet, the intersectional exercise of scrutinizing her persistent invisibility exposes the limits of the hypermasculine Latin American persona embodied by Paulo Honório: when he fails to embody a presumed neutrality or universality of discourse afforded to men of his standing, Velha Margarida becomes the first constitutive element to reveal cracks in the text. Even when numbers and accounts briefly lose their prominence and the pot becomes a symbolic extravagance, the arithmetic of ledgers continues to structure P. H.'s cognition. Velha Margarida's ambivalent status – both bond and asset – complicates the linear textuality asserted by the protagonist-narrator.

Similarly, Paulo Honório's desire to get married first appears in the novel as a practical measure designed to ensure the continuity of a bloodline and the production of an heir. For P. H., the ideal woman has little intrinsic subjectivity; her desires and idiosyncrasies count for nothing. As he admits,

I tried to fantasize about a tall, healthy creature in her thirties with black hair, but I stopped there. I'm incapable of imagination and the good things I mentioned came out as highlights, never coming together to form a complete being (Ramos, 2009, p. 657, my translation).

In a quasi-Frankensteinian assemblage – where disparate traits are patched together to produce a desirable object – P. H. seeks an efficient, functional partner. Time, like in commercial practice, is money. He then evaluates potential brides according to their expected returns and social advantages. Nevertheless, his impressions of each of them appear to be primarily characterized by indifference and uselessness. As a cattle farmer in search of a new bull, he assesses his potential financial returns:

I saw Mendonça, Gama, Gondim's sister (I didn't even know what Gondim's name was) and Dona Marcela, Dr. Magalhães' daughter. Dona Marcela was a blast. Her eyes! The bad thing about her was that she used a lot of paint on her face and a lot of ss in her conversations. Be patient (Ramos, 2009, p. 693, my translation).

His chosen one, until that moment, would be a suitable mate that would facilitate a fruitful union. Though he concedes some appreciation for physical attributes, Dona Marcela's status as the judge's daughter renders her a strategically valuable match. P. H.'s disdain for certain feminine display – excessive make-up, affected speech – serves as data for psychological analysis but does not translate into a sustained interest in their interiority. The woman's role is thus primarily contractual, consistent with realist predecessors (Flaubert, Queirós, Alencar) in which female transgressions are punished while male complicity often goes unpunished (Funck 1998)⁵.

⁵ There is a vast feminist critical literature around the phenomenon, both in readings of 19th century novels and on parodic appropriations published by contemporary novelists. *Bovarisism and the Novel: Madame Bovary and Lady Oracle* (2000), by Andrea Saad Hossne and Sandra Margarida Nitri is an example of this type of criticism in the context of the Brazilian scientific production.

It can be argued that, although Madalena's tragic fate is ultimately determined in the narrative, the narrator himself pays a high cost: he must confront the consequences of his own actions, convictions, and growing paranoia. Given the first-person perspective (augmented by the insertion of a "writer" figure), it is important to examine how the character processes surrounding events and reports them. This requires attention to the narrator's linguistic register (objective, numerical), his modes of argumentation (practical, statistical), and his rhetorical strategies (instrumental and purposeful) – as well as to the limits of his capacity to embody those very strategies.

Madalena's emergence in the plot thus represents a pivotal moment and a shift in the trajectory of the narrative. At first, P.H. had overheard a discussion between several local men regarding the teacher, which started with an emphasis on the young woman's physical attributes, particularly her "legs and breasts". It is noteworthy that the narrator characterizes the moment when João Nogueira indicates that she is "educated" as a way of "deepening" the discussion, suggesting a level of formal education that was previously deemed unnecessary for the farmer. In contrast, Gondim employs the pejorative term "sissy". Padilha reiterates Madalena's physical features. At this stage, for the narrator she appears "off the books," lacking a practical function in his instrumental project.

In their second encounter, at the judge's house, P.H. experiences a marked shift: diminutives reappear and Madalena presents as the inverse of the fragmented ideal he had imagined – blonde rather than brunette, fragile rather than robust, mysterious rather than legible. The narrator becomes infatuated; in keeping with Graciliano's style, he struggles to recognize the reality of his circumstance, instead narrativizing his desire to possess her, describing her as "a strange animal to govern", as noted in the epigraph for this text.

In the context of these changes in the protagonist's psychological development, which include marriage and the relocation of Madalena and her aunt to São Bernardo, jealousy pervades Paulo Honório's thoughts. The narrative becomes saturated with paranoid and intrusive thoughts: every action of the young woman invites irrational suspicion. P. H. ceases to be an objective chronicler and loses the reins over his own life. The text increasingly registers speculation, imagination, and the dread of being deceived or having made a bad bargain. He interprets ordinary domestic expenditures – new school materials, the maintenance of an incapacitated employee, additional provision for Velha Margarida – as evidence of unsustainable, even abusive, spending. Productivity on the ranch declines, and P. H. attributes the failures to a single cause: his wife's interference and her refusal to be defined solely by numbers and labor.

Nevertheless, Graciliano imbues Madalena with a more nuanced characterization, transcending the conventional portrayal of an ideal of domesticity (Moyano, 2010) or a mere decorative and protocolary element emulating bourgeois life in the rural areas of the Brazilian backlands during that period. While the narrator supplies scant biographical data about her family, his observations indicate she is not from privilege; she has an education and became a teacher. From the moment P. H. begins to see her as "the bride" he must secure, an instructive figure – Dona Glória, Madalena's aunt – enters the scene. The narrator's descriptions of Dona Glória are hostile and often misogynistic; she is presented as the archetypal spinster, a figure extensively critiqued by feminist scholars (Maia, 2011; King, 2005; Oram, 1992). An avid reader of *Eça de Queirós*, Graciliano

seems to have constructed, in some way, his own Dona Juliana (from *Os Maias*, 1888), a secondary and antagonistic character who always presents an obstacle in the protagonist's path. In Graciliano's novel, the narrator repeats adjectives such as "old woman", highlights her "pointed knees", and notes her consistent attire in full black. At one point, P. H. even remarks with contempt that the lady has "an insignificant smile and poor manners".

The most demeaning episode occurs during a visit to Viçosa, where Paulo Honório registers his offense that Dona Glória "was unaware of São Bernardo" (Ramos, 2009, position 874, my translation), revealing his territorial attachment and the cultural distance he perceives between rural and urban life. He reads her leisure – "she slept, had lunch, dinner, supper, read novels under the shade of orange trees [...]" (Ramos 2009, position 1325, my translation) – as idleness, thus converting forms of survival, labor, and cultural knowledge into evidence of unproductivity. Therefore, the lady does not fit into any equation, and throughout the narrative, she is depicted as a burden that the landowner is forced to accept in the name of his union with Madalena. This is an uncomfortable and irrevocable clause of the commercial transaction disguised as their marriage bond. Consequently, Dona Glória represents a financial obligation that Paulo Honório has consented to assume.

The act of reading is positioned as an activity with expletive value, thereby establishing the irony that Graciliano sets out to construct. By composing his own narrative (and assuming a reading public), Paulo Honório denounces the actions of the character, whom he describes as perpetually "reading in the corners" of the rural estate. The narrator finds himself in a quandary: either he is betraying his own values by committing himself to writing, or he has undergone a subjective shift that has driven him to narration, thus re-signifying his value and consequently his judgment of the lady-reader.

Beyond the simple oppositions of country/city or nature/culture, a conversation between Madalena and P. H. reveals her acuity and a form of knowledge that unsettles his dogmas. After becoming exasperated by Dona Glória's unwarranted presence in his office, which jeopardized the productivity of the workday, the landowner voiced his disapproval, denouncing a purported reluctance to work and a proclivity to "live with her hands shaking, reading nonsense" (Ramos, 2009, position 1363, my translation). Madalena, for her part, engages in a direct challenge of her interlocutor's standpoint:

But believe me, Dona Glória has been more active than you. [...] We lived in a very small house, said Madalena. There were two chairs. If a visitor came, Dona Glória would sit on a kerosene tin. The dining room was my study. The table had a broken leg and leaned against the wall. I worked there for many years. In the evenings, I would turn down the lamp to save money [...]. It was Dona Glória who didn't get sick, "continued Madalena. I'd go off to school and she'd put on her shawl and dig into life. She had many professions. She knew priests and made flower arrangements, put baptism records in alphabetical order, decorated altars. She knew judges and copied court rulings. At night she sold tickets at the Floriano. And since the baker next to us was illiterate, she did his bookkeeping in a notebook on the counter (Ramos, 2009, positions 1377, 1384, 1392, my translation).

It is important to note that the considerations presented in this text, as well as all the interactions and dialogues present in the novel, are the result of a

process of recollection by a writer-character who, from the very first pages, is selectively foregrounding the events at his will. In a comparison between Graciliano and Eça de Queirós, Candido (2012) reminds us that, in this first-person narrative, “scenes and characters form a constellation closely dependent on the narrator”. Madalena’s interventions therefore grant insight into Paulo Honório’s dominant worldview: she speaks the narrator’s language, listing roles, chores, and sacrifices in ways that mirror how he enumerates his own achievements – ultimately the acquisition of São Bernardo.

Where the narrator omits or silences the more obscure and violent means by which he attains his ends, another consciousness introduces the burden of gender into the engines of capital. Madalena recognizes reproductive and informal labor as essential facets of social production. She points to the considerable workload that structures the daily lives of women in her class (Davis, 1983; Federici, 2019). Yet her central argument remains lodged in the public sphere – the realm of transactions and negotiations that P. H. can apprehend and incorporate into his ledger. She thus stages a comparison often emphasized by critics: the invisible labor of the female caregiver who provides sustenance and education for her niece versus Paulo Honório’s pursuit of the estate. This valuation challenges her husband’s actions and represents an opposing perspective. “There is no comparison”, asserts Paulo Honório. In this regard, both parties appear to concur, despite pursuing disparate lines of argumentation. The choice of life over property – a concept that Antônio Candido refers to as Madalena’s “humanitarian goodness” – is, in this way, a clearly contextualized and self-conscious political positioning informed by the intersections of class and gender. This lens allows for a radically different interpretation of the world, one that is not only constituted by the monetary value of labor but also incorporates gender as a crucial variable in the calculation of any surplus.

Reflecting on Dona Glória’s manifold activities and capacity to navigate urban life, the narrator doubles down on his prior account: “It’s clear that, dedicating herself to so many odd jobs, she was underpaid” (Ramos, 2009, p. 1396, my translation). Yet this justificatory move merely reiterates the material basis of his critique. Madalena’s rejoinder clarifies the point: “what she **cannot** do is dedicate herself to continuous work: she consumes herself in incomplete work. That’s why she’s so restless. Here there are no movie tickets, no court rulings, no baptismal records, no baker’s ledger” (Ramos, 2009, p. 1396, my translation, my emphasis).

This intervention prompts a few questions: What does the right to “dedicate oneself to continuous work” entail? To whom is this opportunity extended? What insights can be gained regarding the disparities in the world of labor, in daily life, and in the aspirations of men and women within that context? As Paulo Honório himself states, his various occupations were ultimately directed towards a singular objective: the accumulation of wealth. For Dona Glória, the objectives were always multiple in nature. Federici reminds us that, since Lenin, Gramsci, and Juliet Mitchell, domestic work has been systematically marginalized in political economy:

[...] capital has failed to penetrate our kitchens and bedrooms, producing the double consequence that we are imagined to remain in a precapitalist, feudal social form and that what occurs in private spaces is considered irrelevant to social change (Federici, 2012, p. 83).

Subsequently, the stability of life on the ranch rapidly deteriorates. On the one hand, there is P. H.'s preoccupation with ensuring the smooth functioning of his undertakings. On the other hand, there is the jealousy and insecurity that drive him to attribute responsibility for all his losses to his wife. This is evident in his tendency to confront her repeatedly and his difficulty in handling the silences that, for him, are even more unbearable. These silences provide an opportunity for a series of fabrications in which he will invariably emerge as the loser being deceived. Infidelity is a pervasive thought regarding every aspect of Madalena's life: in her relationships with P. H.'s friends, acquaintances, and even his employees. He begins to re-evaluate his choices, recognizing his inability to exert complete control over this other life, which, as a dutiful spouse, he should have been able to manage as one of his assets. Amid his paranoid delusions, he begins to question:

What was Madalena's religion? Perhaps none. I've never thought about it. [...] Materialist. I remembered hearing Costa Brito talk about historical materialism. What does historical materialism mean? [...] So I have a bit of religion, although I think it's partly dispensable in a man. But a woman without religion is horrible. Communist, materialist. What a nice marriage! [...] Women without religion are capable of anything. [...] Girls learn a lot at primary schools. I don't like know-it-all women. They're called intellectuals and they're awful. I've seen some who recite verses at the theater, give lectures and control their husbands or something (Ramos, 2009, p. 1607, 1614, 1636, 1642, my translation).

Church, State, School: it is notable that P. H.'s value judgments tend to align with the institutional framework that pervades the social fabric, particularly in the realms of religion, politics, and education. For him, as significant entities in favor of order, these institutions should ensure that certain limits and boundaries be properly demarcated and protected, in accordance with the normativity of compulsory heterosexuality, within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Paulo Honório is unable to tolerate any form of questioning of the "mythical norm", as defined by Audre Lorde (2000, p. 538). This refers to the notion that individuals who are subjected to oppression based on their gender, race, and class perceive a dominant and pervasive universality embodied in male, young, Caucasian, and heterosexual people (Lorde, 2019). Ramos creates a character whose final aim, symbolically and discursively, is to occupy a position he will never be fully awarded: that of the colonizing voice of metropolitan control over post-colonial territories.

However, the potential for subversion remains. In the absence of religion, Madalena's behavior becomes erratic and unpredictable, despite P. H.'s recognition, from a masculine perspective, that a belief system is not a prerequisite for human existence. The woman is soon transformed into a symbol of another threat, namely, the encroachment of socialist ideals upon the capitalist order. She epitomizes the spectral caricature of communism that persists as an unresolved issue within Brazil's landowning conservatism. With access to formal education, she begins to assert her autonomy and desire to govern her actions. Literacy, as P. H. notes, is "those complicated words that my ignorance avoids" (Ramos, 2009, p. 2067, my translation), becoming another potential threat. Its role becomes unclear in the context of the power dynamics at play, particularly when he reiterates that it did not facilitate Madalena's social ascension as a

teacher or offer any substantial financial benefits. In the absence of profit, there is no legibility. In the realm of the unknown, one encounters the murky and sandy territory of elucubration.

CONCLUSION: THE ACCOUNTS OF VELHA MARGARIDA, GLORIA, AND MADALENA

Throughout this analysis, this article has exposed tensions between a carefully crafted language of finances in a capitalistic view of life and politics, which classical readings of *São Bernardo* (1934) have argued, and the potential questions raised by the female characters in the novel via an understanding of their subjectivities in intersectional terms. Velha Margarida, Gloria, Madalena: Latin American women with distinctive identities tied by gender and distanced by markers such as race, class, and age.

Their presence in Ramos' story invites the reconfiguration of boundaries between imagination and fiction, resulting in the emergence of new layers of meaning that challenge the conventional notion of objective rationality, even if appropriating the language spoken by the narrator himself. Looking at these characters demands a degree of fabulation, as the narrative unfolds in an increasingly complex way, psychologically constructing an intriguing central character (Paulo Honório) who is, at times, lost in his own thoughts and limited in his own abilities to read his surroundings. Inadvertently, language becomes a significant obstacle for the protagonist. The fictionality that had little or no value, whether in the petty-bourgeois consumption of novels that Dona Gloria read or in Madalena's enigmatic readings, also serves as the substratum of the hero's downfall. As Candido notes, "the moment he becomes known through narrative, he destroys himself as a landowner" (Candido, 2012, p. 42, my translation).

Following Madalena's suicide, the empire's collapse resulted in a pervasive and anguishing need to materialize the story in text. Prose becomes Paulo Honório's chosen medium. Having relinquished his previous dedication to the productivity of his land, he now finds himself victimized, unable to move objectively, and falling into an inevitable subjective encounter with his own feelings. The narrative trajectory, indelibly marked by the moment of Madalena's demise, serves as a kind of formation, wherein the protagonist finds himself in a state of internal conflict. In this way, Lafetá identifies the emergence of Paulo Honório's subjectivity, manifested through the voice of enunciation and the intrusion of interior monologues. This represents the convergence of two distinct realms: that of objectivity and that of the "final and tragic encounter with solitude" (Lafetá, 1986, p. 217, my translation). Reification is the prevailing force, and the character is stripped of his absolute control. He is left with only one coherent purpose: to reconstruct his own trajectory in language. Paulo Honório is ultimately compelled to acknowledge the impossibility of altering the course of his narrative:

I think of Madalena all the time. If only we could start again... Why fool myself? If we could start again, exactly what happened would happen. [...] It's this way of life that has rendered me useless. I'm a cripple. I must have a small heart, gaps in my brain, nerves that are different from other men's nerves (Ramos, 2009, p. 2301, 2308, my translation).

Feminisms from the Global South and intersectional studies offer productive avenues for reading Ramos beyond class-centered analysis, without denying class's structural importance. In early twentieth-century Brazil, a poorly paid rural schoolteacher's ascent to the status of a landowner's wife culminates in an unbearable tragedy. Madalena's suicide must be recognized as a consequence of gendered violence and as a stark illustration of the broader problem of femicide. Yet in Ramos's narrative she does not disappear before confronting her tormentor and imparting a final lesson. Her death forces the landowner to re-evaluate his belief system – prompted, significantly, by inconsistencies exposed in the very logic of his bookkeeping.

À REVELIA DOS NÚMEROS: GÊNERO E CLASSE EM SÃO BERNARDO, DE GRACILIANO RAMOS

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar *São Bernardo* (1934), de Graciliano Ramos, à luz do feminismo e dos estudos de gênero, especialmente no que se refere às interseções entre as categorias de gênero e classe. Ao enfatizar a representação das personagens femininas feita pelo autor, a leitura evidencia uma compreensão refinada da interconexão entre sistemas de opressão, dialogando com críticos da literatura brasileira como Antonio Candido, Otto Maria Carpeaux e Luiz Lafetá. Obras de Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Silvia Federici e de outras teóricas feministas e pós-coloniais compõem o aparato teórico do trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Graciliano Ramos. São Bernardo. Gênero. Classe. Feminismo.

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