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# DEBASING A PILLAR OF BRAZILIAN LITERATURE: DIOGO MAINARDI'S *POLÍGONO DAS SECAS*

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Within the sphere of Brazilian culture, the public figure of Diogo Mainardi is quite polemic. Mainardi is best recognized in Brazil for his provocative, satirical column in the popular weekly societal magazine *Veja* and his participation in the weekly television talk show *Manhattan Connection*. It is from his irreverent column in *Veja* that Mainardi has achieved national recognition as a controversial critic who tends to offer biting commentary on contemporary issues. His column confronts Brazilian political figures, domestic and foreign politics, and a wide variety of contemporary issues in Brazilian society.<sup>1</sup> The significant time that he has spent outside of Brazil (including a formative overseas experience in the UK in early adulthood, as well as nearly a decade of shared residence between Brazil and Italy) provides him with a unique, almost literal, “foreigner in his own land” perspective on Brazilian society.

Mainardi's jocular sentiment when speaking about Brasil can easily be interpreted as unpatriotic, “Não gosto de nada do que tem no Brasil: o cheiro, a comida, a literatura—o jeito de tudo que é brasileiro me irrita” (“Carrossel de diversões” 115). Mainardi consciously foments and gains from the controversy surrounding his public image. Consequently, he has created a dynamic between himself and his readership that is symbiotic, if not parasitic. While Mainardi's public persona is well known for his brash, controversial voice in Brazil's culture wars, his work as a novelist is a body of fiction that has achieved some critical acclaim, yet remains largely, perhaps purposefully, ignored.<sup>2</sup> In reference to Mainardi's novels, many Brazilian critics take the attitude of “*não li, e não gostei*.” One could be tempted to link this impressive level of cynical disparagement and distaste of unread

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<sup>1</sup>Mainardi's relentless attacks on the widely popular administration of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), the hundreds of cases of litigation brought against Mainardi for defamation of character, and the eventual vindication he received upon the discovery of high-level corruption in Lula's PT party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), thrust him into the spotlight and put his name at the forefront of debate surrounding journalism and free speech in Brazil during the Lula years (2002-2010). Mainardi's public campaign of dissent is well documented in the collections of essays *A tapas e pontapés* (2004) and *Lula é minha anta* (2007).

<sup>2</sup>In spite of having won the prestigious Jabuti prize (1990) for his first novel *Malthus* (1989), Mainardi's subsequent novels have been overshadowed by his public persona. In addition to *Malthus*, Mainardi's other novels include *Arquipélago* (1991), *Polígono das Secas* (1995) and *Contra o Brasil* (1998).

works as a sign of achieving notoriety as an unabashed satirist. Although this interpretation does help to contextualize the author's public persona, reactions like these are also paradigmatic of the type of critical reception that can often prefigure reading iconoclastic works by young novelists willing to take antagonistic postures towards established literary canons. Mainardi's *Polígono das Secas* (1995), for example, is an aggressively reader-oriented, postmodern satire that challenges expectations regarding reading and writing about rural themes through the incorporation of elements of the grotesque and what could be considered a narrative manifestation of "daemonic parody."<sup>3</sup>

The audacious proposition put forth by the fictionalized author of *Polígono das Secas*, is an attempted demystification of the *sertanista* novel or novel of the *sertão* ("hinterland"), a vein of the regionalist novel that Mainardi's narrator often reduces to "*romance sertanejo*." Throughout the twentieth century, a debate developed among Brazilian intellectuals over the conceptualization of interior, underdeveloped regions denominated collectively, *sertões*. Many etymological interpretations of the term "sertão" date its first usage in Brazil to early Portuguese colonial expansion, in which the term was used to describe uncharted inland territories. Until the mid-twentieth century, the predominant usage of the term was in this general sense of "undeveloped lands." This usage exists moderately even today for describing the regional "sertões" found throughout Brazil's vast territory. However, in contemporary Brazil, the term *sertão* has experienced a relative resemanticization and, thus, today primarily connotes the semi-arid, drought-stricken, geographic sub-region that comprises a major portion of the rural interior lands of Northeast Brazil, as well as a portion of the Southwestern state of Minas Gerais. While dry and thorny vegetation (*caatinga*) envelops a major portion of this region, there are also isolated rain forest patches (*brejos*), tropical and sub-tropical forests (*mata*) and rocky outcrops (*lajeiros*). The highest areas or *agreste*, which are subject to less intense droughts, are located closer to the coast and generally serve as a natural barrier between the *sertão* and the *zona da mata* that lines the coast (*litoral*). The immensity and complexity of the *sertão* has seduced Brazilian intellectuals as a potential site of social unification since the late-Colonial period. In her study on the topic, Nísia Trindade Lima explores how interpretations of what constitutes literary regionalism and literary *sertanismo*, what their different phases are, and the extent to which they are celebrated or problematized, have historically generated great academic debate in Brazil (19-33).

In spite of great differences of qualitative opinion, there is general consensus that on a basic level, literary regionalism encompasses works that narrate local scenery, dialects, customs, and belief systems. This type of broad definition is useful in understanding the historical development of very diverse strains of *sertanismo*, as well as the way that they have been received by the literary academy.<sup>4</sup> While contemporary interpretations of *sertanismo* tend to diverge drastically when discussing textual ideologies and the ways in which "regionalist" authors succeed or fail at depicting

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<sup>3</sup>Bloom uses the term "daemonic parody" in the context of poetry to describe an author who compulsively aims his sights on defacing the formal model of precursory texts. My application of this term is an extension of basic elements of this concept to fiction. For a more complete discussion on "daemonic parody" (Bloom 92).

<sup>4</sup>Several of the most eminent literary scholars on historical *sertanismo* include Tristão de Ataíde (Alceu Amoroso Lima), Nelson Werneck Sodré, Lúcia Miguel Pereira, Alfredo Bosi, and Antonio Candido. While there is great variety among the five, all but Ataíde find continuity in their initial readings of *sertanismo* as an inferior genre. Bosi and Candido would eventually revise this type of qualitative interpretation, but the term *sertanismo* is sometimes still used interchangeably with a wide variety of historical and geographical rural regionalisms in contemporary Brazil. It has, however, also evolved to simply categorize works that articulate themes that are specific to the vast diversity found in the Northeastern *sertão*.

the tension between a specific region and its place within the national power centers of the moment, early readings of rural regionalism were generally limited to evaluating aesthetic interests or narrative strategies. These qualitative delineations would mark sertanista criticism for generations.

Traditional readings of regionalism attempted to delineate all rural novels as being simplistic and diametrically opposed to the more sophisticated “urban” novel, but this would eventually change dramatically with the advent of the modern novel. This binomial division, however, highlights a major tension in Brazilian cultural history between the less developed peripheral interior and the cosmopolitan, coastal urban centers. Lima’s study (1999) explores the historical origins and practices of incorporating cultural and geographical representations of rural Brazil into nationalist discourse. By highlighting the polarizing, often antagonistic, relationship between litoral/interior belief systems and nationalist discourse in Brazilian social thought, she problematizes the different representations of the typified human inhabitants and interpretations of the interior regions, which vary from the archaic, barbarous, and underdeveloped (exemplified through abandoned and ailing spaces plagued with misery, violence, political corruption, disease, and drought) to romanticized and idealized picturesque versions. Certain litoral intellectuals envisioned the different paths to Brazilian modernity as necessarily intersecting in the geosocial space of the sertão or sertões. In contrast to the supposedly inauthentic, Europeanized litoral, the sertão is seen as the cradle of “authentic” or essential traits of *brasilidade*. This perspective is associated with the turn-of-the-century projects of modernization, including vast rural literacy, hygiene, and sanitation missions, resulting from the technical evaluations that were formed from scientific and military expeditions. According to Lima, Brazilian regionalists’ interest in the folklore of sertaneja culture dates from the *café com leite* dominance of political rule during the Old Republic (1889-1930), which resulted, effectively, in an expansion of positivist concepts of national identity (65-67).

Nevertheless, the first fictional depictions of the sertão are found in the Romanticist works from the late-Imperial nineteenth century. While Tristão de Ataíde (1922) is credited for first using the term sertanismo in a literary context, Nelson Werneck Sodré (1938) was the first critic to employ the term sertanismo within the greater context of literary regionalism by highlighting works like José de Alencar’s *O sertanejo* (1875), Bernardo Guimarães’ *A escrava Isaura* (1875), Franklin Távora’s *O cabeleira* (1876) and Visconde de Taunay’s *Inocência* (1872) as key sertanista texts. The most notable sertanista work of this period is *O sertanejo*, which is considered an aesthetic bridge between Romanticist and Realist/Naturalist representations of the sertão through its formation of the beginnings of critical discourse on underdevelopment and misery in the region. Although Sodré’s limited reading of sertanismo constrains it to a strictly nineteenth-century inconsequential phenomenon that proceeds veins of *indianismo* found in works like Alencar’s *O guarani* (1857) and *Iracema* (1865), his study has an indelible influence on national literary history.<sup>5</sup> In their early writing on sertanismo, Alfredo Bosi (1970) and Antonio Candido (1965) draw directly on Sodré’s original historical delineation. Sodré, Bosi and Candido’s inclusion of novels that develop in rural areas of Rio de Janeiro (Guimarães), Pernambuco (Távora) and Mato Grosso (Taunay) further demonstrate the historical relativity of the terms sertão and sertanista. Bosi shows how these foundational works attempted to generate a sense of national identity, albeit through somewhat superficial literary portraits of Brazilian landscapes and cultures (*História* 140-7). For his part, Candido originally treated regionalism as a “[g]ênero artificial e pretensioso, criando um sentimento subalterno e fácil de condescendência em relação ao país” (*Literatura* 136).

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<sup>5</sup>Pereira’s *História da literatura brasileira: prosa de ficção, 1870-1920* (1950) is another foundational text on the subject. While she expands the definition of sertanista tendencies into the early twentieth century, her study also stops short of including works from the avant-garde movements of the twenties and thirties that would eventually transform the genre.

It is widely accepted that the beginnings of critical legitimacy were brought to literary sertanismo through Euclides da Cunha's, *Os sertões* (1902). Using the Canudos rebellion (1893-1897) and subsequent massacre to demonstrate the abysmal discrepancies between Brazil's rural regions and its urban centers of power, Cunha draws on the theme of abandonment, thus framing the beginnings of sociological and ideological interpretations of the nation.<sup>6</sup> Part narrative and part sociological study, Cunha's work depicts conflicts of race, class, environment, and corruption, as well as the lack of access to education, health and other government services. *Os sertões* would impel subsequent sertanista works to center more on reconciling perceived notions of social and cultural underdevelopment that were reinforced by the ubiquitous crises of hunger, malnutrition, squalid living conditions, and illiteracy in the region. Lima's study demonstrates how early twentieth-century intellectuals, Cunha among them, identified themselves with the inherent element of otherness in sertaneja culture and the corresponding notion of being a foreigner in one's own land, which prompted them to advocate for incorporating the sertões into national culture. She highlights the generation of Gilberto Freire during the formative years of 1933-64 as tied to the academic institutionalization of the social sciences, which, by privileging the dispossessed and dislocated, were responsible for solidifying an idealized sertão as a site of authentic nationality (155-73).<sup>7</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, diverse artistic representations of the multiple sertões and the perpetual suffering of the sertanejos achieved distinguished attention, in great part, through the topoi of drought, violence, and lawlessness portrayed in works of literature, music, film, and plastic arts. Bosi, notes that the Brazilian regionalist novel experiences a real explosion in the 1930s, emboldened by the radical experimentation of the avant-garde groups of the 1920s that are associated with the Semana de Arte Moderna in São Paulo in 1922 (11-18 February) and ignited by the proposals articulated in Freyre's "Manifesto regionalista" from the Recife Congresso Regionalista in 1926, giving name to what has been called the *romance de trinta* (*História* 345). While Freyre and many other Northeastern authors originally rejected the aesthetics of the Semana de Arte Moderna, the most successful novelists of this period embraced their call for formal innovation, while continuing to map local lands and cultures. Bosi and Candido highlight the regionalist formula "boom," beginning at the end of the 1920s with the thematic impulses found in José Américo de Almeida's *A bagaceira* (1928) and later evolving through aesthetic innovation during the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, what is known as the *ciclo das secas* or *literatura das secas* sees a virtual explosion in literary portrayals of the social changes experienced in Brazil's transition away from plantation oligarchy toward a more industrialized class society. In these years, celebrated Brazilian authors from the Northeast published sertanista novels that problematized the devastating effects of unpredictable droughts, consistent misery and predictable social inequality on the oppressed rural peoples of the Northeast, such as Rachel de Queiroz' *O quinze* (1930), José Lins do Rego's *Pedra Bonita* (1938) and Graciliano Ramos' *Vidas secas* (1938). These novels are all considered classics, and have helped to solidify the place of sertanista works in Brazilian literary history. The plots of most of the novels written by the abovementioned Northeastern authors develop in the geographical region of the sertão.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>For further discussion of the three major tendencies (Romantic, (neo) Naturalist, and Modernist) in sertanista literature, see Bernucci.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Paulo Prado's *Retrato do Brasil: ensaio da tristeza brasileira* (1928), Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande & senzala* (1933), Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (1936), and Caio Prado Junior's *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo* (1942).

<sup>8</sup>Other noteworthy works from the *romance de trinta* that generally do not take place in the sertão include works from Jorge Amado's *ciclo do cacau* and Lins do Rego's *ciclo da cana-de-açúcar*, as well as the Southern regionalist works of Erico Veríssimo. It should also be noted that Amado does

Perhaps the complexities surrounding consensus on this academic debate can best be observed in the way that two of Brazil's most eminent literary critics, Candido and Bosi, modify their own personal readings of both regionalism and literary representations of the sertão over the course of history. Through the incorporation of strategies of formal innovation associated with the modern novel in Latin America,<sup>9</sup> Ramos' *Vida secas* and João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956) are novels that stand out as representative canonical works that effectively stylize sertanejo speech and thought, foregrounding redefinitions of regionalism. While aesthetically and ideologically quite different, Ramos' use of narrative focalization to emulate characters' perspective and Rosa's empowered, first-person narration, both open the door to a new phase of sertanismo that celebrates the contradictions of the sertanejo people and also gives them the power of agency. This new vein of regionalism sparks Candido's attempts to further establish hierarchy within regionalist tendencies by dividing the genre into varying phases of "consciousness of underdevelopment." He creates a new category for what he calls "super-regionalism," which includes Latin American authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Rulfo, João Ubaldo Ribeiro, José María Arguedas, Gabriel García Márquez, Augusto Roa Bastos and João Guimarães Rosa, whose works are today considered canonical for their transcending of regional values and themes ("Literature and Underdevelopment" 56). Within a strictly Brazilian context, Bosi speaks similarly of what he calls "neo-regionalism" or the "alto regionalismo crítico de Graciliano Ramos e a experiência estética universal do regionalista Guimarães Rosa" (*História* 233). The relationship between sertanismo and literary criticism is complex and ever changing. Over a century of artistic integration of sertaneja culture into the national discourse has led to a general increase in the acceptance and celebration of sertaneja culture in the Brazilian imaginary and an integration of sertanista works into both national and international canons. Candido and Bosi's original hierarchical claims for historical inclusion or exclusion of certain regionalist works into lists of good literature participated in fomenting myths surrounding the role of regional cultural production in nationalist discourse.<sup>10</sup> Bosi and Candido eventually revise their original readings of regionalism and sertanismo, opening up interpretations that are less restricted by chronology or aesthetic design and are more identified by the ideological impulses to articulate geographic space, time, culture, and symbols that permeate the national consciousness. There is a stark contrast between the somewhat disparaging application of the term by Bosi that restricted sertanismo to exoticist late-Romanticism to a more socially conscious usage that emphasizes orality and the distinction made between narrators' treatment of marginalized peoples as objects versus subjects. Candido's writing also clearly demonstrates a transformation of the term from his early criticism. In his later writing, what matters most to Candido is whether a text humanizes or alienates the people of the region. Regardless of alignment in the academic debate and its oscillating readings of regionalism, "neo-regionalism," or "super-regionalism," it is hard to deny the wide reach that nationalist appropriation of regional cultures has achieved in Brazil.

Although *Polígono das Secas* engages the more general tradition of the rural regionalist novel and its focus on local settings, cultures, languages and traditions, Mainardi's repeated usage of the

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have one text that could be considered sertanista, *Seara vermelha* (1946), but this is an exception to his other works in that by addressing migrant exodus to São Paulo, a great portion of the plot of this novel does take place in the sertão of Bahia.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond L. Williams highlights some of the most common formal techniques and strategies associated with the Latin American modern novel as interior monologues, stream of consciousness, fragmentation, varying narrative points of view, neologisms, innovative narrative structures, and frequent lack of causality (*The Twentieth-Century* 93).

<sup>10</sup>Personal readings of literary tendencies and traditions are always informed by current political and social thought and therefore experience change over the years. For further discussion on reader response, see Bloom and Iser.

ethnically charged term “romance sertanejo” intentionally replaces the more politically accepted sertanista with an ambiguous term that is infused in issues surrounding identity and popular culture. This kind of mischievous prodding of the sensibilities of his readers sets the general tone for the essence of Mainardi’s ambivalent satire. Somewhat paradoxically, it is possible to read *Polígono das Secas* as both a deflection of vanished threats and at the same time an unintentional prolonging of the inherent impulse shared by regionalist authors to revalidate local cultural identity within an emerging nationalist culture. *Polígono das Secas* postulates the tradition of the sertanista novel as a theoretical framework for incorporating regionalist values of environmentalist and social resistance into the national imaginary, and accordingly, Mainardi places a satirical bent on such generic conventions. In this respect, Mainardi works squarely from within the traditional satiric mode, in which authors censure an aspect of contemporary society that they consider to be in crisis. This novel is a pretext for launching a scathing denunciation of both the Brazilian literary hierarchy and, what its fictionalized author denominates, the “sertanization” of the national conscience, which he equates with the sublimation of underdevelopment, ignorance, and misery to the category of nationalistic values and sentiment. *Polígono das Secas*’ allegation that romanticized portrayals of the sertão and sertaneja culture have enjoyed a disproportionate focus in the construction of the national imagination is not overly controversial. Therefore, it is plausible that it is not what Mainardi is proposing, but rather his abrasive approach to the subject that is so irreverent.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, various groups of Latin American authors published manifesto-like texts that advocated for breaking free from overbearing, nationalized narrative aesthetics, which they claimed tended to limit creative possibilities.<sup>11</sup> Some of the texts that stand out are the prologues from the collection of Spanish American fiction *McOndo* (1996) and the two anthologies of Brazilian fiction *Geração 90: manuscritos de computador* (2001) and *Geração 90: os transgressores* (2003), as well as the manifesto written by the “Crack” generation in Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The traditions against which the *McOndo*, *Crack*, and *Geração 90* authors are writing derive from the formulaic conventions and totalizing impulses of the modernist novel. Works associated with the modernist novel often explore both the conceptual relationships between rural and urban spaces, and the social conflicts that characterize them. All three of the turn-of-the-century groups patently reject labeling artistic tendencies through generic concepts. Broad labels about certain authors and works brought international attention to the image of Latin America, but ended up stereotyping, and therefore limiting Latin American writing. On the one hand, the turn-of-the-century generations vary in the extent to which they are writing against the weight of some of their precursors’ reputations, but on the other, they are unified in overtly rejecting the pervasive topoi of underdevelopment and misery found in the modern novel in Latin America. Eduardo Coutinho interprets the antagonistic relationship between Brazilian authors who were writing in the 1990’s and both

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<sup>11</sup>See Octavio Paz on the literary tradition of rupture. Paz highlights modern literature’s characteristic impulse of pronouncing and celebrating originality. Also see Bloom, as he draws on Freudian psychology to highlight intratextual relations and arrive at the conclusion that young authors suffer from a type of psychological complex that is caused by the great amount of existing literature and the depletion of possible themes. While Bloom utilizes this term in the context of verse poetry, it is possible to make a relatively fluid extension of the concept to narrative or even creative production in general.

<sup>12</sup>Chileans Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez are both the general editors and authors of the introduction to *McOndo*. The general editor and author of the introductions to *Geração 90: manuscritos de computador* and *Geração 90: os transgressores* is Nelson de Oliveira. The authors of the Crack generation are Ignacio Padilla, Jorge Volpi, Eloy Urroz, Vicente Herrasti, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, and Pedro Ángel Palou.

national and international canons as a “demolition of the pillars that prop up tradition” (610). In line with contemporary currents in literary studies, he argues that issues surrounding inclusion and exclusion in the traditional literary studies process of canon creation are no longer sufficiently flexible for the inevitably fluid need to restructure canonical lists.

A skeptical attitude has been observed in many postmodern novels with respect to the pronouncement of, or search for, “truth claims.” Linda Hutcheon reflects on the use of metafiction to question the idea of representation and how it is used to legitimize and privilege certain types of knowledge (51). In addition to incorporating stylized traces of revered sertanista novels, Mainardi appropriates several of the most salient elements of modern canonical sertanista novels, and glosses his method through extradiagetic digressions. On a number of occasions, the narrator of *Polígono das Secas* directly invokes the names of authors and works that are intrinsically tied to the modernist sertanista tendency, constructing an explicit, self-conscious dialogue with the tradition. As Williams observes, a key tendency that distinguishes a chronology of the postmodern novel in Latin America is the reflexive knowledge of, and reference to, the tradition of the modern novel and literary criticism, which manifests itself through an intertextual dialogue (“Modernist” 369). While intertextuality in *Polígono das Secas* focuses particularly on works from the Northeast romance de trinta, by also taking on *Vida secas* and *Grande sertão: veredas*, Mainardi extends his cantankerous parody to the entire genre of the regionalist novel of the sertão, without discriminating or distinguishing between historical moments or geo-aesthetic tendencies.

*Polígono das Secas* insistence on addressing the distracting position of all veins of sertanismo in the national imagination presents the reader with a paradox by offering a self-reflexive dialogue between literary creation and literary criticism, which implicitly invokes Coutinho’s allusion to the deconstruction of traditional literary pillars. While Mainardi’s insistence on continuing an explicit dialogue with literary tradition within his own narrative work distinguishes him significantly from the propositions of the *McOndo*, *Crack*, and *Geração 90* authors, his implicit opposition to the concept of canon inherently aligns him with this generation. Discussing his own work within the context of the Latin American novel of the 1990s, Mainardi contrasts the trajectory of his novels and those of other groups of young Latin American authors:

Eu estou satirizando e desmitificando uma literatura já morta, quer dizer, a literatura regionalista, quando eu escrevo a respeito dela, que nos anos 90 já é cadáver. Ao contrário do que pode fazer um latino-americano com o realismo mágico, que era um cadáver mais fresco, o meu é um cadáver velho putrefacto, que ninguém mais levava em conta (*Entrevista 4*).

Mainardi’s claim that the “boom” period for regionalist tendencies on the Brazilian literary scene ended long before the “boom” of magic realism is true. However, it is difficult to take this comment at face value. While *Grande sertão: veredas* transcends literary regionalism for some, and surpasses it for others, it is clear that after its publication many authors avoid the inevitable nationalistic labels associated with regionalist writing. Similar claims of the “death and re-birth of regionalism” have come and gone over the years. In fact, in the early 1990’s, Bosi (1992) was already warning of a resurrection of the genre, “O regionalismo não está, como supuseram alguns mal-avisados, tão morto que não seja capaz de renascer” (343-44). In line with Bosi’s own revisions, most contemporary critics highlight impulses toward demonstrating the stark contrasts between oral and written cultures and the denunciation of injustice and misery suffered by oppressed peoples of the nation as an essential commonality of more contemporary manifestations of the genre, which has opened up the idea of a coexistence of rural and urban regionalism.

There are many contemporary authors continuing to engage issues surrounding oppression and misery, particularly with regard to industrialization, development, and the environment. Most recently, Malcolm Silverman’s association of works of protest with regionalism allows for an additional vein of the genre.<sup>13</sup> While many of the major problems of rural Brazil (electricity, water



treatment, government subsidies) were already improving by the time *Polígono das Secas* was published, land and labor reform, as well as equal distribution of wealth remain huge issues even in present day Brazil. Authors continue to engage the “consciousness of backwardness” successfully. The continued critical and commercial success of authors like Francisco Dantas in the 1990’s, for example, represents a viable contemporary strand of serious sertanista writing, which seemingly negates claims that literary regionalism, or sertanismo for that matter, has ended, further undermining a literal interpretation of Mainardi’s comment. His suggestion that there is more urgency for other authors to write against the burden of tradition is clouded by his use of hyperbole, which suggests that this may or may not be an attempt at self-deprecation. Nevertheless, Mainardi’s cautious avoidance of comparison with his contemporaries is quite warranted. While his explicitly antagonistic approach to demystifying tradition creates a natural connection with some authors of his generation, his dogmatic insistence on the satiric mode sets him far apart.

Eagerly glossing authorial intentions throughout the text represents a very specific vein of narrative satire. The use of this type of prosaic metalanguage clearly is not limited to satiric works. However, one of the major precursors of this technique in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Brazil is Machado de Assis. In this sense, Machado’s satire pertains more to the Horatian tradition, in which the didactic element of the text benefits from a marked emphasis on the ludic. In *Polígono das Secas*, the narrator does not hesitate to apply an overly explicit didacticism, which demonstrates a clear desire to create a polemic relation between the narrator and the reader. An insistence on excessive metalanguage can easily stimulate a sense of discomfort in the reader by attempting to prefigure interpretation and deter autonomous conclusions. This trend begins in the first line of the second chapter of *Polígono das Secas*, “Januário Cicco,” which could be interpreted as a tribute: “A fonte é Euclides da Cunha” (14). However, the narrator’s voice becomes markedly more belligerent as the narration progresses, and is exemplified in the fourth chapter, “Piquet Carneiro,” when he attempts to demystify the supposed origins of the literatura de cordel:

A literatura de cordel abunda em histórias semelhantes à de Piquet Carneiro, o herói negativo cuja maldade é castigada através de uma terrível metamorfose. [...] Como demonstram numerosos estudos etnográficos, o cordel não é fruto da imaginação dos versejadores nordestinos. Deriva diretamente dos romances de cavalaria medievais. O folclore local baseia-se numa moral rasteira e numa fantasia roubada. Assim é Piquet Carneiro. Assim são todos os outros. (20-21)

As this passage demonstrates, the narrator outlines the fictionalized author’s objectives, attempting to further limit possible readings of the novel. Later, this project is carried out to extremes through the creation of metafictional chapters in which a certain aspect of the narrative intention is expanded on ad nauseum. In the final metafictional chapter, the narrator explains that the implicit author’s intent is to spread yellow balm throughout the fictitious sertão as a metaphor that symbolizes a desire to annihilate the effects of Northeastern regionalism on the national imaginary. However, the culmination of this tendency is already prognosticated in the first metafictional chapter: “Mais adiante, num arroubo didático, impedindo a livre ação interpretativa por parte do

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<sup>13</sup>Silverman highlights novels that dialogue with the regionalist tradition, dividing the works into two main categories, those that avoid allusions to the military dictatorship such as *Romance da pedra do reino* (1971) by Ariano Suassuna, *Tetralogia do Piauí* (1965-1970) by Francisco de Assis Brasil, and *O coronel e o lobishomem* (1964) by José Cândido de Carvalho; and those that critique post-1964 politics through parody, such as Darcy Ribeiro’s *Maíra* (1976), Antônio Callado’s *Quarup* (1967) and *Sempreviva* (1981), João Ubaldo Ribeiro’s *Sargento Getúlio* (1971) and *Viva o povo brasileiro* (1984), Márcio Souza’s *Mad Maria* (1980), Benedicto Monteiro’s *Verde vagomundo* (1972) and *O minossauro* (1975), Benito Barreto’s *Plataforma vazia* (1962) and *Mutirão para matar* (1974), Marcos Santarrita’s *A solidão do cavaleiro no horizonte* (1978), Moacyr Scliar’s *Mês de cães danados* (1977), and Antônio Torres’ *Essa terra* (1976).

leitor, o autor do romance irá esclarecer suas verdadeiras intenções” (34). This type of excessive didactic commentary demonstrates the arrogant and cantankerous tone that the narrator tends to use to antagonize the reader throughout the narration.

The causticity found in this novel distances it from the jocosity and jubilation often associated with satiric works of the Horatian tradition. While the narrator’s proscriptive declarations regarding his satiric program and proposals preserve a certain ludic intentionality, these metafictional digressions aim not just to entertain, but also to provoke. Reminiscent of the sense of entitlement and superiority associated with the Juvenalian tradition, *Polígono das Secas* demonstrates what could be read as an implicit desire to completely alienate the reader. At the end of the narration, this is demonstrated in an unmistakable manner: “O leitor não conta. É subalterno em relação ao autor e não tem qualquer direito a interferir” (116). Later, the narrator continues along this same vein, “A esta altura, o leitor deste romance poderá concluir que o presente romance não passa de um instrumento para o debate literário. Engana-se. O leitor está proibido de concluir o que quer que seja sem consultar previamente o autor” (117). This contemptuous attitude involves a confrontation with the reader that is far removed from the type of reading that the most experimental regionalist authors demanded of their readers. From Graciliano Ramos to Guimarães Rosa, a tradition exists in which the author creates what can be considered a literary puzzle, encouraging a more active reading process. Mainardi utilizes hyper-explicit extradiegetic digressions and a disparaging tone in order to create what could be considered a “discursive grotesque,” through which the author attempts to forcefully invert the expectations of the reader. John R. Clark asserts that when exaggerated condescension and arrogance appear in satire it is meant to lampoon the tone of intolerance that is often associated with educators, writers, religious leaders, and cultural authorities (30). The narrator’s disdainful tone brings together Mainardi’s multiple projections, including a parody of the pretentious and proscriptive tone that encompasses the processes of development and construction of literary canons and political correctness.

As is frequently the case with this type of acidic satire, the narrator’s attitude may violently disagree with the “horizon of expectations” of readers who do not share his sense of humor, or who simply do not identify satire as the dominant mode of the novel. Perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of Mainardi’s writing is his ability to incite and discomfort his readers. For example, in reference to the excessive extradiegetic declarations such as those seen in the previous citations, one critic made the following commentary: “[. . .] é absolutamente espantoso que, nas suas inúmeras intervenções no texto, o autor qualifique de ‘romance’ essa perversa e mal construída paródia rapsódica” (Diatahy 3). Diatahy’s primary formation is in the field of sociology, which could partially explain his extreme distaste for *Polígono das Secas*. It is, however, difficult to decipher whether Diatahy is critiquing Mainardi’s formal technique or if it is the content and tone of these digressions that really perturb him. Mainardi strives to polarize his readership, striking at the foundations of a vein of Brazilian literature that has been recognized internationally and that, as a result, is intrinsically tied to the sensitivities surrounding nationalist pride and political correctness, while looking for solidarity in like-minded readers who see a paradox in the way in which modern literary techniques are used to represent Brazil as a backward and abject nation. Through its insistently sour tone and tendencies toward excessive metafiction, Mainardi’s brand of satire, discourages certain readers and, in turn, creates a decided dynamic of alienation and self-marginalization.

In line with traditional satire, the narrator of *Polígono das Secas* employs a self-conscious ironic distance that becomes markedly less subtle, and thus more taboo, as the narration develops. The implicit author is eager to vandalize what many Brazilian intellectuals consider sacred. This is exemplified by the narrator’s antagonistic digressions, which attempt to further taint the reception of the implicit dialogue with the sertanista novel by projecting an irreverent and sarcastic attitude toward its eminent authors. According to the narrator, the sertanista novel, “[. . .] glorifica a figura do sertão, apropriando-se de sua linguagem e de suas idéias, acolhendo no universo intelectual o cretinismo endêmico de sua cultura” (61). The so-called “cretinization” of the intellectual universe is a common concept throughout Mainardi’s journalistic and literary writing. In *Polígono das Secas*,

parody of the aesthetic model is used as a rhetorical tool that helps to satirize the beautification of the futile, and that which, according to Mainardi “[...] há de mais demagógico, [e] mais popularesco da nossa consciência nacional,” and has contributed to the promotion of elements “da massificação, da glorificação do sentimento fácil, [e] da glorificação da humanidade vencedora, a pesar dos sacrifícios” (*Entrevista* 4). As the narration continues, the attack on tradition becomes more explicit, which is revealed through the narrator’s scrutiny of the redundant nature of the sertanista novel, “A bibliografia não é longa. O autor considera que toda a literatura sertaneja pode ser resumida a seis ou sete títulos. Os outros não acrescentam nada, não merecendo nem mesmo uma citação” (88). Echoing the observations of the historical author, the narrator explains that the fictionalized author’s intention is to bury what he considers to be an antiquated and over-saturated tradition, “O filão sertanejo esgotou-se, seus maiores cultores morreram décadas atrás” (116). The similarity between the thoughts expressed by the narrator and the previous commentary by the historic author provides a clear example of the complexity surrounding the issue of authorial intention in satire.

Unlike many contemporary satiric novels, *Polígono das Secas* is structured in a very conventional manner. The novel is divided into four sections, each containing eight short chapters. The last chapter of each section consists of the aforementioned metafictional essays. The first seven chapters of each section carry the name of the character on which the episode focuses. These chapters deal with the stories of the following characters: Manoel Vitorino, Januário Cicco, the Untor, Piquet Carneiro, Demerval Lobão, and Catarina Rosa. However, the character to whom the most space is allotted in the narration is the Untor or “Anointer,” a shadowy figure who uses a black cloak, and sports an amputated hand and glass eye. The Untor uses his pestilent “*unto amarelado*” or yellow balm to carry out his mission of contamination and annihilation throughout the sertão. Among other ingredients, the *unto amarelado* consists of urine, fecal excrement and saliva taken from humans with contagious, mortal diseases. While the Untor occupies two chapters in each section, the primary narrative thread develops along the trajectory marked by his travels and interactions with the other main characters, each of which represents an archetypal character of different veins of the sertanista novel that the Untor seeks to destroy. The narration begins with the story of Manoel Vitorino. This first episode is based on characters found in the narrative poetry of João Cabral de Melo Neto, most specifically Severino from *Morte e vida severina* (1955). The *jagunço*, Januário Cicco, offers a parody of Diadorim, one of the protagonists of Rosa’s *Grande sertão: veredas*. Januário, like Diadorim, incarnates the prototypical headstrong, mercenary jagunço willing to sacrifice his life for the mission. For his part, Piquet Carneiro, the man-turned-donkey, exemplifies the fantastical nature of the literatura de cordel.<sup>14</sup> Mainardi creates another intertextuality with the sertanista canon through the episodes of the *retirante*, Demerval Lobão, a migrant figure based on Fabiano, protagonist of Ramos’s *Vidas secas*. In addition to the abovementioned intertextualities, other Northeastern works are explicitly referenced throughout the novel including titles such as Leonardo Motta’s *No tempo de Lampião* (1930) and José Lins do Rego’s *Fogo morto* (1943). Many of the secondary characters that fill out the narration are based on sertanista literary archetypes such as the *vaqueiro*, the *coronel*, the *cangaceiro*, the *violeiro*, the *jumento*, the *santo* and the *mártir*. Sooner or later, the Untor’s mission of annihilation inevitably crosses all of the other characters’ paths as he contaminates them with his toxic yellow balm.

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<sup>14</sup>A form of locally published and sold, inexpensive, illustrated pamphlet of narrative poetry also known as *folhetos*. Finding its roots in the oral tradition of the Iberian *romanceiro*, the cordel is verse balladry that narrates stories with Northeast-related themes, meant to be read by, and to, inhabitants of the region. For an in-depth study on the history of the cordel and its place in contemporary cultural and literary production, see Slater.

The trajectory of the Untor's murder spree spans across the drought-stricken portion of the sertão that the government denominated the "Polígono das Secas" in 1936. The sociopolitical construct known as the "Polígono das Secas" passes through portions of the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Minas Gerais, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe. It is important to note the deliberate use of this term in the title of the novel. By invoking this polemic region, Mainardi is also implicitly highlighting the political corruption scheme popularly known as the "Indústria da Seca," in which agricultural modernization was promised through public works programs that designated emergency government funds to hydration and disaster relief plans for nearly a century. However, as a result of greed and fraud, the "Indústria da Seca" ended up only strengthening the power of elite landowners and politicians, further perpetuating the continued social and economic underdevelopment of the region. On numerous occasions, the novel's narrator alludes to this phenomenon by underlining the incongruous existence of this "legislative abstraction."

The Untor's travels takes the reader across the sertão as he hunts down women named Catarina Rosa who represent female myths of *cangaço*, like Maria Bonita. *Polígono das Secas* also parodies Alessandro Manzoni's *Storia della colonna infame* (1840) by utilizing the name Catarina Rosa, an historic figure whose story is based on Manzoni's work. In Milan, in 1630, she falsely accused two *milanesi* of spreading a pestilent ointment onto the walls of Milan. Under distress of torture, the two accused are forced to admit guilt and are therefore sentenced to a plethora of inhumane punishments including amputation, bone breaking on the wheel, and incineration. The narrator of *Polígono das Secas* explains that by attempting to kill all of the sertaneja Catarinas, the Untor is attempting to destroy the myth of sertaneja social banditry associated with Maria Bonita, while at the same time avenging the atrocities done to these two milanesi.

While there is one "Catarina Rosa" chapter in each section, these chapters only function as supplementary episodes appended to the main plotline. The narrator attempts to explicitly link the literary stereotypes that are reaffirmed in the sertanista novels with the ignorant mentality of the historical Caterina Rosa. The Untor's avowed mission is to eliminate the backwardness that the various sertaneja Catarina Rosas represent by contaminating them with his pestilent unto amarelado. In addition to contaminating all of the Catarina Rosas, the Untor also infects any other sertanejo that crosses his path. Almost as an act of clemency on the part of the fictitious author, all of the Catarinas are left to die at the end of her respective chapter. Therefore, each *Catarina Rosa* chapter deals with the story of a new Catarina. Aside from the four Catarinas whose stories are told in separate chapters, additional Catarina Rosa characters appear sporadically throughout the other characters' chapters. In this way, the identity of Catarina Rosa represents a certain multiplicity, which not only facilitates the intertextual dialogue with Manzoni's text, but also demonstrates the use of characters in *Polígono das Secas* as expendable, faceless scapegoats. Through the monolithic and disaffected representation, and subsequent extermination of all of the cardboard Catarinas, the fictionalized author performs textual violence on what he postulates to be a superficial homogeneity and naivety that dominate literary representations of sertaneja culture.

The sinister Untor refuses to leave a single character untouched by his ointment. Along with the long list of Catarinas, all of the other supplemental characters also die by contamination. The only characters that survive the Untor's plague are the four main characters, Manoel Vitorino, Januário Cicco, Piquet Carneiro and Demerval Lobão. Mainardi's scrutiny of the persistence of sertaneja literary stereotypes in the Brazilian imaginary manifests itself through the violent attacks on the four main characters. Each of these four demonstrates a relative resistance to the mortal effects of the ointment. However, it should be noted that this resistance does not keep them safe: Manoel Vitorino loses an eye and a hand (which sets up a dynamic of mistaken identity between him and the Untor in one episode); Januário Cicco is obsessed with hunting down the Untor (he is eventually rewarded for his determination by contracting a condition that causes him to defecate pus); Piquet Carneiro is converted into a donkey; and Demerval Lobão is mummified alive and also suffers renal hemorrhaging. Each of the four suffers a different physical deformation, and all four lose loved ones

to the Untor's plague. Left with no other apparent option, each character traverses the "Polígono das Secas" from a different direction, with the hope of seeking vengeance against the Untor. This commonality serves to unite the paths and plots of each of the four in such a way that in the end, all of the apparently unconnected storylines (throughout the majority of the first three sections) of each main character's respective chapters intertwine. It is noteworthy that in spite of the narrative attention given to these four characters, there is a clear attempt to deny the reader any empathy, or even sympathy, for these virtual cardboard cutouts that represent an attempt to expose the cartoon nature of stereotypes. Meanwhile, the ubiquitous presence of the Untor and his violent contact with the other characters throughout the narration situate him in the role of anti-hero or abject hero.<sup>15</sup>

In each episode of the first section, the narrator uses a very solemn tone to present all of the characters, which could resemble that found in traditional sertanista novels. However, the characterization of the main characters becomes more and more caricaturized as the narration continues. The misery and injustice found in the region that normally serves as the foundation of an implicit social critique in most sertanista novels are presented in an exaggerated and grotesque manner to achieve satiric ends. A primary component in the creation of a grotesque aesthetic generally resides in complicating the reception of the work. Mainardi's defiant use of metalanguage and "daemonic parody" aims to promote shocking visceral and emotive responses.

The parody of prototypical characters and language commonly associated with the sertanista novel establishes a fictitious space that corresponds to the diverse manifestations of this tendency. In the metafictional chapter of the second section, "Nomes," the narrator offers the gratuitous observation that the names of the majority of the characters are taken from cities located in the geographic region of the "Polígono das Secas." Mainardi appropriates his precursors' lexicon to construct an environment identifiable as the sertão. *Caatinga*, for example, is an emblematic metaphor used in sertanista literature. This dry, thorny vegetation is one of the most representative images of the rough and hostile climate that dominates the sertão. Caatinga almost always appears in some form in sertanista novels. In the first chapters, Mainardi incorporates an abundance of expressions that emphasize the sertaneja nature of the fictitious space. On a number of occasions, he comically situates characters ornamentally according to their location with relation to the caatinga: "rola desastradamente caatinga abaixo" (11), and "avança caatinga adentro" (17). Other sertaneja flora and fauna that are traditionally used in sertanista literature to stereotypically emphasize the presence of hunger and drought in the region also populate the novel. The various fictitious sertões employ the topos of uninhabitability in order to highlight a ubiquitous sentiment of futility and move the reader toward social consciousness. However, *Polígono das Secas* recreates this sentiment precisely to ridicule it.

Mainardi's use of sertanejo lexicon forces the reader to construct a highly visual fictitious space. Northrop Frye affirms that the parodic nature of the satiric mode can often produce a "comedy of the grotesque." In the first chapter, "Manoel Vitorino," the narrator begins a systematic devaluation of the novel's characters. The dead son of Manoel (whose name doesn't matter, according to the narrator) is just another victim of the sertão's oppressive environment, abundant in drought and infectious diseases such as malaria, Chagas, and hookworm. The narrator's aloof attitude about unnamed characters is meant as a playful intertextual dialogue with canonical sertanista novels like *Vidas secas*, in which Fabiano's children are unnamed primary characters. However, from this moment forward, the narrator's exaggerated sense of superiority becomes evermore unmistakable to the reader. The use of frigid sarcasm, marked by an insistence on emphasizing the lack of importance in identifying the name of Manoel's son, attempts to generate a sense of alienation in compassionate readers.

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<sup>15</sup>For a more ample discussion on the concept of anti-hero or abject hero, see Bernstein.

In this macabre episode, Manoel is on his way to the cemetery to bury his dead son. He is carrying the body in his arms when he suddenly falls into an eight-meter deep crater. He injures himself gravely and finds himself trapped in the crater. Fighting off boredom, Manoel eventually tries to distract himself by spitting from a distance into the open mouth of his son's cadaver. Manoel begins this absurdist activity only after realizing the insanity of trying to survive starvation by eating "umas poucas dentadas à altura do antebraço e da barriga da perna [of his contaminated dead son]" (13). This scene demonstrates a disaffected caricature of rare, but documented cases of real life cannibalism that occurred in the region due to severe famines such as those experienced during the infamous drought of 1877-1879.

While many of the precursor novels that are explicitly referenced in the novel attempt to express the dislocation and disarticulation associated with rural migration and adversity with a more epic tone, *Polígono das Secas* is more in line with the earlier satires of José Bento Monteiro Lobato, in *Velha praga* (1914) and *Urupês* (1914), which parodied picturesque and folkloric representations of the sparsely inhabited interior of São Paulo, known then as the "sertão paulista," by associating underdevelopment with the laziness of the peoples that inhabit rural Brazil. Although the *caboclo* (Brazilian of mixed Amerindian and European ancestry) and other racialized types of the sertão have at times been used as symbols of social union and integration, they have also been scapegoated as symbols of backwardness and obstructers of development since the late-Colonial period. This caricature of the rural caboclo has become one of the most iconic characters of Brazilian fiction. First developed in his articles surrounding sertaneja culture in *O estado de São Paulo*, Lobato's Jeca Tatu character begins as a racialized caricature in which the caboclo is portrayed as sickly and lazy, and is inherently blamed for Brazil's perpetual underdevelopment. In opposition to the European or North American idealized vision of productive rural farming culture, Lobato saw the caboclo as a symbol of backwardness, misery, inadaptability, and general resistance to modernity. The first representations of Jeca Tatu helped Lobato advocate for European immigration as a strategy for national progress and development.

Lobato's early works ridiculed and caricatured sertanejo people by portraying them as indolent, ignorant, unhygienic, and violent. An ambiguity characteristic of this type of satire is whether the intention is to censure the integration of oppressing values and stereotypes into the national discourse or rather to simply exclude oppressed peoples from national culture altogether. *Polígono das Secas* sets out to demonstrate the absurdity of stereotypes. Under the auspice of satire, Mainardi's narrator extends his reactionary, politically incorrect, undertaking of demystification by utilizing situational irony to depict the sertaneja people as savage and, at times, horrifying, and therefore risks offending the sensibilities of readers who tend to uncritically accept the literary construction of the sertanejo or who have a heightened sense of political correctness. Manoel Vitorino's episode demonstrates a vein of humor that is completely foreign to the sertanista novel. While the presence of dark humor does indeed help to sustain the subversive parody of the genre, the main objective of this episode is not yet to distance *Polígono das Secas* completely from the type of scenes of misery and suffering that appear in the original sertanista novels. Manoel Vitorino's fall into the crater embodies a metaphor of descent, a foundation in which the reader is forced to foreground a typical sertanejo setting in a downward trajectory and, furthermore, his taboo interaction with his son's cadaver represents the reader's first encounter with visual elements of literary vandalism. While this morbid scene presents the reader with a clear induction, it is relatively light compared with subsequent manifestations of the grotesque.

Mainardi appropriates the aesthetic model of the sertanista novel using the common techniques of animalization and dehumanization to ridicule the overabundance of scenes of misery and suffering. These formulas are mocked through hyperbolic descriptions that exceed the parameters of the genre. Far removed from the sympathy or outrage that images of feeble, marginalized characters invoke in such novels as *Vidas secas*, for example, the characters in *Polígono das Secas* are mere ornamental figures, whose principal function is to foment an incongruent reception for the reader with respect to generalizing human behaviors and identities. Through the creation of the toxic

yellow balm that the Untor uses to kill sertanejos, human figures are distorted to articulate inconformity with the sertanista novels' mystification of the sertão value system. A result of this incongruence is that the reader is motivated to focus on the artifice of the novel itself.

The most grotesque moments in *Polígono das Secas* stem from violent scenes of necrophilia, mutilation, and scatological descriptions of characters that die literally covering themselves in their own excrement. One of the most shocking scenes actually combines several of the abovementioned elements. After his first encounter with the Untor, Manoel Vitorino executes two horrific actions by selling saliva taken from his dead son's cadaver to the Untor and then later explaining to him how to find a Catarina Rosa that lives in the village Olho d'Água Das Flores. Manoel suffers a short-lived moral crisis, and decides to follow the Untor's trail hoping to arrive before him in order to warn Catarina Rosa. Upon arriving in Olho d'Água Das Flores, he finds her already dead. The following scene describes Manoel's descent into thievery and necrophilia, as he takes advantage of the Untor's victims while following his path of destruction:

Manoel Vitorino recolhe um balde de água do poço e começa a borrifá-lo sobre o cadáver de Catarina Rosa. Ao desabotoar-lhe o vestido, revelam-se todos os efeitos das doenças que haviam provocado a sua morte. As veias tumefatas, os seios necrosados, as crateras pustulentas, os bubões nas virilhas.

Observando o corpo de Catarina Rosa, Manoel Vitorino sente nojo e vomita. Depois de vomitar, abre-lhe as pernas e violenta o seu cadáver. Alguns momentos mais tarde, arrasta-a pelo braço até o casebre e violenta-a novamente sobre o colchão de feno. (68-69)

Upon describing this cruel and inhuman scene, the narrator displays notable insensitivity. This amoral attitude toward such heinous acts is a clear attempt to heighten the reader's discomfort. His reaction to the act of necrophilia is one of absolute emotional detachment, almost mocking the suffering that this Catarina experiences while dying. Through insolent descriptions of scenes of human suffering, Mainardi achieves that special mixture of amusement and repugnancy found in the grotesque.

Mainardi's tenuous relationship with sertaneja culture is complex. While his formative years abroad often exacerbate his own sense of personal dislocation, for many readers Mainardi's callous portrayal of the sertão presents a gross regression. *Polígono das Secas* evokes invective incarnations of country dwellers, similar to Lobato's early Jeca Tatu. Lima's historical analysis of sertanismo also offers a reading of the evolution of Lobato's portrayal of the caboclo from the lens of the popular movement toward multiculturalism and racial democracy that permeates nationalist discourse in contemporary Brazil. She draws attention to Jeca Tatu's eventual renaissance in later years as he is reinvented and recast as a symbol of national identity in which the caboclo is seen as a model of productivity (133-54). Like Mainardi's opinionated commentary in *Veja, Polígono das Secas* blatantly defies the impulse toward political correctness that enveloped Brazil upon returning to democratic rule, which he seems to see as misdirected. Mainardi participates in a long tradition of litoral intellectuals who have reflected on national consciousness through dialogue with the topos of underdevelopment that, more than mere geographic distinctions, forms the base of the polemic dichotomy sertão/litoral. Similar to Lobato's representation of Jeca Tatu in *Urupês*, Mainardi's novel takes the literary characters of sertaneja fiction to their negative extremes: sick, anemic, isolated, ignorant, lazy, indolent, and parasitic. This type of simplistic and prejudiced regression is not likely to be well digested if read literally, and this is one of the most divisive aspects of Mainardi's style. By offering an ambiguous and grotesque caricature of Brazilians who represent some of the most historically oppressed members of society, *Polígono das Secas* exposes a link between literary tendencies and continued social imbalance. However, other than promoting an end to stereotyped cultural production, the text fails to offer any type of clear social solutions. Mainardi's insistence on creating polemic debate about the role of sertaneja culture in the national imaginary is what stands out. While this type of ambiguity is very common in some veins of satire, it is also likely to complicate many readers' reaction to the novel.

In line with Lima's study, Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Júnior (1999) presents a deconstructive examination of cultural identities of the Northeastern region. This study traces the historical development of the invention of the Northeast as a distinct region for political purposes from the 1920's on, to the idea of the sertão from a site of utopia in the 1930's, fertile for revolution, to a saturated and decadent cliché in the late 1960's. Albuquerque Júnior offers an eloquent meditation on the contemporary traps surrounding representations of the region:

É preciso produzir uma permanente crítica das condições de produção do conhecimento e da cultura no país e em suas diversas áreas. É preciso ter um olhar crítico em relação a este olho grande que nos espia; ter uma voz dissonante em relação a estas grandes vozes que tentam nos dizer. Não se trata, pois, de buscar uma cultura nacional ou regional, uma identidade cultural ou nacional, mas de buscar diferenças culturais, buscar sermos diferentes, dos outros e em nós mesmos. (310)

Albuquerque Júnior is not necessarily endorsing the depths of such strident rupture as Mainardi's. However, *Polígono das Secas* represents a coarse, but fitting response to this same kind of sentiment. Mainardi resurrects the spirit of the early satirical Lobato in order to advocate for the creation of new Brazilian narratives, emancipated from constraints that contemporary authors have inherited from literary trends that he, like Albuquerque Júnior, also accuses of being antiquated and stale.

Through its sardonic treatment of literary hierarchy, *Polígono das Secas* represents a site of resistance against inherent deceptions found in the notion of the literary canon and its inevitable ties to the editorial market, as well as other academic and political institutions of Brazilian cultural hegemony. Mainardi constructs an overly faithful representation of the genre—taking to extremes by evoking pillars of nationalist cultural identity only to later unsteady these same foundations by antagonizing the literary hegemony from a peripheral viewpoint. Through his contemptuous treatment of literary sertanismo in *Polígono das Secas*, Mainardi constructs a type of “daemonic parody,” obsessively attempting to debase the formal model while in the process proposing a creative misreading, in this case, of the so-called “sertanization” of Brazilian culture. Throughout the novel, an emphasis is given to support the idea that the role of sertaneja culture in the Brazilian imaginary has been fabricated and, as a result, is damaging. The novel not only critiques the stereotyping of sertaneja culture through literary discourse, but also takes on its readers, whom the narrator cautions against accepting and propagating the myths of sertaneja resiliency in the face of adversity. *Polígono das Secas* playfully confronts the literary academy, as well as the national consciousness, demonstrating a contemporary continuation of the problematic relationships with literary modernity that highlighted many veins of Latin American literature throughout the twentieth century. Mainardi's personal textual representation of sertaneja culture implicitly rejects the exclusionary tendencies of the notion of literary history, as well as parasitic uses of underdevelopment for artistic and nationalist gain. Paradoxically, even as an antagonist, Mainardi continues the search for Brazilian cultural identity by calling for an end to nationalist literary stereotypes, becoming an active participant in the process that he would have some readers believe he loathes.

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