

# Two Naturalist Novels, One Plot: Homoeroticism and Creativity in Portugal and Brazil

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## RÉSUMÉ

*La compréhension du naturalisme à l'échelle de la littérature mondiale demande, de la part de la critique, une nouvelle approche à l'histoire littéraire. Même si Zola demeure une référence, circulent, à la fin du XIXe siècle, d'autres textes fictionnels et critiques issus de ce modèle – textes qui, dans certains cas, peuvent avoir eu plus d'influence sur un roman naturaliste que n'en ont eue les textes fondateurs de cette école littéraire.*

*Partant, il ne s'agira pas ici de montrer comment les romans naturalistes d'Émile Zola ont influencé les œuvres de l'écrivain portugais, Abel Botelho, et de l'auteur brésilien, Adolfo Caminha, mais bien plutôt d'examiner comment le roman O Barão de Lavos [The Baron of Lavos, 1891] de Botelho a permis à Caminha de produire Bom-Crioulo: The Black Man and the Cabin Boy, 1895, une œuvre qui, quoique très similaire à son modèle, l'a néanmoins dépassé.*

Émile Zola suggested, in *The Experimental Novel*, that the moment has passed for the idealistic writer who invents plots, characters, feelings, and literary forms on his or her own. On the contrary, inspired by scientific methods,<sup>1</sup> Zola expressed a strong faith in a literary order according to which writers would see contemporaries as fellows and as competitors trying to prove their own theories, but never ignoring other writers' "experiences": "Hence it is nothing but a vast movement, a march forward in which everyone is a workman, according to his genius. All theories are admitted, and the theory which carries the most weight is the one which explains the most."<sup>2</sup> Zola comments further:

Everyone, the great and the small, moves freely, working and investigating together, each one in his own specialty, and recognizing no other authority than that of facts proved by experiment. Therefore in naturalism there could be neither innovators nor leaders; there are simply workmen, some more skillful than others.<sup>3</sup>

Writing about early detractors of naturalism, Salete de Almeida Cara remarks that the "very clear exposition of the design of a novel, based on the methods of the biological sciences [in *The Experimental Novel*], was often taken too literally, losing the most vivid

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<sup>1</sup> "We continue necessarily, I repeat, the work of the physiologist and the doctor, who have continued, in their turn, that of the physician and the chemist. Hence we enter into the domain of science." (Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, trans. Belle M. Sherman [New York: The Cassell Publishing Co, 1893] 32).

<sup>2</sup> Zola 44

<sup>3</sup> Zola 45.

dimension of how narratives are actually performed.”<sup>4</sup> These words were directed toward criticism on naturalism, but I would also use them to evaluate the evolution of the use of Zola's writings by other naturalists: very often, they followed the dictates of *The Experimental Novel* too closely. But, for better or for worse, the idea of a project open to different contributions was welcomed and reproduced in many European and American countries.

Zola would concur that literary discoveries are many times the result of collaborative work; thus, naturalist methods need not be limited to a single author. Indeed, authors worldwide followed Zola's conception. Many dealt with common subjects, exploring diverse possibilities for parallel situations. Working in this way, different narratives of similar realities could focus on important social questions, such as clericalism, hysteria, urban life, the workplace, and prostitution. These are topics dealing with contemporary society explored by authors such as Zola in France, Aluísio Azevedo in Brazil, Stephen Crane in the United States, Federico Gamboa in México – each one with different approaches.

This is perhaps Zola's greatest contribution to the theory and practice of writing a novel: establishing a working method, a “reproducible” method for literary creation and the suggestion of themes to be reconceived abroad by other writers. Zola, more than merely reproducing or using scientific discourses, developed a way to construct novels – an endeavor in which most other naturalist writers were not successful to the same extent. This method was “shared” through theoretical and fictional texts, reaching an international literary community in Europe and America. Enthusiasm for this new literature spread to many countries around the world, including Brazil, after the first novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* series came out, in French, a language that many writers could read, or in translations. Aspiring authors all over the world had not only practical “models” to follow, but also a “guidebook” to assist them in understanding the process: *The Experimental Novel*. These texts inspired many new writers to venture into an artistic and democratic creative project. But the result of each text, of each novel, would always depend on the author's “temperament,” as Zola claimed.<sup>5</sup>

This article deals with two “lesser” writers in worldwide naturalism: Portuguese Abel Botelho (1855-1917) and Brazilian Adolfo Caminha (1867-1897). Their names are often remembered as relevant authors of the Portuguese and Brazilian literary scenes at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and some critics noticed the influence of Botelho in Caminha's best-known novel, but only a few of them have dealt with this relationship in depth.

Caminha, as a member of “Padaria Espiritual,” a group of naturalist writers that published a newspaper called *O pão* [Bread] in Fortaleza, probably read Botelho's work, since he wrote a novel that is strongly linked to an earlier work of the Portuguese writer. Some contemporary critics would even accuse him of imitating Botelho's novel.<sup>6</sup> Caminha is better known in the international literary scene nowadays, but he is far from figuring in a general literary canon. I propose a comparative analysis of their novels, since such a comparison will allow us to understand how they dealt with the idea of literature as a product of writers “working together” in different countries in the literary world of the nineteenth century. This comparative approach does not mean they were friends or had exchanged many ideas outside

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<sup>4</sup> Salete de Almeida Cara, *Marx, Zola e a prosa realista* (Cotia, Brazil: Ateliê, 2009) 22. [“A exposição muito explícita do projeto desse romance, tributário dos avanços das ciências biológicas, foi tomado excessivamente ao pé da letra, pondo muitas vezes a perder a dimensão mais viva das narrativas efetivamente realizadas”]. Translations from Portuguese into English are my own.

<sup>5</sup> “Une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament,” wrote Zola more than once. See Émile Zola, “Mes haines, causeries littéraires et artistique,” *Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 44, 125, 217. Jean-Paul Bouillon added some variations to this definition in Émile Zola, *Le Bon Combat: De Courbet aux Impressionistes. Anthologie d'écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Hermann, 1974) 51.

<sup>6</sup> David Higgs, *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 148.

their writing: the main dialogue between Caminha and Botelho was in the plots of their novels, as I will try to show.

Botelho, author of *O Barão de Lavos* [*The Baron of Lavos*, 1891],<sup>7</sup> and Caminha, who wrote *Bom-Crioulo* (*Bom-Crioulo: The Black Man and the Cabin Boy*, 1895), are today recognized for the introduction of explicit male homosexuality into the naturalist novel. Botelho is a Portuguese better known in Portugal, and the international recognition of Adolfo Caminha came with the appearance of the English version of *Bom-Crioulo* in 1982.<sup>8</sup> By addressing the homosexual relationship so explicitly and making it central to their novels, Caminha and Botelho both followed a path proposed by other naturalist writers, who encouraged the study of sexual behavior considered “deviant” or “pathological.” But, with this movement, they were daring to take a path avoided by Zola, Eça de Queiroz, and Aluísio Azevedo – the three most canonical naturalists in France, Portugal, and Brazil, respectively.

Those books have often been read as typical examples of the sensational treatment of sexuality. Dorothy Scott Loos, for instance, writing about *Bom-Crioulo* and some of Caminha’s contemporaries in Brazil, explains: “the controversies between authors and critics, engendered for the most part by this element of sex, added to the sensationalism which these novels aroused in the public.”<sup>9</sup> She adds that, “in addition to these sensational aspects, the works included less spectacular elements, such as a genuine sympathy with the underdog in society, and other ideas consistent with the liberalism stemming from nineteenth century meliorism.”<sup>10</sup>

Both authors figure as entries in *Who’s Who in Gay and Lesbian Literature*,<sup>11</sup> written by Robert Howes. About *Bom-Crioulo*, Howes writes:

*Bom-Crioulo* caused a scandal when it was first published. The hostile, homophobic reaction of two of the major critics of the period and the early death of the author caused it to lapse into obscurity for the next forty years. In the second half of the twentieth century, it has increasingly been recognised by mainstream critics and literary historians as one of the major nineteenth-century Brazilian novels.<sup>12</sup>

Of Botelho, Howes explains that “although the appearance of *O Barão de Lavos* caused a stir and some newspapers declined to review it, the novel was generally treated seriously by the critics, even those who disliked it”<sup>13</sup>:

One critic noted that there were homosexuals in various walks of life who managed to live their lives successfully. Others interpreted the novel as a moralistic work, warning of the dangers of homosexuality and the sad, degraded end awaiting homosexuals. This is the view that has come to predominate and explains why the novel has continued to be published under successive political systems, including the repressive Salazar regime.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Abel Botelho. *O Barão de Lavos*, in *Obras de Abel Botelho*, vol. 1 (Porto: Lello & Irmão, 1979) 1-247.

<sup>8</sup> Adolfo Caminha, *Bom-Crioulo: The Black Man and the Cabin Boy*, trans. Edward Lacey (San Francisco, USA: Gay Sunshine Press, 1982). Further references to *Bom-Crioulo* are from this English translation of the novel. In Portuguese, a new 2009 edition of *Bom-Crioulo* was published by Hedra in São Paulo.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Scott Loos, *The Naturalistic Novel of Brazil* (New York: Hispanic Institute in The United States, 1963) 63.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Loos 63.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds., *Who’s Who in Gay and Lesbian Literature: From Antiquity to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Howes, in Aldrich and Wotherspoon 94.

<sup>13</sup> Howes, in Aldrich and Wotherspoon 94.

<sup>14</sup> Howes, in Aldrich and Wotherspoon 94.

He also points to the influence of the theory of degeneration “in the extreme form popularized by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso.”<sup>15</sup>

To David William Foster, “the most striking quality of *Bom-Crioulo*” is that not only is it the first explicitly gay novel in Brazilian (and Latin American) literature, “but that it may be alleged to be one of the first such works in modern Western literature. This is especially true if we define gay literature as writing about questions related to male homosexual identity, whether viewed as inherent character or chosen behavior.”<sup>16</sup> Edward Lacey, the English translator of *Bom-Crioulo*, claims that the book, “the first modern gay novel,” should be better known also because it shows sad and shocking verities about the human condition among sailors and “in the bas-fonds of the city of Rio de Janeiro some one hundred years ago.”<sup>17</sup>

Temporal and thematic coincidences were rarely emphasized by literary historians. Alfredo Bosi and Luciana Stegagno Picchio,<sup>18</sup> authors of well-known histories of Brazilian literature, do not establish Botelho as a source for Caminha’s writings. They only mention Eça de Queiroz as a Portuguese influence on his work. Even when Picchio writes about the provincial naturalist movement in which Caminha played an important role, the Portuguese names quoted were Eça de Queiroz, Ramalho Ortigão, Guerra Junqueiro and Antonio Nobre. Nelson Werneck Sodré, in *Naturalismo no Brasil*, the most complete monograph on Brazilian naturalism, states that “the orthodox Portuguese naturalists had no influence on Brazilian literature.”<sup>19</sup> His definition of “orthodox” naturalists is very clear: those whose characters were explained by heredity – a definition we can easily find in *O Barão de Lavos*. According to Sodré, the latest works of Portuguese naturalism were not read or debated in a fruitful way in Brazil. Some recent authors, however, point to a connection between those novels, based on factual evidence – three books by Botelho were sent in 1892 to the group of writers who edited the periodical *O Pão*, in Fortaleza (capital of Brazilian State of Ceara): *Lira insubmissa* (poetry), *Germano* (a poetic drama) and *O Barão de Lavos*.<sup>20</sup>

Why were obvious evidences of such influence rapidly obliterated by literary historians and literary critics for such a long time? How could these plots’ points of intersection, in such polemical and similar books, written within a very close space of time, be ignored? The answer to those questions may lie in a general tendency of literary histories to reflect a pyramidal model. We can easily recognize when a great writer, such as Émile Zola or Eça de Queiroz, influences those who are one or two or three levels below. But it is hard to see lateral exchanges and influences “from bottom up”: how could a system organized according to the idea of literary meritocracy explain the situation when a less-than-average author suggests a plot, a form or a unique way to transform a novel into a better one? This seems to be the case with Botelho and Caminha. Understanding naturalism demands a different approach to literary history. In other words, even if Zola serves as a model, there are many other suggestions circulating and producing fictional and critical texts around this model in the last years of the

<sup>15</sup> Howes, in Aldrich and Wotherspoon 97.

<sup>16</sup> David William Foster, *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing* (Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 1991) 13. In fact, a book published in 1885, *Um homem gasto* [Wasted Man], by Ferreira Leal, had some success dealing with male homosexual characters; but, among critics, the work did not retain the status of readable literature.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Lacey, translator’s preface, *Bom-Crioulo* 17.

<sup>18</sup> See Alfredo Bosi, *História Concisa da Literatura Brasileira*, 3rd edition (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1989), Luciana Stegagno Picchio, *História da literatura brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Nelson Werneck Sodré, *O naturalismo no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1965) 61. [Os naturalistas ortodoxos portugueses não influenciaram na literatura brasileira].

<sup>20</sup> See Maria Leticia Alcoforado, “*Bom-Crioulo* de Adolfo Caminha e a França,” *Revista de Letras* 28 (1988): 87. See also Leonardo Mendes. “Vida Literária em *O Pão da Padaria Espiritual*, Fortaleza, 1892-1896,” *Revista Interfaces* 17.2 (Jun.- Dec. 2012): 62-74.

nineteenth century. Some of these texts might have more directly influenced a naturalist novel than the writings of the main author of the literary school. My intention is not to give answers as to how Émile Zola's novels might have influenced the Portuguese writer Abel Botelho and the Brazilian novelist Adolfo Caminha, but rather to show how Botelho opened the way for Caminha to produce a very similar but much more interesting novel than the original work.

### Extreme naturalism

In the last years of the twentieth and in the beginning of the twenty-first century, *O Barão de Lavos* and *Bom-Crioulo* gained the sympathy of a new generation of critics. A freer generation in terms of morality could view sex in these narratives without the old prejudices against naturalism. A newer generation of critics could, with new tools, explain what some of the earlier critics noticed, but did not explore sufficiently. Gender and queer theories have allowed a positive evaluation of homoeroticism after decades of readings pointing to this dynamic as a negative element, especially in pieces written by conservative critics of naturalism. According to this conservative criticism, homoeroticism was the “final proof” that naturalist writers were merely exploring the “pathological side” of human nature in order to obtain more publicity for their books.

Óscar Lopes and António José Saraiva<sup>21</sup> wrote that *O Barão de Lavos*, the first book of a five-novel series titled “Social Pathology Cycle” – the other novels are *O livro de Alda* (1898), *Amanhã* (1901), *Fatal dilema* (1907), and *Próspero Fortuna* (1907) –, represents “extreme naturalist aesthetics” in Portugal. In other words, these critics, as well as many others among their compatriots, believe Botelho is one of the authors who have most explored this “pathological” side of life. This is a euphemistic way to say that Botelho explored a prohibited theme: homosexuality. *O Barão de Lavos* is, according to Mario César Lugarinho, “the founding narrative of explicit representation of homosexuality in the Portuguese language.”<sup>22</sup> To Lugarinho, however, Botelho's book has “no great aesthetic ambitions” and a “very irregular narrative structure and inconsistent characters.”<sup>23</sup>

The critic's evaluation is not incorrect. He also points out how *O Barão de Lavos* made an important contribution to literature because of its innovative approach to male homosexuality. The novel profiles Sebastião, the Baron of Lavos, as a decadent nobleman married to Elvira, a bourgeois woman richer than her husband. Sebastião is a name full of meaning in Portuguese history: D. Sebastião (1554-1578) was a king who disappeared in a crusade battle in Marrocos before he had the chance to get married and leave an heir to his throne. After his death, Portugal entered an enormous crisis and, in 1580, the kingdom became part of Spain, remaining so until 1640. Sebastião became a legend; and even today we can find in popular Brazilian and Portuguese culture – such as regional poetry in the Brazilian Northeast – traces of what is called “sebastianismo”: the belief that one day D. Sebastião, “The Hidden One” or “The Desired,” would return to save Portugal and the Christian world. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, peasants from the village Canudos, in the hinterland of Brazil, started a rebellion against the “godless” Brazilian Republic, believing

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by José Luiz Foureaux de Sousa Júnior in “Abel Botelho: o lado ‘esquisito’ do esquecimento,” in Ida Maria Santos Ferreira Alves and Silvio Renato Jorge, eds., *A palavra silenciada: Estudos de literatura portuguesa e africana* (Rio de Janeiro: Vício de Leitura, 2001) 112.

<sup>22</sup> Mário César Lugarinho, “Direito à história ou o silêncio de uma geração: uma leitura d’*O Barão de Lavos*, de Abel Botelho,” in Alves and Jorge 164.

<sup>23</sup> Lugarinho 164.

that D. Sebastião would return as a messiah to support them. This event was narrated by Euclides da Cunha in a book titled *Os sertões* (1902), published in English as *Rebellion in the Backlands* – probably the most important work of nonfiction in Brazilian literature. Thus, when Abel Botelho named the main character of his novel “Sebastião,” he was criticizing Portugal’s extreme religiosity. He was also suggesting that Portugal would inherit nothing from its nobles. They were infertile, and that infertility was represented by homosexual love and intercourse.

Sebastião falls in love with Eugenio, a poor white, a blond and blue-eyed young fellow. The narrator considers the relationship between an old man and a post-adolescent awkward. The baron and his wife drift apart, and the latter also takes Eugenio as a lover, forming a love triangle. In a brief and informative review, Brazilian critic Massaud Moisés concludes: “After a dramatic scene was created, events piled up, leading the Baron deeper and deeper, until the end, when he died ignobly.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the book, the Baron’s behavior is treated as an “atavistic” disease, an energetic “explosion” of “constitutional vices” inherited from a confluence of six generations “involved by crazy instincts of pederasty.”<sup>25</sup> He is a “degenerate” in the words of the narrator, who usually uses terms taken from the vocabulary of genetics, physics, and botany to describe the character.

The condemnation of homosexuality (a word created by the medical culture of the nineteenth century) is clear and outspoken, and the examples could fill several pages. However, Lugarinho notes that the narrative presents a sort of trap for the reader: “Apparently, the narrator is a conscious moralist, a spokesperson for Victorian bourgeois morality,”<sup>26</sup> he explains; “[h]owever, a great number of comments are raised to support the Baron’s behavior.”<sup>27</sup> According to Lugarinho, the Baron’s trajectory “is treated as an initiation to perversion, which may, many times, recall Sade, for whom the path to perversion is also seen as the way to knowledge and, therefore, even as step towards Reason.”<sup>28</sup> One striking example of the narrative’s ambiguity occurs when the Baron discovers the taste of semen when practicing oral sex on Eugenio, as noted by Lugarinho: “The narrator could have accused him of vice, immorality and finally physical degradation, but he renders the scene a great initiatory and lyrical moment.”<sup>29</sup>

If *O Barão de Lavos* inaugurates the explicit representation of male homosexuality in Portugal, we can state that *Bom-Crioulo* plays a similar role in Brazil. João Silvério Trevisan, a present-day Brazilian LGBT activist who is also an established journalist and writer, has noticed that the book handles the homosexual relationship with “astonishing naturalness.” According to him, the novel also legitimates the “tenderness between two men from the

<sup>24</sup> Massaud Moisés, *A “patologia social” de Abel Botelho* (São Paulo: FFLCH, 1962) 22. [“Criada a situação dramática, os acontecimentos se avolumam, conduzindo o Barão de baixaza a baixaza, até que, no fim, morre na sarjeta, ignobelmente”].

<sup>25</sup> Botelho 16. To Hadji Omar Thiam, “Les personnages des romans d’Abel Botelho sont, pour la plupart, soumis au déterminisme héréditaire. Les déformations physiques et morales de ceux-ci trouvent leur explication dans l’hérédité. C’est ainsi que, dans *O Barão de Lavos*, l’homosexualité de Sebastião est considérée comme une donnée naturelle perpétuée par six générations dans sa lignée.” “Les sources de *Patologia Social* d’Abel Botelho (1853-1917),” Actes du colloque interdisciplinaire: Nouvelles perspectives de la recherche française sur la culture portugaise (5-6 février 2007). Web 16 Nov. 2015 < [http://www.msh-clermont.fr/IMG/pdf/13-THIAM\\_115-125\\_.pdf](http://www.msh-clermont.fr/IMG/pdf/13-THIAM_115-125_.pdf)>.

<sup>26</sup> Lugarinho 165. [Aparentemente, o narrador é um consciente porta-voz de uma moral burguesa moralista, vitoriana].

<sup>27</sup> Lugarinho 165. [Todavia, traz à tona uma série de comentários abonadores do Barão].

<sup>28</sup> Lugarinho 165. [sua trajetória recebe um tratamento de iniciação à perversão, podendo, em alguns momentos, se recorrer ao modelo de Sade em que a perversão libertina é caminho de conhecimento e, portanto, de acesso à Razão].

<sup>29</sup> Lugarinho 166. [“Entre imputar-lhe o vício e a degradação moral e física definitivamente, o narrador prefere apresentar a cena como um grande momento iniciático e lírico”].

lower class”<sup>30</sup> while paying tribute “to the scientific prejudices” of the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, not only on the homosexuality issue, but concerning the racial question as well.<sup>31</sup> In an article on literary life in Rio de Janeiro, Leonardo Mendes explains that, at the end of nineteenth century, homoeroticism was a fact for writers that were sharing public spaces with gay men in coffee shops, restaurants, theaters, squares, and brothels.<sup>32</sup> American historian James Green says *Bom-Crioulo* “is a complex novel that involves multiple notions of race and sexuality in Brazil at the turn of the century,”<sup>33</sup> and “it is remarkable how Caminha describes homoeroticism with a bold frankness.”<sup>34</sup>

This characteristic recently gained international interest, and the novel was translated into German, English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Turkish. According to Carlos Eduardo Bezerra, the recent internationalization of *Bom-Crioulo* indicates that the novel “filled gaps,” not only in Brazil, but also in other countries, by building a character – the sailor – which is linked to the erotic imagination and to pornographic depictions of homoeroticism throughout the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> David Higgs remembers that Caminha had attended the naval school in Rio and was certainly “well informed about the milieu he described. A doctor writing in 1872 commented on the high incidence of sodomy in the Brazilian military. Superiors demanded (“does not solicit but orders”) this sexual service of those under their authority.”<sup>36</sup> As happened to many other naturalist works, after an explosive moment in 1895 (the same year as Oscar Wilde’s trial), the novel underwent a process that could be classified as a “conspiracy of silence,” both in official and academic spheres, for moral reasons, says Trevisan.<sup>37</sup> Other factors would help place *Bom-Crioulo* in real or virtual indexes: in 1910, Brazilian sailors started a rebellion against physical punishment; and the leader of the movement, named João Cândido, was, like Amaro in the novel, a black sailor. The book was, at one time, categorized as a “communist novel” by the Brazilian Navy.<sup>38</sup> In 1983, literary journalist Leo Gilson Ribeiro tried to publish a review of *Bom-Crioulo* in one of the biggest Brazilian newspapers. According to him, the editors decided not to publish the review due to the opposition of the newspaper’s owners. However, this moral condemnation did not succeed in excluding the novel from libraries and bookstores, and the book continued to be published and read in Brazil.<sup>39</sup>

### Similarities and differences between *Bom Crioulo* and *O Barão de Lavos*

*Bom Crioulo*’s plot is very similar to that of *O Barão de Lavos*. An old, strong, and experienced sailor, Amaro falls in love with a young cabin boy named Aleixo. Physically, Aleixo is reminiscent of Eugenio: he is also white, blond, and blue-eyed. Amaro is a black man,

<sup>30</sup> João Silvério Trevisan, “Introdução to *Bom-Crioulo*” (São Paulo: Hedra, 2009) 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> Trevisan 18.

<sup>32</sup> Leonardo Mendes, “Vida literária e homoerotismo no Rio de Janeiro de 1890,” *Via Atlântica* 24 (Dec. 2013): 133-48.

<sup>33</sup> James Green, *Além do Carnaval: homossexualidade masculina no Brasil do século 20* (São Paulo: Editora da UNESP, 1999) 73.

<sup>34</sup> Green 73.

<sup>35</sup> Carlos Eduardo Bezerra, “Bom-Crioulo: um romance da literatura gay feito no Brasil,” *Revista de Letras* 28.1-2 (Jan.-Dec. 2006): 99. Following this suggestion, it is interesting to think how the song *In the Navy*, by disco group Village People, became a gay icon.

<sup>36</sup> Higgs 148.

<sup>37</sup> Trevisan 11.

<sup>38</sup> Trevisan 11-12. On João Cândido and his movement, see Joseph Love, *The Revolt of the Whip* (Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Trevisan 11-12.

probably a fugitive slave who found shelter in the Navy. He is described as “very tall,” a “colossal figure,” “with a formidable system of muscles”; and he is also compared to Hercules, for his bravery in withstanding the corporal punishment he receives.<sup>40</sup>

It is known that Caminha read Botelho’s novel, and it seems clear that similarities and differences were not so incidental. They seem to be part of a project that allows us to understand how small differences in a plot can have many consequences. Just as a chemist must change the initial elements of a reaction to see the result of such changes, novelist Adolfo Caminha felt that he, as a naturalist, should reconstruct the plot of *O Barão de Lavos* by changing some of its elements (for example, substituting a black and marginal protagonist, for a decadent noble) and keeping others (the poor young white guy) to show better the differences between Portuguese and Brazilian societies. In some cases, the authors can even use almost identical passages. Dorothy Scott Loos quoted very similar descriptions in *A carne*, written by another Brazilian author, Júlio Ribeiro, and in Zola’s *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*. “The lush Paradou [...] was a model for a description of the tropical and sensual setting of Brazil.”<sup>41</sup> The expression that serves as a title for the Brazilian novel, *Bom-Crioulo*, means approximately “a good black man.” In the nineteenth century, “crioulo” was more specifically the word used to define a black man born in Brazil rather than in Africa; a “crioulo” may or may not be a slave.

After developing a sexual relationship on board, in the corvette where they served as sailors, Amaro and Aleixo go live together, sharing a room in a boarding house. There they can get together on their days off, keeping their privacy under the blessing of Carolina, a Portuguese thirty-eight year-old woman. Everything is going well, and Carolina even makes a joke that, someday, Aleixo and Amaro could have kids. However, Amaro is transferred to another steel ship, one of the most powerful battleships in the world, “famous for its complicated machinery and its impressive artillery capacity.”<sup>42</sup> Amaro has a hunch that the transfer will take him away from Aleixo, revealing that he is aware of the meanings of current developments in society: what he expects does happen.

Amaro’s posting to the new ship is not simply another episode, but a factor that suggests the process of modernization in the Brazilian Armada and its effect on relationships among seamen. The changes create a discrepancy between the old and the new Navy. Amaro and Aleixo are now separated on the sea, and their days off will now rarely coincide. Carolina realizes Aleixo is alone and, while looking at herself in the mirror, she decides she would be able to seduce the young boy. Amaro tries to escape from his new ship, but he is severely whipped and transferred to the Navy hospital. Amaro is, in theory, already free, but this physical punishment submits him to a new kind of violent servitude. Given the strength of slavery in Brazilian society, even a black Hercules must succumb. Hence, his attempt to build his own identity, as a lover of a young white man, fails.

As in the case in *O Barão de Lavos*, the older man is the one who introduces the “housewife” to the young man, with whom he will have his first heterosexual intercourse. In both novels, the older man will suffer from unrequited love. Amaro will be destroyed by love and surrounded by police bayonets. As in the Portuguese novel, the Brazilian version considers love and sex between men unnatural, but also maintains an ambiguous discourse: after the first intercourse between Amaro and Aleixo, “the day had dawned fine and sunny, hot and luminous, with the exquisite transparency of freshly washed crystal.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Greek mythology is very present in this novel: Ganymede, a model for the Greek social custom of pederasty, and the relationship between Socrates and Alcebiades are mentioned in Abel Botelho’s novel.

<sup>41</sup> Scott Loos 79.

<sup>42</sup> Caminha 79.

<sup>43</sup> Caminha 61.



In addition to similarities between the two novels, we can also find some relevant distinctions. At the end of nineteenth century, Brazil was experiencing a time of intense transformation and a certain amount of political and economic turbulence, with the establishment, in 1889, of a Republican regime, after almost seventy years of Monarchy. But this Republic also brought a series of frustrations.

Brazilian naturalism found no major obstacles in representing the world of the working class. Great worker characters were created by Aluísio Azevedo, especially in *O cortiço* [*The Slum*], and Júlio Ribeiro, in *A carne* [*The Flesh*]. Amaro, the *bom-crioulo*, is a sailor who suffers the hardships and violence of the hierarchical organization of labor in the Navy; the cabin boy Aleixo also has a series of duties on ships; and Carolina, besides the boarding house, can count on a regular income from a butcher, who is also her lover. This material and economic world is virtually absent in *O Barão de Lavos*. In the novel of Abel Botelho, we do not know where money comes from. Sebastião has a property in the country; but this mention serves more to show his disregard for his alleged fortune, which the love for Eugene will ruin (what is revealed, moreover, is that the fortune is not that great), than to demonstrate Portuguese social organization – perhaps because of the political crisis that the country was experiencing at the time, waiting for a Republic that would still take two decades to be realized. In 1918, writer Lima Barreto would assert that “Brazil is more complex in its economic and social order”<sup>44</sup> than Portugal. “Old Portugal may have had a great past,” he wrote, but “[w]e have not a past, we only have the future.”<sup>45</sup>

Portuguese stagnation, however, is worse for the upper echelons of society (like the Baron) than for the poor people in the novel. Eugene becomes a hit in the theater, taking advantage of the publicity that his relationship with the Baron provides. On the other hand, Aleixo is killed by Amaro, who is himself already destroyed by the failure of the relationship in which he has invested all his energy. By way of analysis, we could say that Botelho sees some future in Eugene and Elvira, who, in an allegorical way, represent Portugal’s poorer class and its bourgeoisie, while Caminha shows how poor Brazilians, although active in economic and social life, are destined to fail.

Thus, the relationship between the first (*O Barão de Lavos*) and second (*Bom-Crioulo*) novels must not be simplified as a mere replication of plot or plagiarism. Caminha did not hide his affiliation to Botelho, but used the plot suggested by the Portuguese writer to explore different situations. Slavery, the work force, and sexuality in Rio de Janeiro were factors that contributed to creating a plot with a new shape and very different and complex developments.

Caminha more than once expressed his frustration with the Brazilian cultural and economic environment. According to him, this environment prevented the professionalization of writing. His frustration, however, indicates that the book market in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century already existed as a business and could generate a “satisfactory” income.<sup>46</sup> Although he advocated that writers should not sacrifice their artistic ideals or accept pressure from publishers for popular works, Caminha lived in an environment where the book was becoming a more popular commodity. Books were getting less expensive, with simpler editions making it possible for them to be read by more people. People who could not read “fashionable” foreign languages, such as French and English, were able to understand books like *Bom-Crioulo* and Portuguese translations of French libertine books. Alessandra El Far has presented

<sup>44</sup> Lima Barreto, “Literatura militante,” in *Marginália* (São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro: Mérito, 1953) 115. [O Brasil é mais complexo, na ordem social e econômica].

<sup>45</sup> Barreto 116. [A velha terra lusa tem um grande passado. Nós não temos nenhum, só future].

<sup>46</sup> The most important article by Adolfo Caminha on this subject is “Editores,” in *Cartas literárias* (Fortaleza: UFC Edições, 1999) 119-25.

the results of her research showing how the circulation of Portuguese books in Brazil increased at the end of the nineteenth century, especially those classified as “for men” and “sensational novels” in newspapers. Although the writers were not always able to reach a wide audience, they would have liked to. Prostitutes were recurring characters in “sensational novels,” but their presence can also be seen as an index of this new penetration of a book culture into the lower levels of Brazilian society: a chronicler of *Jornal do Brasil* wrote on December 31st, 1900, that “[interest in] the book has spread; [it is] no longer a rare and expensive object”<sup>47</sup>; another, Orestes Barbosa, told the story of Alice da Silva Ramos, a prostitute who, he said, “decided to learn to read just to ‘taste’ the famous narratives of her time.”<sup>48</sup>

Maybe this fact helps to explain the dubious narratives, such as those we find in *O Barão de Lavos* and *Bom-Crioulo*, and many other novels of this period, including the works of Zola, the Goncourts, and Aluísio Azevedo. Authors who were able to write about difficult themes were often the same ones who would resort to a moralizing mode of discourse. Even those who expressed a progressive political point of view would display unbridled racial, class, and gender prejudices. The desire to denounce violence against the poor many times would result in a reaffirmation of some patterns of domination.

The scientific discourse that transforms homosexuality into an illness is nowadays a clear sign of weakness in these novels. Hence, *O Barão de Lavos* and *Bom-Crioulo* offer us a double challenge: first, we need to read naturalist novels with the freedom that we now have to deal with issues once forbidden; second, we need to maintain a critical spirit to understand the forces that determine the strength and limits of these books.

Botelho and Caminha probably sought more than popularity among readers: they were also hoping to be recognized by their peers as good writers. In order to achieve that distinction, they shied away from endorsing “homosexual behavior” outright. As writers, in some measure, they felt they must deny their adherence to the forbidden to be able to continue exploring it. Caminha, for example, tried to justify his qualities as a novelist, denying any relationship with an “immoral” literature and pointing to known authors who, in theory, would be more “dangerous” than he was. In a newspaper article about another novel he had written, he rhetorically asked if the novels by Aluísio Azevedo and Júlio Ribeiro, better known at this time, should be burned in front of a council of Jesuit priests. Caminha also stated that he was against “literary licentiousness” and that he would never forgive a writer for describing immoral scenes and erotic episodes just to achieve some value as scandal.

This effort to distance himself from “immorality” is a response to the way he was treated by contemporary critics. It has even been suggested that the story of the cabin boy Aleixo could be based on the writer’s own biography. Defending himself from what was read as an accusatory criticism, Caminha wrote an article titled “A damned book,” in which he asks: “What is, after all, *Bom-Crioulo*?”<sup>49</sup> And he answers, referencing contemporary scientific findings as best he could:

This is nothing more than a case of sexual inversion studied by Krafft-Ebing, Moll, and Tardieu, and found in books dealing with legal medicine. A rude sailor of slave origins, uneducated, with no instruction in the principles of sociability, in a fatal moment obeys the homosexual tendencies of his own body and perpetrates a sordid

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<sup>47</sup> Alessandra El Far, *Páginas de sensação: Literatura popular e pornográfica in Rio de Janeiro (1870-1924)* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003) 71. [o livro espalhou-se; deixou de ser objeto raro e caro].

<sup>48</sup> See El Far 70.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Bezerra 108. [Que é, afinal de contas, o *Bom-Crioulo*?]

act: he is a born-degenerate who is not responsible for the vileness he has committed until he murders his friend, the victim of his instincts.<sup>50</sup>

When Caminha had to defend himself, the dubiousness of his romance fades, and the author ends up reducing the interest of his book. Medical discourse wins over the literary one. However this quote also shows how the medical condemnation of homoerotic relationships works as a kind of shield, which the writer uses to avoid attacks – not always successfully. These were attacks which naturalist writers around the world, in those days, had to deal with after adopting Zola's suggestions.

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Bezerra 108. [“Nada mais que um caso de inversão sexual estudado em Krafft-Ebing, em Moll, em Tardieu, e nos livros de medicina legal. Um marinheiro rudo, de origem escrava, sem educação, nem princípio algum de sociabilidade, num momento fatal obedece às tendências homossexuais de seu organismo e pratica uma ação torpe: é um degenerado nato, um irresponsável pelas baixezas que comete, até assassinar o amigo, a vítima dos seus instintos”].