

THE ECOLOGICAL LEGACIES OF BALEIA'S MORAL LIFE

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Abstract: This essay studies the role of the dog “Baleia” in two versions of *Vidas secas* (Graciliano Ramos’ 1938 novel and Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ 1963 film), to reflect on historical and present relationships between people and animals in Brazilian society, economic life, and cultural production. I argue that while doing so may not have been their intention, Ramos and Pereira demonstrated through their renderings of Baleia that the treatment of animals in and by human societies is an ethical as well as an economic matter—one that will continue to have enduring implications in Brazil and elsewhere for the future of humanity, non-human animals, and the shared natural world that together we call home.

Keywords: Baleia, Graciliano Ramos, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, animal rights, environmentalism.

Resumo: Neste ensaio estudo o papel da cachorra "Baleia" no romance *Vidas secas* de Graciliano Ramos (1938), e no filme epônimo de Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1963), para refletir sobre as relações entre pessoas e animais não humanos na sociedade, na vida econômica, e na produção cultural brasileiras desde a primeira metade do século XX até o presente. Desejo mostrar que embora não fosse a sua intenção, tanto Ramos quanto Pereira demonstraram através das distintas interpretações de “Baleia” que o tratamento dos animais é uma questão ética além de econômica—uma questão que terá implicações duradouras para o futuro da humanidade, dos animais não humanos, e do bem-estar do planeta que juntos chamamos de lar.

Palavras-chave: Baleia, Graciliano Ramos, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, direitos dos animais, ambientalismo.

On Baleia’s literary birth (and death), 1938

Graciliano Ramos’ fourth and final novel, *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives*) (1938), famously depicted the travails of an itinerant family in the Brazilian northeast as they struggled for survival with their ill-fated animal companions amidst the slow violence (Nixon) of drought, climate-induced poverty, and chronic hunger. In subsequent decades, the work would become quintessential regional literature not only for its acute critique of a corrupt state and unjust society, but also for Ramos’ anthropomorphic rendering of the novel’s central character—a scrawny dog with the cruelly ironic name, “Baleia” (whale), whose rich interior life, psychological meanderings, and capacity for empathy rivaled that of her pitiable human family: the slow-witted but hardworking ranch hand, Fabiano; his clever but unhappy wife, Vitória; and their two nameless children, known simply as the Younger Boy and the Older Boy.¹¹⁰ Since the appearance of Ramos’ novel, published just one year after the writer completed an eleven-month jail sentence in Rio de Janeiro,¹¹¹ Baleia has been much commented among critics for seeming more “human” than her humans. In a social environment where all life is precarious and empathy virtually non-existent, the dog’s thoughtfulness, devotion, longing, and joy—mostly expressed through third-person, omniscient narration—set her apart from the callous and sometimes cruel human family that held her in their care, as well as from the brutal social conditions framing their “dry” collective existence.

As the Alagoan author made known later in his career, these five oft-studied characters were in fact fictionalized renderings of key figures from his difficult and sometimes abusive childhood, spent mostly in the Brazilian northeast as the eldest of sixteen children. One of the most memorable glimpses into their “barren lives”—Fabiano’s anguished sacrifice of Baleia for fear that she was suffering from rabies—reconstructed a scene that Ramos had experienced as an eyewitness in the small town of Maniçoba many years earlier. Written initially as a short story in May 1937 and published in Brazil and Argentina soon thereafter, Ramos’s heart-wrenching conceptualization of Baleia and her

¹¹⁰ In a 1944 letter to João Condé reprinted upon his death in 1953, Ramos explained that he had based Fabiano and Sinhá Vitória on his elderly grandparents, and the two boys on his uncles and aunts. See: “*Vidas secas*”. *O Cruzeiro: Revista* (Rio de Janeiro). 25 April 1953. Edição 27. p. 65.

¹¹¹ In the aftermath of the 1935 “Intentona Comunista”, Ramos was accused of leftist militancy by the Vargas administration and imprisoned on political grounds, though in the fact, he did not join the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) until 1945. See: Macedo and Ponso.

untimely demise would ultimately serve as inspiration for his best-known work, appearing in the final version of the novel as the ninth of thirteen chapters.¹¹²

Baleia goes to Cannes, 1964

Nearly a quarter-century after Baleia's literary birth, Ramos' legendary canine maintained her protagonism in director Nelson Pereira dos Santos' iconic film adaptation of *Vidas secas*, which amidst effusive accolades from international cinema critics, sparked outrage during the 1964 Cannes Film Festival over the dog's violent and distressing "killing" on the big screen. The scene was so realistic that organizers reportedly made an unauthorized effort to cut it from the film before festival events were even underway, outraging seasoned producer Luiz Carlos Barreto, who, having developed great affection for the pup while collaborating on *Vidas secas*, adopted her into his Rio de Janeiro home after work on the film concluded.¹¹³ Notwithstanding assurances of the dog's wellbeing, early media coverage of Cannes that year highlighted critiques of the "cruel" Brazilian filmmakers, inadvertently shining a spotlight on the beginnings of an international movement to protest animal abuse, spearheaded by Italian Countess Mia Acquarone, who reportedly stormed out of a screening in disgust to file a complaint with the Society for the Protection of Animals.¹¹⁴

To allay spiraling fears and accusations that the dog had in actuality been sacrificed for the art of cinematography, the Brazilian filmmakers acted swiftly, collaborating with Air France executives to convince their public relations director, Michel Villiers, to accompany a very pregnant Baleia on a first-class flight from Brazil to France. Upon arrival in Cannes, Baleia became the biggest if most unanticipated star of the festival,¹¹⁵ and news pivoted to an informal competition among fans to adopt her puppies in the case they were born during her visit to France.¹¹⁶ All the while, Pereira dos Santos

¹¹² Ramos explained in a May 11, 1937 letter to Argentine translator Benjamín de Garay that Baleia was the protagonist of the short story around which he would subsequently construct *Vidas secas*. He published the story in Brazil for cem-mil réis in the literary supplement to *O Jornal*, and then subsequently, with Garay's help, in an Argentine daily during a (not uncommon) time of financial duress (Maia 49, p. 59).

¹¹³ See: "Bronca", *Diário da Noite* (Rio de Janeiro). 1 May 1964, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ "Toda a Europa se curva ante 'Vidas Sêcas' sob protesto da Condêssa amiga da Baleia". *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro). 5 May 1964, p. 8.

¹¹⁵ Baleia's trip received lots of media attention in Brazil during May 1964. See, for example: "Baleia voa para Cannes", *Tribuna da Imprensa* (Rio de Janeiro). 9-10 May 1964, p. 7; and, "Baleia seguiu", *Diário da Noite* (São Paulo). 11 May 1964, p. 14.

¹¹⁶ See: "Baleia seguiu", *Diário da Noite* (Rio de Janeiro). 11 May 1964, p. 14; and "Palma de Ouro ficou na França", *Diário da Noite* (Rio de Janeiro) 15 May 1964, p. 15.

wondered sardonically what the countess and other supporters of the animal protection campaign must have thought about children in the Brazilian northeast dying from malnutrition, likely not suspecting that around the same time, biologists, climate scientists, and environmental activists would begin making the argument that those two issues—human wellbeing and the wellbeing of non-human animals—are, in fact, inextricably interconnected. As the prescient Rachel Carlson put it to an interviewer that same year during a discussion of her groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring* (1962): "Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself".¹¹⁷

Despite all the controversy it stirred, Ramos'-novel-as-Pereira's-film departed Cannes with three awards.¹¹⁸ And back home in Brazil just a few weeks later, Baleia gave birth to seven puppies, again making front-page news for the novel and the film across the country, by then nearly two months into the right-wing dictatorship that would remain in power for over two decades.¹¹⁹ Thus having drawn worldwide attention to dire poverty and hunger in the Northeast at a moment of extended political crisis for all of Brazil, Baleia's 1960s "performance" of Ramos' 1930s character sparked unintentional debate and transatlantic exchange over the ethically fraught relationship between human and non-human animals just as the nascent animal rights movement was beginning to gain momentum in Europe and across the Americas.¹²⁰

In this context, this essay considers Baleia's protagonism in the written and filmic versions of *Vidas secas* as a way to reflect on the historical and present relationships between people and animals in Brazilian society, economic life, and cultural production.¹²¹ In light of increased scholarly attentiveness to animal sentience, morality, and subjecthood that has emerged since the creation and circulation of Ramos' legendary character in the 1930s, and academic and popular awareness of the relationship between the commodification of animal lives and the global environmental crisis that has expanded and deepened over the last several decades, I also consider the role of cultural production, including fiction writing and film, in inviting and inspiring human societies to consider their animal

¹¹⁷ See: Natural Resources Defense Council, "The Story of Silent Spring". August 13, 2015. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/story-silent-spring>.

¹¹⁸ *Vidas secas* won "Best Youth Film", "Best Art and Essay Film", and the "Catholic Film Industry Institute Award".

¹¹⁹ "Baleia deu à luz sete cachorrinhos". *Diario de Pernambuco* 27 May 1964, p. 1.

¹²⁰ On the history of animal rights, see for example Benton and Redfearn; Kete, Ryder, and Singer.

¹²¹ To avoid redundancy, I shall henceforth refer sometimes to non-human animals as just "animals".

counterparts, along with the environment and the greater natural world, as subjects worthy of empathy and respect. What, then, I wish to ask, might be the ecological legacies of Baleia’s moral life? I hope to show that while doing so may not have been their primary intention, Ramos and Pereira demonstrated through their distinct renderings of Baleia that the treatment of animals in and by human societies is an ethical as well as an economic matter—one that will continue to have enduring implications for the future of humanity, non-human animals, and the shared natural world that together we call home.

Baleia as Foreshadower

“Speciesism”—a term coined only in the 1970s¹²²—was certainly not part of Graciliano Ramos’ conceptual repertoire when he created his most famous character some forty years earlier; nor was it likely familiar to Pereira when he adapted *Vidas secas* to film in 1963. Nevertheless, both representations of Baleia’s human-like qualities, and particularly, her introspective, moral life, powerfully foregrounded the scientific and ethical examination of non-human animal existence in relation to humanity that would develop more fully and amidst significant polemics over the decades to follow. Since the outset of the twenty-first century, this ample body of interdisciplinary work has culminated in the now widely recognized link between the exploitation of animals and the phenomenon of human-induced climate change, otherwise known as the Anthropocene.¹²³ For the past several decades, scholarship in fields ranging from philosophy, ethics, and cultural anthropology, to veterinary medicine, evolutionary biology, and ecology has argued not only that the animals who are exploited through diverse facets of human existence can and do possess and exhibit their own moral behavior—what Marc Beckoff and Jessica Pierce have denominated “wild justice” (2009)—but also that the widespread use of animals by humans, especially through factory farming and related industrialization, has had a devastating impact on environmental wellbeing worldwide. As Koneswaren and Nierenberg concluded in their 2008 study on human contributions to global warming, “the farm animal sector is the single largest anthropogenic user of land” in a global context (578).

¹²² Psychologist Richard D. Ryder coined the term in a self-published pamphlet called “Speciesism”, which he distributed in Oxford (UK) in 1970. As he later described, his subsequent exchanges with philosopher Peter Singer influenced Singer’s 1975 publication of *Animal Liberation*, which facilitated recognition and use of the term in North America. See Ryder, “Speciesism Revisited”.

¹²³ For diverse disciplinary approaches to the Anthropocene, see Crutzen and Stoerner; Chakrabarty, Heringman, Oreskes, and Meybeck. Meybeck observes that Vernadski coined the term in the 1920s, when the geological impact of humans was still very limited.

Formulated and received under distinct moments of authoritarian rule—during Getúlio Vargas’ Estado Novo (1937-45) and on the eve of the 1964-85 military dictatorship, respectively—the novelistic and filmic versions of Baleia’s life averred the meaning and value of non-human animal existence within a national and world order that relegated people like Fabiano and his family to destitution, ultimately disparaging and dismissing marginalized lives and “unproductive” lands for failing to contribute meaningfully to progress and modernization. Like so many climate refugees from Brazil and across the Americas, and well before the Anthropocene became a keyword for scholars and activists who care about the global climate crisis, Fabiano, Vitória, the boys, and their animals—Baleia, as well as an unnamed pet parrot who due to Sinhá Vitória’s frantic hunger will become a family meal¹²⁴—are forced by drought to flee their improvised homes again and again, forever in search of a more secure, more prosperous, and certainly from Sinhá Vitória’s perspective, a more “human” existence.

After an extended period of stability and even relative prosperity as transient residents of an unoccupied, tumbledown ranch, Fabiano must contemplate uprooting his family once again as the familiar reality of scarcity sets in, his thoughts clouded by deep regret over having sacrificed Baleia. His remorse is only made deeper by the lingering sense that the sacrifice, protracted and agonizing, was also perhaps completely unnecessary. Hungry, exhausted, and filled with rage over his powerlessness, he shoots haphazardly at migrating flocks, convinced by his wife’s far-fetched suggestion that the clusters of thirsty black birds are somehow to blame for the family’s dwindling water supplies:

Que havia de fazer? Fugir de novo, aboletar-se em outro lugar, recomeçar a vida. ... Seria necessário mudar-se? Apesar de saber perfeitamente que era necessário, agarrou-se a esperanças frágeis. Talvez a seca não viesse, talvez chovesse. ... As bichas excomungadas eram a causa da seca. Se pudesse matá-las, a seca se extinguiria. ... Impossível dar cabo daquela praga. Estirou pela campina, achou-se isolado. Sozinho num mundo coberto de penas, de aves que iam comê-lo. ... Se a cachorra estivesse viva, iria regalar-se. ... Coitadinha da cadela. ... Precisava consultar com Sinhá Vitória, combinar a viagem, livrar-se das arribações, explicar-se, convencer-se de que não praticara injustiça matando a cachorra. Necessário abandonar aqueles lugares amaldiçoados. (Ramos, pp. 110-15)

Thus losing faith in the miracles he had once asked of God and fearful of even greater sacrifice and suffering to come, Fabiano abandons hope for the *sertão* after his small assembly of languishing farm animals finally perishes from dehydration and starvation. After slaughtering a lone, sick calf whose meat he dries for transport, the beleaguered father sets off with his diminished crew, still

¹²⁴ On the recreation of this opening scene in Pereira’s film and for a fictionalized “interview” with the parrot who (like Baleia) survived “death” on screen, see Corrêa and Price.

crippled with guilt over the dog, and anguished over the thought that his only remaining companion animal—a horse loaned to him by the ranch owner and regretfully left behind—will die alone and like Baleia, in pain (p. 125).

With the pathetic image of the dog's vulture-ravished body already etched into his memory, the weary ranch hand gets teary-eyed imagining the horse's pitiable fate: "*esmorecido num canto de cerca...magro, pelado, faminto...arredondava uns olhos que pareciam de gente*" (p. 124). Fabiano's despair is exacerbated not only by the knowledge that his companion will suffer a miserable death—one that he as caretaker should have been able to prevent—but also by fear. The eyes in Ramos' narrative thus function as a leveling mechanism, as the "human-seeming" gaze and perspective might belong to Baleia, to the horse, to the ranch hand, his wife, or to one of the children—that is, to a person or to an animal. As animals are elevated through their human-like qualities and humans are degraded to animality, they face a similarly harsh fate. For Fabiano, "*o que indignava ... era o costume que os miseráveis [urubus] tinham de atirar bicadas aos olhos de criaturas que já não se podiam defender*" (p. 125). Notably, Ramos' emphasis on eyes would not only be taken up by Pereira, who included Baleia's disconcerting and "humanizing" stare at spectators in anticipation of her violent death, but also predated a familiar theme and visual trope of the anti-speciesism movement by some eighty years.



Figure 1: Still from *Vidas secas* (1964): "Baleia".



Figures 2 & 3: Media campaigns from PETA (2020) and the International Society for Animal Ethics (2018).¹²⁵

Of Dogs and Men

Capturing the experience of millions of Brazilian migrants during the early-twentieth century (and of course, long thereafter), Ramos' narrator tells us that the weary family will leave that dry place of suffering, carrying with them little more than hopes of creating a more prosperous life elsewhere. Beaten down by so much anguish and loss but unwilling to abandon all prospects for their children, Fabiano e Sinhá Vitória “[a]ndavam para o sul metidos naquele sonbo [de achar]...[u]ma cidade grande, cheia de pessoas fortes” (p. 126). There, at least in their musings, the boys will attend school to learn “difficult and necessary things” that will make them categorically “different” (p. 126) from their disenchanted parents who will have failed ultimately to achieve the privileges, comforts, or social status of which they once fantasized, and that might have made them somehow “more human” (p. 126).¹²⁶ Contemplating with trepidation the long journey to that “*terra desconhecida e civilizada*”, and without knowing “*como ela era nem onde era*”, the couple is resigned instead to end up as “*dois velhinbos...como cachorros, inúteis...como Baleia*” (p. 126), making peace, and even finding contentment with the imagined tradeoff of their own yearnings for the possibility of the boys' future well-being. This final vision of

¹²⁵ These media campaigns are in keeping with Peter Singer's canonical *Animal Liberation* (1975), whose argument against animal abuse derived from Jeremy Bentham's notion, conceptualized to address human mistreatment of other humans during the late-eighteenth century, that “the capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all” (Singer 7). See Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907 [1780]. <https://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML.html>.

¹²⁶ Estanislau Fischlowitz and Madeline H. Engel argued in 1969 that between 1940 and 1960 (approximating the dates of the novel and film), Brazil's urban population grew from 31.24% to 45.08%, with the majority of migration comprising movement from the Northeast to the Southeast and the North. The main incentives, they argued, were twofold: massive land takeovers by wealthy proprietors to raise cattle on *latifúndios* and radically reduced job opportunities (41-42).

the family's cyclical journey is, of course, paradoxical, for we know not of Baleia's *uselessness*, but of her deliberate and thoughtful *usefulness*—as a friend, a counselor, a co-worker, and perhaps most critically, a hunter who managed to provide her people with food, saving them quite literally from starvation on more than one occasion. What is more, Ramos' narrator tells us, the city of the parents' reveries will become for the family a different kind of tragic "prison" (p. 126)—metaphorically reminiscent of the small, battered birdcage that once housed the similarly "useless" pet parrot who met his sad end as an impromptu meal during the family's earlier pilgrimage and desperate bout with hunger (p. 11).

By contemplating and portraying the relationship between the family, the animals, and the environment in this way, interrogating and complicating the questions of who depends on whom, who cares for whom, and who operates with introspection and "humanity", both Ramos and Pereira placed into question the anthropocentric worldview that most readers and spectators took (and take) for granted, inadvertently encouraging us, as Erica Fudge puts it in a reflection on the possibility of writing the history of animals, to "abandon the status of human as it is presented within humanist history...[and] assert the ways in which 'human' is always a category of difference, not substance: the ways 'human' always relies upon 'animal' for its meaning" (p. 14). As she argues further:

by recognizing the lack of foundation for our perceived stability we can begin to think about the category 'human' in very different terms. History and humanity are, as the humanists proclaim, coterminous, but a history can be written that does not celebrate the stability of what was, and what shall be. Instead, history should reinterpret the documents of the past in order to offer a new idea of the human. No longer separate, in splendid isolation, humans must be shown to be embedded within and reliant upon the natural order. (p. 15)

Along these lines, by subjecting people and a wide variety of other animals to a similarly arduous fate, the *sertão* fashioned by Ramos and brought to life by Pereira provides an apt context in which to consider Fudge's post-humanist proposal, which "refuses the absolute separation of the species" and, drawing on the work of Wendy Wheeler, advocates for "ecological sensibility" to understand "the relationship between individual creatures and the living world of which they are a living part" (p. 16). Informed like history with the ever-evolving science of ethology, the novel and film enable us to reconsider the subjectivity of non-human animals—a crucial first step in rethinking and reforming our place in the world. After all, as "Elizabeth Costello" speculated in J.M. Coetzee's enigmatic Tanner Lectures on Human Values: "if [we] can think [our] way into the existence of a being who has never

existed, then [we] can think [our] way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom [we] share the substrate of life” (35).¹²⁷

Living Like Animals

While Fabiano and Vitória placed their bets on a new life in the south, we know historically that tens of thousands of other *nordestinos*, alongside people from marginalized communities elsewhere across Brazil, would instead head west and further north to seek economic opportunities in the Amazon. Indeed, undemocratic and democratically elected political leaders alike incentivized and facilitated such migration to the resource-rich region in a perpetual campaign to overcome the “underdevelopment” plaguing the country.¹²⁸ From Getúlio Vargas in the 1930s and 1940s, to Juscelino Kubitschek in the 1950s, to the military regime of the 1960s and 1970s, Brazil’s political leaders dreamt for most of the 20th century of replacing the scarcity of Northeastern “backwardness” with plentiful Amazonian development, propelled by wealth derived from extractivism and animal husbandry—the primary economic activity depicted in both Ramos’ novel and Pereira’s film. In the Amazon, as is now well documented, such practices would wreak triple havoc—ravaging the environment while infringing on protected Indigenous lands and threatening the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of Native communities. What is more, counter to the material and spiritual relationships with non-human beings that are integral to many Indigenous cosmogonies,¹²⁹ the practice of animal agriculture as depicted in the novel and film, like those that would be implemented on a massive scale across the Amazon during the late-twentieth century, transformed animals into “livestock” and placed them at the epicenter of what would become a few decades later Brazil’s greatest ecological crisis: cattle.¹³⁰

While Baleia’s humanlike treatment and tragic death are central to both the original text and the filmic adaptation of *Vidas secas*, Ramos and Pereira’s storytelling also drew critical attention to the suffering and death of many other animals—a miserable fate tied inextricably, like that of the human

¹²⁷ See Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, and a collection of critical responses to the metaphysical novel edited by Amy Gutmann.

¹²⁸ See Garfield, *In Search of the Amazon*, particularly Chapter 4: “The Environment of Northeastern Migration to the Amazon” (pp.127-69).

¹²⁹ See for example Kopenawa’s discussion of non-human animals in the Yanomami spiritual world and Viveiro de Castro’s theorization of “Amerindian perspectivism”.

¹³⁰ For a wide range of studies documenting the environmental impacts of cattle ranching, related soy production, and deforestation on the Amazon, see: Keller et. al. For a recent ethnography of cattle ranchers in the Amazonian state of Acre, see Hoelle.

protagonists, to their exploitation in and by an unjust and brutalizing economic order. While the ungenerous and even cruel natural environment in this unspecified location of the Brazilian northeast¹³¹ fails to provide all sentient beings with the minimum necessities for an endurable biological life—food, water, and shelter, for example—the non-human animals also endure pain and distress at the hands of their human masters, oppressors, or tormentors. In addition to the pet parrot and dog who meet an untimely end at the hands of their family, *Vidas secas* portrays scraggly cattle festering with maggot-filled wounds and branded with fiery irons; cows, horses, and goats lashed with whips and sticks; pigs slaughtered and butchered; foxes caught in traps that crush their spines; cavies skinned and skewered; thirsty birds shot with pellets; and faithful workhorses abandoned to languish and starve.

Drawing attention to this collective suffering directly and indirectly, Ramos and Pereira reveal, as Singer puts it, “not that the people who do these things to the animals are cruel or wicked”, but rather, the notion that “once we place nonhuman animals outside our sphere of moral consideration and treat them as things we use to satisfy our own desires, the outcome is predictable” (p. 97). In keeping with this argument and therefore likewise predictable, then, Italian Countess Mia Acquarone and her fellow activists for animal welfare had little to say about the recreation of these violent scenes in Pereira’s film despite the fact that billions of brutally farmed animals demonstrate (as do dogs) cognitive abilities akin to that of human toddlers (Broom et. al). Published during the same year as the Baleia “debacle” at Cannes, Ruth Harrison’s *Animal Machines* (1964) made a related moral case for animal welfare, adding the prophetic argument that the intensification of animal agriculture and its undergirding capitalist desire for increasingly “efficient conversion of food into saleable products” (p. 1) would not only lead to dreadful outcomes for animals at the receiving end of such processes, but was also highly detrimental to food quality, the environment, and human health.¹³²

In both Ramos’ and Pereira’s conceptualizations, of course, impoverished *sertanejos* like Fabiano and his family, as well as the rural poor more generally—are likewise subjected to relentless violence and abuse, both physical and mental. From the perspective of animal welfare advocates, these human lives are further diminished, paradoxically, by the very political and economic structures within

¹³¹ While Ramos’ biographer, Denis de Moraes, notes that Baleia was based on Ramos’ childhood experience seeing a dog sacrificed in Maniçoba, neither the novel nor the film is specific in this regard.

¹³² Notably, Rachel Carson wrote the introduction to Harrison’s seminal work. For a detailed analysis of the animal farming processes that were under critique during the mid-twentieth century, see also Singer’s Chapter Three: “Down on the Factory Farm” (pp. 95-157).

which they conceptualize (as dominant society has long normalized) their animal companions as nothing more than dispensable bodies, or so many products destined for market. In contrast to Ramos' empathetic and contemplative Baleia, who speculates about the motives for certain human behaviors, rationalizes her likes and dislikes, and weighs the costs and benefits of making her preferences known to her oftentimes unpredictable human family, the livestock in Fabiano's care appear in the novel and the film as work objects to be treated with loathing and cruelty, subjected without a second thought to a miserable existence from birth to slaughter, and easily transformed into goods like the comfortable leather bed of which Sinha Vitória is so desirous.¹³³

Rejecting the prospect that her children grow up to raise cattle like their poor, emasculated, and dehumanized father, Sinha Vitória links her desire for the family to live "like people" to their ability to own things: "*Por que não haveriam de ser gente, possuir uma cama igual à de seu Tomás?...Porque haveriam de ser sempre desgraçados, fugindo no mato como bichos?*" (p. 121). And yet, when Fabiano finally agrees with his wife that they can no longer continue "living like animals"—hungry, sleeping on sticks, and running from their misery through the brush—we learn that the family will ultimately end up "trapped" in their new urban surroundings (*ficariam presos [na cidade]*)—not unlike the corralled, doomed cattle that had lived and died under their care (p. 126).

Being Alive in the Human Way, or...Consuming

Of course, the miserable animals who populate the backlands at the center of Ramos' fictionalized rural economy and Pereira's film will in fact eventually become beds, shoes, food products, and a multiplicity of other items for market through modernizing processes of industrialization and manufacture that over the course of the twentieth century would move away from the *sertão*, into the Amazon, and across Brazil—particularly west, to Mato Grosso (Vale et. al.). "Out-of-place" (Schwarz) in regions whose cultural, social, and political realities are, like Fabiano's, rife with cronyism and corruption, and governed predominantly by neo-feudal relations, the capitalist mode of production generates merchandise that will always remain beyond the reach of the rural poor who become, in turn, increasingly alienated and dehumanized by mechanized work and mass production. In the Northeast, the Amazon, and beyond, the once symbiotic relationship between humans and non-

¹³³ Through grave misfortunes, Vitória's greatest and most constant longing is to replace her bed of sticks (*varas*) with one of leather. Resentful of her husband's callous comment regarding her inability to stride steadily in her "expensive" footwear, Vitória admits to herself: "*Devia ser ridícula, mas a opinião de Fabiano entristecera-a muito*" (p. 41).

human animals would become contrived and increasingly painful, like swanky leather shoes on a barefooted family trying to overcome their sense of inferiority and “ridiculousness” upon imprisoning their feet for a long walk to church services in town (pp. 71-73). In keeping with political philosopher Elías Palti’s study of Roberto Schwarz’s well-known essay, the predicament of Ramos’ fictional family:

is not a matter of two diverse logics, but of one and the same logic—the striving for profit—that operates...in different ways in...diverse regions. While in the center it tends to generate conditions proper to advanced-capitalistic societies, in the periphery it perpetuates underdevelopment and reproduces pre-capitalistic patterns of social relations. (p. 155)

Likewise, with regard to the ever-expanding animal economy and broadening environmental catastrophe in Brazil and globally, the “center” and “periphery”—the Seu Tomásés and Fabianos of the world—have lived, and will continue to live the Anthropocene quite differently, in keeping with the same socioeconomic hierarchies that helped to produce the crisis in the first place.

Thus always on the outskirts of a nascent society of conspicuous consumers and always looking in, Fabiano, Vitória, and the boys face what Zygmunt Bauman has called in the twenty-first century the “*consuming desire* of consuming”, but without ever having had the opportunity to fulfill even their most basic needs (p. 13; original emphasis). The gnawing impetus for the family to have a better existence, one that exceeds mere subsistence, thus differentiates Fabiano and Sinha Vitória from most of the non-human animals alongside whom they struggle for survival and otherwise share the conditions of “bare life” (Agamben), despite Ramos’s and Pereira’s similar emphasis on the dehumanizing impact of dire poverty. Bauman’s characterization of a developing society of consumers is again insightful for considering the family’s plight:

Like all living creatures, they had to consume to stay alive, even though being humans and not mere animals, they had to consume more than sheer survival would require: *being alive in the human way* set demands which topped the necessities of “merely biological” existence with more elaborate social standards of decency, propriety, “good life”. (p. 12; my emphasis)

While the family then competes with farm animals and birds for the resources they all need to survive—drinking out of desperation, for example, from the same muddy puddles—their “being alive in the human way” means that Fabiano and Vitória also hope for rain and fantasize of abundance. In this regard, however, Baleia is also alive “in a human way”, dreaming in her last moments of a “good life” in fields plentiful with more cavies than she could ever capture. “[N]o fundo todos somos como minha cachorra Baleia e esperamos preás”, Ramos wrote in a letter to his wife in May of 1937 (*Cartas*, p.103).

While the family thus shares with all the animals a condition of relative voicelessness vis-à-vis the dominant society, their interior voices, like Baleia’s, express not only the aspirations for greater fulfillment of the material needs pinpointed by Bauman, but also general preoccupations, regrets, fears,

and longings—only some of which are related to materiality. Baleia as imagined by Ramos and recreated by Pereira thus has a “human way” of being that other animals lack—one that draws on and simultaneously reproduces the double standard for the “humane” treatment of animals as advocated by Acquarone and similarly-minded activists who discount the sentience of non-human animals who don’t happen to be household pets.

As Karla Armbruster has argued, projecting humanlike behaviors onto animals to argue for the value of their lives can have the effect of creating “slavishly devoted, imperfect versions of ourselves rather than capable beings with their own lives, perspectives, and abilities” (p. 17). Baleia, however, is in many ways far less “imperfect” than her humans. While Fabiano and Vitória exhibit self-indulgent, illogical behaviors that create insufficiency and grief for their family—wasting precious funds on elastic, “luxury” merchandise like alcohol and high heels, for example—Baleia puts herself at the service of others, sacrificing her needs and desires and living with hunger and other forms of discomfort so that the family might be a bit happier—or at least, suffer a bit less. When Baleia’s prowess tracking cavies enables her to provide her famished humans with an unanticipated meal, Sinha Vitória thanks the dog with a kiss on the snout, eagerly licking the cavy’s fresh blood from her own parched lips. Baleia, in comparison, manages to content herself with delayed gratification, expressing her happiness at the mere prospect of receiving the family’s scraps: “*agitava o rabo...esperava com paciência a hora de mastigar os ossos*” (p. 16).

Also unlike her family members, Baleia demonstrates appreciation for small comforts that make life more pleasurable. Watching Sinha Vitória build a fire to cook dinner, for example, the dog “*aprovou com um movimento a cauda...e desejou expressar sua admiração à dona. Chegou-se a ela em saltos curtos, ofegando, ergueu-se nas pernas traseiras, imitando gente*” (p. 39). Pitiably, this enthusiasm and goodwill earn the dog a meanspirited kick and annoyed reproach—not unlike those offered to the children when their mother finds them similarly annoying, and which the children occasionally reproduce for the dog and other animals in their reach when they feel ignored or otherwise disgruntled. Surely informed by his persecution, politicized incarceration, and abuse at the hands of the Vargas administration,¹³⁴ the “human way of being” for Ramos thus includes the exercise of power and a resulting chain of violence for its own sake—passed from vicious state authorities to the beleaguered parents, from the parents to the children, and from the children to the animals.

At this moment and others, Baleia tolerates the cantankerous nature of humans with

¹³⁴ On the political context and social critique framing Ramos’ work, see Melo, “Pensando o Brasil”.

resignation and self-sacrificing benevolence: “*para ela os pontapés eram fatos desagradáveis e necessários*” (p. 60). Unwilling to reciprocate harm by “biting ankles”, and feeling otherwise powerless to defend herself, the dog resorts repeatedly to escape, suggesting silently to the children that they do the same: “*só tinha um meio de evitá-los [os pontapés]: a fuga*” (p. 60). In a similar vein, Baleia tries to console the Older Boy—weepy, hurt, and resentful—when he finds himself on the receiving end of his parents’ angry and sometimes abusive behavior: “[O menino] abraçou a cachorrinha com uma violência que a descontentou. [Ela] não gostava de ser apertada, preferia saltar e espojar-se. ...O menino continuava a abraçá-la. E Baleia encolhia-se para não magoá-lo, sofria a carícia excessiva” (pp. 61-62). While in the economy of materiality then, scarcity rules the lives of people and animals alike, the economy of affect for Baleia vacillates between these extremes of shortage and surplus: the adults are abusive, the children, sometimes suffocatingly effusive. And yet, as the most apt and sensitive member of the family, the dog manages to navigate difficult circumstances with kindness and grace, making up for the shortcomings of her humans not only materially, by providing cavies, but emotionally, by offering comfort and care when the family, and especially the children need it most.

Also in concert with Bauman’s analysis (p. 12), the parameters of acceptable forms and levels of consumption below or beyond the family’s necessity likewise vacillate to extremes, between lower and upper limits that provide a segue into the broader economic picture that *Vidas secas* paints for readers and spectators alike. In both Ramos’ and Pereira’s renderings, the lower limit points to the fragile social fabric of the Northeast (and by metonymy, of Brazil), where downtrodden *vaqueiros* like Fabiano translate their own material poverty into a disavowal of voice and subjectivity; an abnegation of their citizenship rights; and a predictably submissive if always resentful bowing down before imperious authority like that of the *soldado amarelo* (pp. 99-107). The poor ranch hand “*conhecia seu lugar. ... O pai vivera assim, o avô também. ... Era um desgraçado, era como um cachorro, só recebia ossos*” (p. 96; my emphasis).

At the upper limit is a likewise ethical but also more individual and personal shortcoming. For instance, Fabiano’s excesses with gambling and alcohol are self-absorbed and irresponsible, not only landing him in jail with a brutal beating but causing him tremendous anger and guilt for disappointing his wife, embarrassing his children, and squandering their hard-earned funds (p. 28). Similarly, Vitória’s efforts to emulate the material conditions of the dominant society by which she, her family, and indeed the entire imagined community of the rural poor are pitilessly oppressed, are similarly self-indulgent. Does she not realize, Fabiano chides, how ridiculous she looks, toddling **like a parrot** in those expensive and useless leather shoes? (p. 41). At both the lower and upper parameters of consumption

and its corresponding level of social status and subjectivity, then, both Fabiano and Vitória are transformed by Ramos' narrator into the very animals they have each gratuitously sacrificed: the dog and the parrot. The couple's unwitting participation in their own undoing evokes one of Marx's perennial, unanswered queries, as well as a concern undoubtedly shared by Ramos: why (and how) do the oppressed become complicit in their own oppression? Since oppressed humans have some agency in this matter (while oppressed non-humans clearly do not), possible answers to this question have important ethical and political consequences for them, for us, as well as for the societies in which they/we live.

The Legacies of Baleia's Moral Life

Extrapolating from these individual failures of "excess" at the upper limit of this embryonic consumer society, we can now point more broadly to the widespread and collective failures of an entire socioeconomic order, in Brazil and certainly beyond, wherein neither the imposition of gross privation onto others nor the amassing of obscene excess faces any moral constraint whatsoever, and indeed, in places where impunity reigns, barely any legal or political limitation, either. Even more so in our times than Ramos' or Pereira's, consumption is its own *raison d'être*, and the parameters of an economy wherein most people consume what they need and occasionally also what they want has been replaced by a system of limitless accumulation wherein large sectors of the population have become so disenfranchised that they lack basic necessities for survival while a tiny and powerful minority accrues more wealth than it could use in a million lifetimes. As of 2019, Brazil was home to the second-highest income concentration in the world, with the top 1% earning 28.3% of the income, the top 10% accounting for 55-60% of the income, and white Brazilians earning 74% more than those identifying as either Black (*preto*) or Brown (*pardo*) (Pimentel; UNDP 107).

While it was that same year, in early 2019, that Ailton Krenak wrote with irony his well-known essay on "how to postpone the end of the world", he could well have been referring to Baleia's family in 1937 or 1964:

Modernization has herded people from the fields and the forests into sprawling favelas and outlying slums, where they serve as cheap labour for the urban centres. These people were plucked out of their traditional ways of living and places of origin and literally flung into the great big blender of humanity. (p. 18)

In fact, during both the Estado Novo and the first years of the 1964-85 dictatorship, the disparity of income among the poorest and wealthiest Brazilians was at its highest points for the entire

twentieth century (Guimarães Ferreira de Souza). As of 2022, Brazil is the ninth-most unequal country in the world and the most unequal in all of the Americas (World Population Review).

Translating Brazil's well-documented and longstanding discrepancies of wealth into the bottom line of current-day Fabianos, we can observe, finally, that since 1938 and 1964, cattle farming has become the least sustainable and most environmentally damaging economic activity in the Amazon, replicating the structural inequalities of Ramos' day to benefit a limited number of large farms and a multibillion-dollar beef industry while the majority of small-scale producers lives in poverty. As Garrett et. al. pointed out in their 2017 probe into the persistence of low-income, high degradation land use in the region, "agricultural exports have increased since 2005, yet rural income, education, and health remain well below the national average" (p. 1). This economic path, which has only become more entrenched since 2019, when the agrobusiness industry and *ruralista* caucus in the National Congress found an ally and advocate in President Jair Bolsonaro, is devastating for the environment, for human rights, and of course, not least, for the animals. Now the largest exporter of beef worldwide, Brazil boasts the globe's second-largest herd of cattle (upward of 230 million), forty percent of which reside in the Amazon, including on protected lands stolen from Indigenous communities (Lima Filho; Campos). The relative profitability of raising cattle versus engaging in sustainable farming practices incentivizes further land grabbing while accelerating deforestation and the proliferation of fires to transform wooded forest into pastures for grazing. State-backed impunity toward illegal land-grabbers has caused the price of land to fall across the Amazon, and as of 2021, seventy percent of deforested Amazonian land was being used for cattle farming (Lima Filho et. al.).

One ecological legacy of Baleia's moral life—and indeed, of Ramos' and Pereira's incisive critiques of social injustice through both the novelistic and filmic versions of *Vidas secas*—is the imperative to address this spiraling political, economic, and environmental crisis before it's too late. Another might be to recognize that each year, among the billions of animals slaughtered worldwide for human use, upward of 28 million cows are killed for market in Brazil alone. As animal psychologists Lori Marino and Kristin Allen (among others) have established, each one of these creatures has a unique personality, feels pleasure and pain, and relies, as do humans and dogs, on five senses to experience the world. Like humans and dogs, cows learn, possess long-term special memory, and enjoy playing with objects, with one another, and with members of other species. Like humans and dogs, they engage in social buffering, seek interactions with a social group, demonstrate distress when it is lacking, and form lasting bonds with others.

In short, the scientific data on ethology and climate change that we have today reveal what Graciliano Ramos and Baleia knew long ago: that the world would be a far better place for all of its beings if humans could learn to demonstrate a little less rapacity and a lot more *solidariedade canina*.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ For an explanation of the term, see Luís Martins' brilliant 1961 chronicle, "Um cão na noite".

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