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Witness narratives in context: analysing the political prison writings of Graciliano Ramos and José Luandino Vieira

Elisa Scaraggi

The smell of context

In her controversial book *Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski dedicates a whole chapter explaining to her readers why ‘context stinks’ ([Felski 2015, 151–85](#)). According to this prominent scholar, ‘we are inculcated, in the name of history, into a remarkably static view of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole’ (157). Felski declares her longing for a renewed, more intimate and immediate connection with literary texts, which is supposedly denied by the widespread academic devotion to a historical approach to literature. To prove her point, Felski reduces the historicist approach to literature to a barren ‘placement in the box’.1 Although her tones are certainly provocative and her aim is to open a debate, this is a clear oversimplification of a much more complex matter. Among other things, the argument leaves aside the problem of how we should consider texts that originate from historical experiences (diaries, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies, etc.). Additionally, when incarceration and parole are not simply catchy metaphors but constitute the material bases for the construction of a literary text, is it possible – or even ethical – to overtly disregard the context?

When analysing literature produced in confinement or that concerns the experience of reclusion of a writer, context, inevitably, plays an essential role. Indeed, it would perhaps be more accurate to use the
word context in the plural because, although incarceration is always marked by violence and by the fact that it places the prisoner in a state of exception, the experience of life in prison varies according to different historical, political and geographical contexts, not to mention the natural dissimilarities among prisoners. There is no single experience of life in prison but a multiplicity of experiences. There is no one literature of confinement as such, but a multiplicity of texts and contexts.

To show how crucial context is in the textual and theoretical analysis of texts related to the experience of confinement, I would like to bring here some examples taken from *Memórias do cárcere* and *Papéis da prisão*, respectively the prison memoirs by Brazilian novelist Graciliano Ramos, and the philological edition of the notebooks kept by Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira during his imprisonment under the Portuguese colonial regime. I will examine these texts as examples of witness narratives, arguing that they should be read and interpreted considering their historical and political contexts and their material conditions of production. Before proceeding any further, I will briefly outline the contexts in which Ramos and Vieira’s incarceration took place and in which their writings were realised.

**Different (con)texts**

Graciliano Ramos was imprisoned for eleven months between 1936 and 1937, under Getúlio Vargas’ first presidency. Months before his arrest, a leftist uprising – deemed pejoratively as the *Intentona Comunista* (Communist uprising) – had broken out in Rio and other cities in the north-east of the country. Vargas took advantage of the uprising, which constituted no real threat to the stability of Brazil, to further concentrate power in his hands and reinforce the authoritarian tendencies of his government, among which was the systematic incarceration of political adversaries. At no point throughout his detention did the writer receive a trial, sentence or even a formal accusation. With astonishment, Ramos recalls in his memoirs how his prison life was marked from the beginning as being outside the parameters of any state of rights.

The interrogation, the witnesses, the ordinary trial formalities did not arrive. Not a word of accusation […] Why did we not appear in any record, not even a fake one, a simulacre of justice? It would be a farce, for sure, but that would grant us a vague possibility of doing something […]. An immoral tribunal is still worth something […].
They did not show any intention of bringing us to trial. And it was possible that we had already been sentenced and that we were serving time without knowing it. They were stripping us of all our rights, even their last traces (Ramos 2014, 65).

On the contrary, José Luandino Vieira received a regular, although biased, exemplary trial. Arrested in 1961 by the Salazarist political police for his participation in the struggle for independence of Angola, Vieira spent the next twelve years in confinement, detained in prisons scattered in what was back then the collapsing Portuguese empire: a few days in Lisbon, almost three years in different prisons in Luanda and finally, eight years in the notorious Tarrafal prison camp, in Cape Vert. Vieira was imprisoned and brought to trial together with two more poets, António Jacinto and António Cardoso, both of whom were white and had links with the Marxist-oriented nationalist movement MPLA. In July 1963, the military supreme court sentenced them to fourteen years in prison, ‘the longest sentences ever handed down to any political prisoners in Angola’ (Silva 2016, 76). Only a few years before, it would have been at least unlikely that three white men should be punished so severely given that, in colonial societies such as that of Angola at the time, the harshness of punishment was a burden generally reserved to the colonised, to non-white people. Nonetheless, with the war ravaging on several fronts, not only was exemplary punishment considered necessary, but the repression of any dissident cultural activity was also deemed of extreme importance for the maintenance of the empire. This justified the deportation of three notable intellectuals to the territories of Cape Vert, which would guarantee their complete isolation.

It was in the remoteness of Tarrafal that Vieira wrote most of his literary works and a significant number of his notebooks. On the other hand, Memórias do cárcere was not actually written in prison. During his time in confinement, Ramos worked on the project of a prison memoir, but eventually he was forced to throw away the notes he had kept for fear of an inspection. After his release and for the subsequent twenty years, he worked on his memoirs, published posthumously in 1953.

I have decided to work on Ramos and Vieira’s prison writings for different reasons. First, in the context that I research, that of literature written in Portuguese, both authors’ canonical status is well-established: not only do their works circulate widely but, ultimately, they have an influence on other writers and on a whole literary system. In this context, Ramos’ Memórias is definitely a benchmark and it has fostered a critical debate on how literature is related to issues such as the portrayal...
of violence, the uncertainties of memory, and the representation of the body, to name but a few. Furthermore, José Luandino Vieira has traditionally been linked to prison writings, but merely because the author is known for writing his *opus magnum* in prison. Although it is too early to assess its impact, the publication in 2015 of *Papéis da prisão* has reopened the debate on Vieira’s prison years from a completely different angle. In fact, not only does the book show how fiction written in prison is intimately interwoven with the author’s life experience, but in a way, it also questions the very status of that fiction and of literary writing (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 13).

My choice was additionally dictated by the fact that these two works can be placed at the ends of literary production spurred by the experience of confinement. The titles speak for themselves: whereas *Memórias* (Memoirs) evokes an established literary genre which presupposes a well-structured autobiographical narration, *Papéis* (Papers) makes us think of a collection of scattered papers which have been assembled, if not casually, at least without a systematic literary project. The books also show different handlings of temporality, as one is an account made with the hindsight of twenty years, while the other is a daily record, an eleven-year long continuum that the reader can follow day after day. One thing they have in common, apart from the prison settings, is that they establish a dialogue with history, since they originate from real-life experiences and claim to be truthful to historical facts. One could say that bearing witness to history is one of their purposes.

### A paradigm of interpretation

Assuming the role of witness and leaving a written testimony can be a means by which prisoners turn from objects into subjects of their own stories. In a text on South African prison writings, Paul Gready affirms that ‘prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to […] seek empowerment in an oppositional “power of writing” by writing against the official text of imprisonment’ (Gready 1993, 489). Given the lack of alternative written sources on imprisonment, ‘the writer seems compelled to assume the role of witness’ (490). This implies giving one’s account of the truth, thus having to grapple with the unstable boundaries between the intimacy of one’s life and the complexity of history, but also between the private, the collective and the public sphere.

In the context of prison writings, as Doran Larson states, the autobiographical account necessarily shifts into public testament, as a result
of a ‘turn of voice that allows the “I” of the prison text – even when not opened into an explicit “we” – to represent communities larger than the prison author […]’ (Larson 2010, 145). Larson also shows how prisoners write to call upon society, denounce their suffering and connect their cells ‘to the apparatuses of power that turn to prisons as a primary means of establishing order’ (ibid.). Behind this kind of writing, both Larson and Gready agree in identifying a political intention, regardless of the motivation of each writer’s arrest.15

However, an openly political analysis of this kind of writing and the role of the witness has often been shaded by a paradigm of interpretation centred on the notion of traumatic memory and constructed in the first place around Holocaust survivors’ accounts, which have become exemplary prototypes of witness narratives. As Hirsch and Spitzer affirm, ‘the Holocaust has in many ways shaped the discourse on collective, social and cultural memory, serving both as touchstone and paradigm’ (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 151). Influential works in literary and cultural studies have contributed to the establishment of this paradigm,16 fostered also by the establishment of a new discipline, trauma studies.

According to this paradigm, the experience of the witness is always associated with trauma and therefore, with a certain degree of pathologisation. Hence, the testimony is considered ‘always an agent in a process that, in some ways, bears upon the clinical’ (Felman and Laub 1992, 9). The healing process can call for psychoanalytic sessions, but writing is also considered a useful tool to achieve the cure, a powerful means to work through the traumatic experience. Moreover, the discourse on the witness is built upon a fundamental contradiction, that is, ‘the contradiction between the necessity, on the one hand, but also the impossibility of fully bearing witness to this particular traumatic past’ (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 152). The traumatic experience is therefore presented as an event without witness (Felman and Laub 1992), or to use Agamben’s words, an event without a ‘complete witness’ (Agamben 2002, 34).

Critics have also focused on the impossibility for witnesses to ‘settle into understanding’ (Felman and Laub 1992, 5) the memory of the violence experienced, a phenomenon which leads to aphasia, or a breakdown of language. Therefore, there is a keen interest in the palpable marks of trauma embodied in the speech abilities of the witness, marks that are revealed through silences, hiatus and dissociations. As Trezise affirms, the voice of the witness ‘cannot fully coincide with itself torn as it is between the language of fact and the shattering of the very framework on which the intelligibility of such language relies’ (in Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 155).
In the last few decades, trauma studies have evolved in very different directions, so that, ‘though it was the Nazi genocide of the Jews that has provided the impetus for much of the current theorization about trauma and witnessing’ (Kacandes 2001, 99), scholars address now a variety of different traumas as for example slavery, colonialism but also child abuse and sexual violence. Nevertheless, some of the premises – for example, the fundamental aporia, the therapeutic function of writing and the consideration on the language of the witness – have remained unchanged and the same parameters are used in a number of different analyses, including that of prison writings. Are these parameters, however, effective enough to describe witness narratives related to the experience of incarceration?

At first glance, trauma theory seems to answer positively to this question. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma itself may provide a link between cultures and experiences ‘not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves’ (Caruth 1995, 11). However, if trauma is to provide a link between cultures, as Caruth proposes, trauma must be reduced to its essential structure, to its lowest common denominator. This means that contextual details are unimportant and can be overlooked. As Richard Crownshaw argues ‘our receptiveness to trauma is based not on historical experience […] but on an ahistorical structural trauma (a lack) at the core of our identity’ (Crownshaw 2010, 8). Brazilian critic Fernando Kolleritz points in the same direction when he says:

to narrate is to compensate. To repair, to recompose the ethical texture. Witness narratives redeem. They are somehow expiatory evocations. They are dedicated gestures. They recreate the moral world: they are the only possible compensation, not just posthumous, but rather a-historical, in the sense that they […] fill in a void of humanity, rearranging, and maybe abolishing, the abjection (Kolleritz 2004, 81).

Paradoxically, although witness narratives claim a strong connection with truth, reality and history, the paradigm to analyse them lacks historicity. History and memory appear then as two separated and even conflicting concepts: in contrast to what is perceived to be ‘the cold storage of history’ (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 155), memory, whose incarnation is the witness, is thought to be more accessible and humane, and able to transmit not only factual knowledge, but also emotions and feelings.
It is possible to observe here an unexpected affinity between Felski’s exhortation to get rid of the historical context to reach a more intimate connection with the text and, for example, a trauma-informed reading of texts by political prisoners which privileges the personal over the political because the latter would ‘prevent the reader from a real and deep interaction with the text […]’ (Lollini 1996, 525). According to the paradigm I have described, personal approaches are more adequate when dealing with ‘traumatic experiences such as those of long-term prisoners’ (520). What I argue, however, is that although incarceration leaves indelible marks upon prisoners’ memory and subjectivity, these cannot always be regarded as ‘trauma’.¹⁹

José Luandino Vieira, for example, does not look at his prison experience as trauma. In an interview released in 2009 in which he agreed to talk about his incarceration at Tarrafal, Vieira affirmed: ‘I think the years in prison were very good for me, speaking from a strictly personal point of view’ (Coelho 2009). Moreover, in an interview granted to me in September 2017, Vieira refers to his experience in prison saying: ‘there is nothing in my life, not even if I live twenty or thirty years more, that can leave such a mark on me. Luckily, it is a good mark’.²⁰

Moreover, when analysing prison writings, one should consider that the text is produced as a response to the writer’s incarceration, which takes place in a specific historical, political and social context. Ignoring it would mean losing part of the message the texts convey while, on the contrary, contextual readings can provide clues with which to understand allusions, subtle references and hints that writers did not make explicit for fear of being punished.²¹ Besides, the very form of the text is defined by contextual conditions. Prisoners of Stalinist gulags, for example, often chose to compose poems rather than prose, because it was easier to memorise them when no paper was available (Pieralli 2017, 285). Likewise, texts written in prison are often fragmentary because the prisoner/writer did not have means to write or had to write quickly because of constant surveillance.

Finally, one cannot deny the powerful relation between witness narratives and history. If the former are not comparable to the work of historians (Wieviorka 2006, 41), one has to acknowledge that they often constitute valuable complementary historical sources²² (Pieralli 2017; Jurgenson 2016). Historians are therefore ‘expanding [their] notion of truth […]’, coming to a deeper, more encompassing historical understanding of what we might now think of as an embodied form of “truthfulness” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009, 161–2). This implies that it has largely been acknowledged that witnesses cannot – and are not
expected to – provide an exhaustive narrative of the truth, for their version of an historical event can only be partial and subjective.

As the paradigm of the witness states, the complete witness really does not exist. The question is, do we need him? Should we aspire to completeness? Is this really – and in any case – an unresolvable paradox?

**Bearing witness – the case of Ramos and Vieira**

Vieira and Ramos do face what theory identifies as the paradoxes related to the act of bearing witness, but they find their own ways of dealing with them and are still able to transmit the truth of their experience. In the first chapter of Graciliano Ramos’ *Memórias do cárcere*, the author seems fully aware of the limits of memory and the possibility to convey historical truth through his text. He knows memory is unreliable. He is aware that his version of the truth is partial and, what is more, flawed and mixed with fiction. However, he does also claim his right to compose a coherent story in which all the pieces fit together and come to closure.

I did not keep the notes acquired during long days and months of observation: in a moment of distress, I was forced to throw them into the water. Surely they would have been useful, but was it an irretrievable loss? I almost tend to think that it was good to get rid of that material. If it still existed, I would feel compelled to consult it at every hour, I would torment myself to say the exact hour of a departure, how many protracted sorrows warmed up in the pale sun, in a morning fog, the colour of the leaves falling from the trees, in a white yard, the shape of the green hills, tainted by light, authentic sentences, gestures, cries, groans. But what does it mean? These true things may not be credible. And if they faded away, leave them in oblivion: they did not amount to much, or at least I imagine they did not amount to much. Other things, however, remained, grew, connected with each other, and it is inevitable to mention them. Shall I claim that they are absolutely accurate? How naïve. […] In this reconstruction of old facts […] I expose what I noted, what I believe I noted. Other people might have different memories. I do not refute them, but I hope they will not refuse mine: they combine and complete themselves and today they give me an impression of reality (Ramos 2014, 11–12).
Without claiming to own or possess the whole truth, Ramos consciously claims his right to expose his personal version of the facts. The account is partial because of the very limits of human experience, and not necessarily because the writer could not settle the experience into understanding. The writer discloses his contradictions and doubts, he even considers renouncing the task, but the reasons to write are stronger.

Rather than the intelligibility of the experience, what prisoners do fail to settle into understanding is the violence of the state machine built to control and repress. However, what at first appears to them as mere irrationality, arbitrariness and excess, comes to make sense if it is interpreted as a strategic device used by the state to quash political adversaries. Putting the traumatic experience into an openly political frame of interpretation, the witness’s aim can switch from the attempt to understand to the desire to resist and counteract.

Here it is important to consider the context of the incarceration and to acknowledge that different contexts require different tools of analysis. While in the case of the Nazi persecution of European Jews, people were deported, segregated and murdered without knowing or understanding the reason for their imprisonment, for political prisoners incarceration may have a totally different meaning. In fact, being incarcerated may not represent the end, but rather another phase of the struggle. For a political prisoner, this understanding is essential to facing the experience of the prison in such a way as to avoid being destroyed by it. Thus, when dealing with texts written by political prisoners, one of the issues to investigate is how the awareness of being part of a larger political struggle influences the individual experience of incarceration and therefore, the account that prisoners give of it.

In the case of José Luandino Vieira, for example, writing can be considered a means to keep on participating in the struggle of independence of Angola, dodging the limits imposed by the incarceration. In fact, the notebooks that he succeeded in smuggling out of prison with the help of his wife constituted a useful source of information for the liberation movement acting in secrecy. Besides this, writing also allowed him to keep a close relationship with his wife, a relationship that he describes as ‘fundamental’ and that was crucial for his mental well-being in prison.

Autonomy is another issue at stake. Prison writings show how, even in inhumane conditions, prisoners tend to carve out some space for themselves, a space not controlled nor supervised by the authorities. Writing as such is a space of resistance and autonomy. Historical and sociological research (Buntman 2003, McEvoy 2015, Alexander 2011)
has proved that political prisoners are likely to associate in groups and set up autonomous organisations, which is a powerful strategy to oppose and restrict the power that prisons exercise on individuals. Under certain circumstances, then, prisons can be seen ‘as places not just of repression […] but of practical and imaginative exercises in self-government and even of state-making’ (Alexander 2011, 552).

Graciliano Ramos, for example, recalls the role of the Coletivo (collective) and of the Rádio Libertadora (freedom radio). The former was an autonomous organisation who took care of prisoners’ essential needs, while the latter was a human radio whose ‘broadcast’ would start as soon as prisoners were shut in their cells at night. Shouting from one cell to the others, prisoners would comment on news and criticise the government; they would read passages of books and sing communist songs and popular sambas. The Rádio Libertadora was also a means to keep in contact with the women who shared the same prison but lived separated from their male counterparts. Autonomous organisations show how prisoners did not renounce their agency or their creative power.

Creativity, especially in the case of prisoners who are writers, also passes through the development of a language and a literary form suitable to describing the experience of detention. Yet, as I have already mentioned, language in witness narratives is a contentious issue. As words are considered inadequate to represent a context so violent and oppressive that it appears unrepresentable, witness narratives are usually identified with a breakdown of language. According to the dominant paradigm, the experience is uncommunicable because language becomes the embodiment of the traumatic experience. Of course, the paradigm acknowledges that most witnesses feel the urge to talk about their experience, but it also stresses the fact that there is always a discrepancy between reality and the words used to describe it.

However, in spite of all this, large numbers of witnesses have written about their experience and many of them have produced narratives that, apart from accomplishing their task of bearing witness to history, also have an undoubtable artistic value. Therefore, instead of focusing on the hardships related to the process of witnessing, I propose to look at the results and achievements of the process. Instead of reading the discrepancy as a failure to convey the truth of the experience, it is possible to interpret it as a device that actually discloses part of that truth, bearing in mind that subverting the common use of language or revealing the mechanisms that lay behind the act of writing can lead to a more aware reading. Brazilian critic Jaime Ginzburg states:
Breaking with the trivial convention of language forces the reader’s perception into a different path of knowledge and formulation of ideas. Without this differentiating movement, literature would continue to use a trivial language, unable to provoke the reader to consider the singular, strange and terrible dimension of the experience (Ginzburg 2010, 272).

Reflecting on how to represent the unrepresentable and finding the proper language to describe the horrors and the pettiness of daily life in prison are not only attempts to restore the primary articulation between language and body, but also a means to regain agency in a context that seeks to deny it.

Furthermore, looking at the materiality of the texts I work with, the first consideration that I would make is that, instead of suffering from a breakdown of language or aphasia, the two writers accumulated words and more words. This craving for accumulation is particularly evident in Vieira’s *Papéis da prisão*. Not only are the notebooks full of drawings, notes written by other prisoners, newspaper scraps, excerpts of letters from family and friends, but the very form of the text alludes to accumulation. In fact, the text is composed of fragments that were not meant to create a narrative, but whose juxtaposition eventually gives the impression of the flowing of time and of a real, lived life. However, looking at the date of the first entry of the notebooks, 10 October 1962, one notices that Vieira began to write almost a year after his arrest. How should this year-long gap be interpreted?

In the brief introduction that Luandino Vieira wrote for the *Papéis da prisão*, he affirms that he started to write as soon as the necessary conditions for the secret circulation of the notebooks were created (Vieira 2015, 9–10). From that point onwards, his resolution to write sometimes wavered – and this is not surprising given the circumstances – but, eventually, it was always renewed. As Vieira affirms in an interview, ‘writing was a good way of killing time, as well as working out the causes that had got me into that situation. Simply for having claimed a national consciousness, a national identity that translated into the nationalist activities that demanded independence, there I was’ (Ribeiro 2010, 30). Nonetheless, one can wonder whether the year that Vieira stayed in prison and did not write any of his notebooks was also functional for him to recover from the shock of the imprisonment, to process the experience and elaborate an adequate reaction to it, a reaction that was both political and personal. Writing in prison combines these two dimensions, as ‘one writes in prison to fill the void of time […] , but on the
other hand, one writes in prison to resist, to avoid forgetting, to survive’ (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 25).

Also Ramos’ Memórias do cárcere reveal that writing was a primary need for the imprisoned author. From the first moments of his incarceration, writing appeared to Ramos as a necessity imposed by the circumstances, a necessity that had to be satisfied:

*It was necessary to write, to tell the events I was entangled in. For sure, I could not develop them: I was lacking calm, everything looked senseless to me. Clearly, I was being senseless: it was absurd aiming to narrate indefinite things, the smoke and shadows that surrounded me. I did not think about this. I had imposed a task upon myself and I had to accomplish it no matter how. Or maybe it was not my imposition, after all: the circumstances determined it. It was essential to exhaust myself, discipline my rebellious thoughts, describe the oscillations of the hammocks, the human loads flopped in the corners, gasping with nausea, vomiting, my new friends’ features becoming clearer. […] I sat on a box and I began to write in the light coming from the hatch. I probably stayed there working for hours, disorderly (Ramos 2014, 130, my emphasis).*

As he was a very strict critic of himself and his own writing, Graciliano was aware that his prison notes were probably not good enough to become part of a literary narrative. However, in another passage, he remembers how, despite all this, he was nonetheless compelled to write, chaotically and desperately.

* I was on my own, a book in my hand, racking my brains in vain to understand it. I struggled on a page, I read it five, six times, then I abandoned the brochure, discouraged. Reading had become impossible; however, I endeavoured to write. If I should find those sheets, disconnected and hideous as they were, they would reveal my perturbation, the weakness of my spirit. But the long hours dragged on, and it was necessary to fill them (479–80).*

**Beyond healing**

Reading these excerpts, one tends to agree with Ann Kaplan, an influential scholar in trauma studies, when she says that the project of working through motivates the project of the memoir (Kaplan 2005, 44). The urge
to write seems to be part of the process of gaining awareness about one's own condition and putting thoughts and feelings in order. Still, in the case of Ramos and Vieira, writing not only has a therapeutic function but is also part of a larger project.

Take, for example, the writings of another famous political prisoner, the Italian Antonio Gramsci. Arrested by Mussolini's fascist regime, Gramsci was sentenced to 20 years and he eventually died because of the complications related to the poor living conditions he endured in prison. One of the judges of the Special Tribunal who tried him justified the harsh sentence saying that they had to 'prevent that brain from working for twenty years' (Gerratana 1977, LXIII). Nonetheless, during the whole time he spent in prison, Gramsci dedicated himself to studying and writing. In 1927, in a letter to his sister-in-law, he wrote:

I am obsessed (this is a phenomenon typical of people in jail, I think) by this idea: that I should do something für ewig [...]. In short, in keeping with a preestablished program, I would like to concentrate intensely and systematically on some subject that would absorb and provide a center to my inner life (Gramsci 1994, 83).

The project of doing something für ewig (literally, forever) would materialise in the pages of the *Prison Notebooks*, a series of essays that Gramsci wrote during his time in prison and that, in spite of its fragmentary and unfinished nature, remains one of the most original contributions to critical thinking in the twentieth century. It is worth noting that, from his arrest onwards, reading and writing had already appeared to Gramsci as vital needs; however, in the letter mentioned above he is saying that now they should respond to a higher purpose and seek a result for their own sake, rather than being a mere instrumental means of survival (Gerratana 1977, XVI).

It is interesting that, trying to explain the expression für ewig to his sister-in-law, Gramsci translates it as 'disinterested', which in this case does not indicate a work disconnected from reality, or art done for art's sake. On the contrary, 'disinterested' refers to Gramsci's personal condition as a prisoner: the project he has in mind is to trespass the restrictions imposed by the circumstances, the limits of the cell, the degradation of his body. As Rosengarten states: 'In prison, deprived of any immediate opportunity to influence the course of human affairs, Gramsci's sense of time became, paradoxically, both more intimate and subjective, yet at the same time more oriented to distant horizons' (Rosengarten 2014, 119).
Although their distant horizons differed from Gramsci’s, in prison José Luandino Vieira and Graciliano Ramos cultivated their writing, and they used prison time to collect material that would eventually become part of the literature they would write outside prison: the experience of the confinement became a source of characters, stories and themes. Writing also became a form of resistance because it represented the refusal to give up a constructive dimension. It exceeded the logic of the therapeutic function of writing thus reinforcing the idea that, when analysing prison writings, we should look for a contextual paradigm of interpretation, one that takes into consideration both the political and the aesthetic intentions of prisoners who write.

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Notes

1 ‘History […] consists of a vertical pile of neatly stacked boxes – what we call periods – each of which surrounds, sustains, and subsumes a microculture. Understanding a text means clarifying the details of its placement in the box, highlighting the correlations and causalities between text-as-object and context-as-container’ (Felski 2015, 156).

2 ‘Vargas became interim president in 1930 and then ruled the country until 1945. In 1937, he created the Estado Novo [New State], an authoritarian regime that relied on nationalism to garner support and legitimacy. Ousted from power in 1945, Vargas returned through a democratic election in 1950 with a populist program that relied on working-class and urban middle-class support…’. See: https://library.brown.edu/create/brazilundervargas/.


4 All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

5 Acronym for Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), one of the three nationalist movements that fought for independence from Portugal.

6 Viera and Jacinto were released for good conduct almost two years before the end of their sentence. Nonetheless, they were not allowed to return to Angola, and had to live in Lisbon and report regularly to the police (Vieira 2015, 1033).

7 On incarceration in colonial societies, see Alexander and Anderson (2008); Bernault et al. (2003); Dikötteret al. (2007); Messiant (2006).

8 1961 is remembered as the year in which the armed struggle started in Angola. The episodes that prompted it were the attack on the gaols of Luanda on 4 February and the massacres of white settlers and their black and mulatto workers in the coffee plantations in the North of the country in March, respectively promoted by the MPLA and the UPA (Union of the Populations of Angola). (See Wheeler and Pellisier (2009); Marcum (1969).)

9 All Vieira’s literary works written in confinement appeared between 1963 and 1981, while Papéis da prisão was published only in 2015.

10 See, for example, Silviano Santiago’s novel Em Liberdade (1981), a fictional account of Graciliano Ramos’ first impressions of freedom once released from prison.

11 On literatures in Portuguese as single literary system (or ‘macrosystem’), see Abdala Júnior (2000, 2003).
experience through language is part of a ‘their piecing together of the fragments of Iranian prisoners, when she affirms that also in Gould’s analysis of accounts by the mark of trauma-informed discourse identity’ (522). It is possible to recognise gap the subject experiences a crisis of this consistency and coherence. In this and of traumatic events that contradict precisely in this gap between the need of a paradox of the testimony, which lie

Letters ([Lollini 1996, 523]). According to Lollini Letters embodies ‘the trauma and the paradox of the testimony, which lie precisely in this gap between the need of a consistent subject and the flow of time and of traumatic events that contradict this consistency and coherence. In this gap the subject experiences a crisis of identity’ (522). It is possible to recognise the mark of trauma-informed discourse also in Gould’s analysis of accounts by Iranian prisoners, when she affirms that ‘their piecing together of the fragments of experience through language is part of a process of overcoming the trauma of confinement’ (Gould 2017, 19). Ramos’ Memórias have also been analysed through this paradigm, such as in Marco (2004); Silva de Abreu (2008); Oliveira (2011); Birman (2012).

One should also wonder which cultures Caruth refers to, considering that trauma theory has been concerned mainly with western culture. In recent times, the category of trauma has been widely used to refer to 9/11 (Kaplan 2005), and once again the focus has been on Western trauma. As Susana Araújo notes, ‘experts have shown that trauma studies have seldom been applied to other historical realities’ (Araújo 2015, 3). Along the same lines, Andermahr affirms that ‘trauma theory has not fulfilled its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement. Rather than forging relationships of empathy and solidarity with non-Western others, a narrowly Western canon of trauma literature has in effect emerged, one which privileges the suffering of white Europeans’ (Andermahr 2015, 500). There is, however, an ongoing effort to ‘decolonise’ trauma studies. In this regard, see Andermahr et al. (2015); Balavé et al. (2014); Rizzuto (2015); Rothberg (2009).

Araújo affirms that ‘in Freudian terms, trauma is not a straightforward process […] It is the inner working of an event, not the immediate, direct, or simple response to a painful event’ (Araújo 2015, 2). Quoting psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, Araújo also states that ‘many people never experience a trauma following a shock’ (2).

For example, Lollini adapts the paradigm to Letters from Prison by Antonio Gramsci, one of the most famous political prisoners of the twentieth century and one that devoted his entire life to a political cause. The critic in fact refers to LaCapra’s Representing the Holocaust as the best approach to analyse Gramsci’s subjectivity (Lollini 1996, 523). According to Lollini Letters embodies ‘the trauma and the paradox of the testimony, which lie precisely in this gap between the need of a consistent subject and the flow of time and of traumatic events that contradict this consistency and coherence. In this gap the subject experiences a crisis of identity’ (522). It is possible to recognise the mark of trauma-informed discourse also in Gould’s analysis of accounts by Iranian prisoners, when she affirms that their piecing together of the fragments of experience through language is part of a process of overcoming the trauma of confinement’ (Gould 2017, 19). Ramos’ Memórias have also been analysed through this paradigm, such as in Marco (2004); Silva de Abreu (2008); Oliveira (2011); Birman (2012).

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The interview is still unpublished.

In her analysis of accounts by Romanian political prisoners, Dumitrescu reports how ‘in their dexterous attempts to evade the censor […] writers protected their lives by pushing their craft to ever-greater levels of allusive sophistication’ (Dumitrescu 2016, 17). In an interview granted to me and still unpublished, Vieira recalls how, one day, one of his fellow prisoners was arbitrarily and severely punished in the prisoners’ canteen at Tarrafal. As he could not talk explicitly about the event, this is what he wrote in a letter to his wife: ‘Today, in the canteen, at lunch, something interesting happened. I forgot to eat my soup because I was looking at the sun coming in through the bars and depicting the bars

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on our table. The others did not care much and kept on eating, but I could not eat the soup with the bars mirroring in it.’

22 Jurgenson (2016) suggests that replacing historical sources where they are not available may justify the prisoners’ wish to leave a written testimony: ‘it is the awareness of being the only ones able to leave a trace […] that induces some prisoners, still in the camps, to investigate, to collect other detainees' stories’ (269–70).

23 Not only did Jews not know nor understand why they were being incarcerated and exterminated, but as Laub reports, they were made to believe that they deserved it (Felman and Laub 1992, 79).

24 In the interview that closes his Papéis da prisão, José Luandino Vieira affirms: ‘if it wasn’t for Linda I would have most possibly drowned … Two decisions were very important: one, the issue of writing; the other, my relationship. Without this relationship, none of us would be the same person; this is what I call a fundamental relationship’ (Vieira 2015, 1072).

25 Even authors considered canonical in trauma studies, such as Primo Levi, do not always fit in the grid of the dominant paradigm. For example, Michaela Wolf states that Levi ‘rejects the notion of the ‘incomunicabilità’, the incommunicability, of the lager experience […], thus arguing against the thesis that sees the Holocaust as a unique experience, which would imply that the experience is bound to remain buried with the death of its victims’ (Wolf 2016, 14–15).

26 Both texts are quite voluminous: Ramos’ Memórias are divided in four parts, which in the original project should have been four different volumes. On the other hand, the first edition of Vieira’s Papéis da prisão has 1102 pages, while the original notebooks comprised ‘approximately 2000 fragile handwritten sheets of paper’ (Ribeiro and Vecchi 2015, 17).

27 José Luandino Vieira was arrested in Lisbon on 20 November 1961. The first entry in the first notebook dates 10 October 1962 (Vieira 2015, 41).

28 Although he did not write any notebooks during his first year in prison, Vieira wrote the short stories that were later collected and published with the title Nosso Musseque. For more information, see the chronology at the end of Papéis da prisão.

29 As long as Vieira stayed in Luanda, the notebooks had an immediate political purpose: passing information to the nationalist movement working in the underground. His transfer to Cape Vert would prevent this kind of communication. However, the notebooks still had a political drive, although not an immediate one: one of the intentions behind the notebooks was to collect material on Angolan culture to prove that ‘the political independence [of Angola] has a cultural base because we [Angolans] have a different culture that justifies political independence’ (Vieira 2015, 1053).

30 For a detailed analysis of the genesis of the Prison Notebooks, see the preface by Valentino Gerratana (1977, XXX–XLII).

Works cited

Andermahr, Sonya et al. 2015. Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism. N.p.


