

Understanding the Legacies of Peripheral Literature in Brazil  
Summer 2022 Tinker Research Grant Report

In 2004, an image of Brazil gained rapid success globally for its depiction of a center and a periphery that called the viewer's attention above all for their physical proximity. The Brazilian photographer Tuca Vieira had captured an image of São Paulo's elite neighborhood of Morumbi next to the lower-class neighborhood of Paraisópolis which, despite its cultural specificity, attracted worldwide attention due to its shock value. Images of poverty such as Vieira's raise questions about representation: to whom are they really addressed, given that there is little control over who receives them, and what kind of dialogue can they establish with this audience? The fine line between sensationalizing poverty and ethically exposing it to promote social change is particularly relevant here, making even more relevant the parallel question of who produces such images of poverty: the question of representation vs. self-representation.



Viera's photograph of Paraisópolis

From the mid-twentieth century onward, the development of “literatura periférica” (“peripheral literature”) in Brazil has mirrored many of these questions that arise organically from the process of representing racial and class inequalities. Literature creates a productive point of entry into these questions due to its ability to add a cultural explanation to otherwise “objective” documentary images. In particular, peripheral literature is a movement that directly addresses this question of who produces this perspective because it is defined as much by which authors write it as by what they write.

Peripheral literature, at its most basic level, is literature produced by primarily Afro-Brazilian authors from favelas and other marginalized urban areas in Brazilian cities who write about issues in their communities, especially urban violence, racism, labor exploitation, and poverty. Early works of peripheral literature such as Carolina Maria de Jesus' *Quarto de despejo* (translated in English as *Child of the Dark*, 1960) already had major international repercussions, becoming an international bestseller translated into fourteen languages. In the 1990s, following improvements in living conditions in favelas, more contemporary authors such as Ferréz helped solidify this literature into a semi-canonical position Brazilian literature. These more recent works' international reception has also been influential, being translated and circulated in Europe and the U.S. as well as within Brazil.

During my Tinker Summer Research Grant project, I sought to gain a broader understanding of issues surrounding cultural production and structural inequalities in contemporary Brazil. As part of my pre-dissertation exploration of research topics, I wanted to understand how “peripheral literature” interprets the confrontation or disconnect that exists globally between mainstream intellectual perspectives and perspectives marginalized from intellectual and cultural production, using this literary movement as a starting point to investigate more overarching questions of race, gender, and cultural citizenship in the Americas, topics in which I have been and remain deeply invested in my past and future research projects.



Contemporary art depicting the artist’s conceptualization of peripheral literature, and of the relationship between literacy and literature more broadly

My project this summer consisted of two main components: familiarizing myself with the works of the most well-known authors associated with “peripheral literature,” such as Carolina Maria de Jesus, Ferréz, Paulo Lins, Allan da Rosa, and Geovani Martins, and with current academic discussions surrounding the movement and interviewing academics in relevant areas of the fields of Comparative Literature and Spanish and Portuguese to see how their past research interpreted these questions. Because intellectual authority is typically derived from high levels of formal education, yet many peripheral literature authors position their authority to represent their communities as coming from the experiences of educationally disenfranchised populations, I asked myself how this demographic of authors related to their intended public and how their intended public related back to them.

Although the virtual research necessitated by summer 2022 travel advisories made me rethink the methodology of my project as it ruled out direct archival research, it ultimately expanded the range of perspectives to which I had access. Because of online access and library resources, my virtual methodology was not overly detrimental to the literature review aspect of my project. Virtual research was particularly helpful when I reached the point of conducting interviews. Throughout this summer, I was able to conduct informal, informational interviews with academic sources who connected me to other appropriate sources, recommended lesser-known authors and texts, and shared with me access to texts from authors who are not widely circulated in the U.S. or within Brazil. To give just one example, a contact introduced me to *Comovida como o diabo* (2019), a digital collection of poems by Juliana Sankofa (the artistic

name of the Afro-Brazilian poet Juliana Cristina Costa) I could not have otherwise obtained, whose poems on racism and gender bias embrace confrontation as a way of responding to discrimination:

Sociedade transformou livro em privilégio  
E depois diz que quem não ler é porque  
não quer  
Sério!?  
A vida está aí  
Nas janelas e ruas das favelas  
Na rara pausa da vida  
Alguém ler o mundo  
e sente dor

Enquanto isso  
Dizem que está faltando leitura  
“O povo não ler”

This poem, which could be translated as “Society made books a privilege / and then they say when someone doesn’t read, it’s because they don’t want to / Really?! / Life is right there / In the windows and streets of the favelas / In the rare pause in life / Someone reads the world / and feels pain / Meanwhile / they say what they need is to read / ‘Regular people don’t read,’” addresses the relationship between access to literacy and intellectual authority that I had originally set out to study. The speaker directly mocks the commonplace discourse in academic circles that marginalized populations just aren’t interested in literature by highlighting the educational and financial barriers that make it difficult to have the academic preparation necessary to study literature in the first place. At the same time, it introduces the idea of experience, of a kind of sociological observation of the speaker’s life and community (“reading the world”), as an alternative source of intellectual authority. Having access to extremely contemporary and non-canonical sources in Brazil gave new dimensions to my research project by enabling me to see how academic and cultural discussions continue to evolve around this topic via non-traditional publishing venues, and how digital and other new forms of media allow young, racialized, and gendered perspectives to be heard, albeit not always to reach a large audience.



## Juliana Sankofa

Artwork from the cover of *Comovida como o diabo*

The more I learned about this topic, the more clearly I could define my questions and areas that I needed to examine further. Across my readings and interviews, several recurring unresolved questions emerged. The first was the need to better define what is considered peripheral literature – the bestselling works from leading publishers to which I had been exposed in my coursework were often perceived as “too canonical” to be truly peripheral, and the international success of authors such as Ferréz and Geovani Martins were perceived as having distanced these authors from the marginalized communities they represented. The nuance of these ideas revealed an underlying contradiction to me: on one hand, the fact of there being multiple levels of periphery and of access to the resources necessary to be published and be heard can certainly limit and distort which perspectives are heard. On the other hand, however, the idea that the authors from disadvantaged backgrounds who reach the largest audiences are by definition too successful to accurately represent their communities can also be a tool used to downplay their artistic and sociopolitical contributions. Another related but distinct theme was that the language we use to describe peripheral literature can itself be limiting – not only was it at times unclear which authors belonged to this movement, but having a clear definition could prove to be a barrier from observing key parallels within Brazilian literature and with other national literary traditions, especially Spanish American literature which responds to fundamentally similar issues. These related concerns about labeling and boundaries made me see the importance of drawing comparisons between thematically related literatures from different national traditions going forward, especially with regards to studying conceptually similar but culturally different Latin American literary traditions related to poverty and racism.

My approach to studying how perceptions of intellectual authority relate to cultural production in contemporary Brazilian literature this summer made me realize that it is through these authors’ interactions with those with access to a culture perceived as more legitimate, whether through describing actual human contact or central and peripheral groups writing to/about one another, that the cultural distance between them is produced. They also pointed to the contradiction of visibility in that, although marginalized communities often feel invisible in the problems they have to face as individuals, they become hyper-visible in the stereotypes ascribed to them by others. In doing so, the “peripheral literature” authors I studied often challenged the ideas of representation vs. self-representation often presented as discrete categories. In destabilizing rigid divisions between the center vs. the periphery through these

interactions while reinforcing it on a more cultural level, marginalized subjects often by definition must represent others' projections onto them. These considerations have also led me back to the need to compare based on content, not national or linguistic boundaries. After exploring a wide range of Brazilian authors whose audiences varied, yet whose concerns remained in response to the same issues, there remains the need to explore these questions more broadly and comparatively across Luso-Hispanic literatures.