

# Interweaving Identities: Race and Gender in Henrique Marques Samyn's Writing

Prof. Dr. Henrique Marques Samyn (UERJ)

## Interviewers

Bruna de Oliveira Sales (UERJ/CAPES)

Marcela Ansaloni de Azevedo (UERJ/CAPES)

Pâmera Ferreira Santos (UERJ/FAPERJ)

For our Miscellaneous edition, with great enthusiasm, we announce the interviewee for the forty-fourth issue of the student magazine of the Postgraduate Program in Literature at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Professor Henrique Marques Samyn.

PhD in Literature in the area of Portuguese Literature from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, with a post-doctoral internship in Literature also at UERJ, dedicated to researching the representation of racialized and gendered subjectivities and bodies from an intersectional perspective. He develops the project “A experiência como fundamento na literatura luso-brasileira de autoria negra” (Prociência / Pibic / UERJ) together with the award-winning LetrasPetras project, focusing on the study and dissemination of literary, cultural and intellectual production by black and women authorship. Furthermore, he is coordinator of the Galician Studies Program at UERJ, in which he researches the historical process of construction of Iberian racism and develops the project “(Contra)modelos de gênero na estética (neo)trovadoresca: matrizes e heranças” (Pibic/UERJ).

In addition to being an Associate Professor at the Institute of Languages and Literature at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Henrique Marques Samyn wrote *Levante* (2020), *Uma Temporada no Inferno* (2022) and *Os Panteras Negras: uma introdução* (2023) among others.

In this interview, we had the pleasure of learning a little more about the aforementioned LetrasPretas project, coordinated by him together with his students. From the importance to the difficulties in keeping it active, we talked about why we

need to have a welcoming place within the university. Furthermore, the importance of literature in the representation of gender and racial minorities was also discussed, as well as the differences between academic and literary writing.

With deep joy, we thank the professor immensely for his willingness to grant us this interview. To the readers, we hope that this material will be of great value for your studies and research.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

1) To start our conversation, we would like to approach LetrasPretas<sup>1</sup>, a project that began at UERJ in 2017 and evolved into an extension project in 2019, of which you are the coordinator. Aiming at analyze and disseminate the literary, intellectual and cultural production of black women, especially independent authors, the project is developed with black students and quota holders at the University. Currently, it brings together members who update a blog, script and present a program on Rádio UERJ, in addition to organizing courses and events. In addition, it was granted with four academic scholarships subsidized by UERJ, covering areas such as Extension, Initiation to Teaching, Complementary Internal Internship and Proatec. Not only that, the project also won the Fernando Sgarbi Lima Award and received honorable mentions. Would it be possible to share with us the story of the creation of the project? What significant challenges were overcome to achieve the deserved recognition? Furthermore, could you provide more details about the work carried out on the project and highlight the results obtained so far?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

In first place, I want to thank the Palimpsesto magazine team, which is such a traditional and important periodical for our university, for inviting me to this interview. It is always a pleasure to talk to students at UERJ, which I have never left throughout my academic career; and in which I have been working, as a teacher and researcher, for more than a decade.

I will then talk about the LetrasPretas project. This project emerged in 2017, with the invaluable help of two students: Maria Verônica da Silva and Larissa França. We started by publishing a blog, updated weekly, in which we reviewed works by black women writers. Since then, the project has undergone several transformations. Many other students joined us; we started holding events and several activities, welcoming

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the project, please go to: <https://letraspretas.com/>.

black writers and intellectuals to UERJ; and we started recording our radio/podcast program, which is now in its ninth season, in partnership with CTE/Rádio UERJ. In the beginning, the project worked almost as a collective, which allowed us to frequently build quilombo spaces within UERJ. With the institutionalization of the project and the obtaining of scholarships, we began to have to deal with the pressure of productivism, which had a negative impact on these aspects of the project, but provided extremely important academic resources for our members (several of whom advanced to postgraduate studies).

I think that projects like LetrasPretas are necessary because academic spaces are still very hostile for black people – especially for black women. Both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, racism, sexism and epistemicide violently affect black female students, to the point that professors feel free to offend and embarrass them during classes. Even though we are unable to welcome all the students who come to us within the scope of the project, we strive to ensure that LetrasPretas is present at our university, demonstrating that it is possible to build receptive spaces for black students in the academic world, despite all the difficulties. But the obstacles, in fact, are many: from contradictory and inconsistent assessments, which create problems for the renewal of the project (we have managed to maintain our grants, but it is often necessary to appeal for resources to point out problems evident in the opinions issued themselves), to the lack of economic conditions for students to move forward in their academic trajectories. Despite everything, we resist; and I need to thank, above all, the students who act as coordinators of the project - currently: Maria Verônica, Amanda Lourenço and Camila Souza -, without whom it would be impossible to keep it running.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

2) On the project's website, when describing themselves, we find the explanation that the name of the project:

[It] seems like a tongue twister, this doesn't happen by chance; It is a metaphor for the countless difficulties faced by black women, both in the production and in the publication and dissemination of their work, in a society in which racism and sexism are still present as oppressive forces.

As coordinator of LetrasPretas and researcher specialized in gender representations, we would like to hear your perspective on the possible contribution of canonical literature

in challenging the patriarchal structure. How do you see the evolution of this representation throughout history?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

In my point of view, one of the most interesting and valuable possibilities opened up by studies on gender and race, more broadly, and feminist and black critical perspectives, more specifically, is the rereading of works conventionally qualified as canonical, in order to enable questions about how certain modes of representation and aesthetic parameters that reproduce sexist and racist values have been consolidated, through stereotypes or subalternizing narrative devices, for example. Thus, contrary to what is often assumed, it is not a question of discarding works considered canonical as negligible or irrelevant; it is about reading them from other perspectives, with the purpose of understanding what underlies the construction of the canon to which they were linked, as well as investigating how attachment to this canon legitimized the erasure of another set of works (including a vast contingent of works produced by women and black people). From these considerations, it becomes possible to ascertain to what extent the so-called canon has gender and color.

Another possible path is the construction of other canons, based on different parameters. In the context of black criticism, more specifically, this is something that has been thought about for decades, so that we have several historiographical and theoretical works, as well as anthologies, that allow reflections on what our “black canon” would be, in terms of names considered founding or essential. I think this is interesting because it highlights the fact that, when we talk about black literature, we are talking about an autonomous tradition, which develops in tension and contradiction with hegemonic Brazilian literature. My book of poems *Levante*, for example, was constructed exclusively in dialogue with this black literary tradition; As I have already emphasized several times, and, to the surprise of many people, *Levante's* poems do not dialogue with authors like Castro Alves or Jorge de Lima – my dialogue there is with names like Lino Guedes, Solano Trindade and Esmeralda Ribeiro. But there are also those who discuss the very need to construct a “black canon”, opting for other approaches.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

3) Even today, in academia, a space dedicated to discussion and the production of knowledge, it is not difficult to come across thoughts contrary to militant debates about gender and race in literary studies. From an intersectional perspective, what would be the role of literature so that oppressed minorities can achieve protagonism and begin to be considered subjects with a voice, especially in those places where they find resistance to their presence?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

A little provocatively, I will take as a starting point that reflection proposed by Antonio Candido, according to which literature is a universal manifestation of men, whatever is called literature – from the “complex ways” of “great civilizations” to the so-called folklore, as Candido highlighted. From where I speak, what interests me is precisely to pay attention to the limits implicit (or not) in this discourse: what kind of “universality” are we talking about? Who are the “men” who produce this “universality”? Based on what criteria can certain productions be classified as “complex” and others as “folkloric”? What makes it possible to recognize certain civilizations as “great”? See: what matters is, precisely, rethinking the existence of determinations that, in a more or less explicit way, operate historically to disqualify certain productions based on arbitrary criteria – qualifying them as “pamphleteering” or “militant”, for example, as if this necessarily implied harm to its aesthetic value or literary attributes. Proposing a review of these parameters requires understanding that racialized people, or those considered inferior or deviant with regard to the gender order, have always produced texts associated with their own experiences and worldviews; and that the mere cleavage between these and hegemonic values was taken as a pretext to prevent their entry into the space of “literature”. It is possible, therefore, to radically question the meaning of what is determined as “literary”, dispensing with universalizing or metaphysical claims.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

4) You have just released the book *Os Panteras Negras: uma introdução*, dealing with the history of the anti-capitalist American political party. It is your second book on the

subject, since, in 2018, you organized *Por uma revolução antirracista: uma antologia de textos dos Panteras Negras* (1968-1971). Thinking about your academic career and even choices as a literary critic, what do you believe is the main legacy left by the group?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

In fact, the anthology *Por uma revolução antirracista*, published in 2018, served as the basis for this new book – *Os Panteras Negras: uma introdução*, released now, in 2023. These books were born with the proposal to make more available to the Brazilian public information about one of the most important groups in the history of black movements; Many people have a vague notion of who the Black Panthers were, but very few people know their trajectory, what they really thought and defended. The 2018 anthology had a good response, but above all in the academic field; That's why I published this new book, with the purpose of providing a kind of introductory manual. Now, how to think about the relationship between the Black Panthers and black Brazilian literature? Perhaps it is possible to speculate about an indirect relationship, that is: to consider that writers linked to our black tradition, especially since the 1970s and 1980s, have established dialogues with issues guided by black movements that were also targeted by the Panthers – such as anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles, the valorization of black body aesthetics, etc. But it is interesting to highlight that the Black Panthers also produced literature: the pages of the party newspaper, *The Black Panther*, have many poems, some of which I translated and published in a magazine (*Despacho 7*, published by Corsário-Satã). Here is an example of research to be done: how is it possible to analyze, from a comparative perspective, the poems published in *The Black Panther* and those published by black writers in the 1970s?

## **PALIMPSESTO**

5) With a large volume of work focused on literary criticism, you decided to explore fictional prose in *Uma Temporada no Inferno*, in 2022. We have the report of an admirer of Lima Barreto who decides to relive the moment in which the author was hospitalized at the Hospital dos Alienados in order to overcome it and, after living this experience, finish writing the Barretian novel *O Cemitério dos Vivos*. What drew your attention to Lima Barreto and his mental health condition, more specifically?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

In fact, the first version of *Uma Temporada no Inferno* was written more than ten years before the book was published, and was not exactly born out of a choice. What happened was the following: in undergraduate and postgraduate studies, I had been taking courses that dealt with Lima Barreto, but which only approached the racial issue very superficially. So, I decided to read Lima's work on my own, looking for what interested me; and, by chance, I found in a public library in Praça Seca, which was close to the village where I lived, a copy of *O Cemitério dos Vivos*, which is always published with the *Diário do hospício*. Throughout reading and re-reading this book, without any pretension, I began to create a text that recreated and dialogued with Lima Barreto's narrative. Thus was born a first version, which went on to win a literary competition. However, at first, this “doppelgänger” was just an abstract voice built over the Barretian text. The published book, *Uma Temporada no Inferno*, is a rewriting of that first manuscript; in it, the voice is attributed to an unnamed protagonist, whose biographical trajectory generates a desire to retrace Lima's journey and complete his work. The creation of this narrator-character allowed me to delve deeper into the issue of mental health, because he is a black man in a racist society, who looks up to the author of *Numa e a ninfa* to become “someone”. The stays in the asylum threw Lima Barreto into extreme situations; but even so, he did not turn his back on literature – on the contrary: he tried to fictionalize his experiences, looking for similarities between himself and writers like Cervantes and Dostoevsky. The narrator character of *Uma Temporada no Inferno* tries to do something similar; In her own words, literature is his Ariadne thread.

## **PALIMPSESTO**

6) In studies on narrative texts, the narrator's provocations, with what he tells and generates questions, make use of instruments such as psychological, ideological, historical and social components, perceptual aspects of distance, angle or quantity of vision. Could you, as an author, share how you create your narrator? Do you consider that you were inspired by or resemble the narrator of another author in Portuguese? What do you believe is essential in a narrator?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

Personally, I don't have a defined protocol for dealing with this construction of the narrator. There are many possible solutions, and I think that everything needs to fit organically into each text, considering the aesthetic demands.

In the case of *Uma Temporada no Inferno*, the first version didn't exactly have a narrator; As I already mentioned, what sustained the narrative was a kind of abstract voice that appropriated Lima Barreto's text and dialogued with it, exploring other possibilities based on what was already in the original works – O cemitério dos vivos and, above all, the Diário do hospício. In the second version, the narrator who is in the published book was born, when I realized that this voice could get a body and a story.

But, if you allow me, I would like to move your question to talk a little about *Levante*, because something curious happened regarding that book. In *Levante*, there are many voices: there are more descriptive or more lyrical poems, which enunciate discourses from particular locations – exposing, for example, perspectives of enslaved people or colonizers. Some poems stage the voices of certain historical figures. And it has happened, twice, that people attribute to me, as an empirical author, what is “said” by a character: Lucas da Feira, whose speech, although vocalizing anti-slavery resistance, reproduces patriarchal violence. This is based on historical records and traditional narratives, which present Lucas da Feira as a vengeful figure, who raped white women to respond to abuse committed against black women. I myself have already critically addressed this discourse, in a text published in the book I edited with professor and researcher Lina Arao (*Feminismos Dissidentes*); but, on a naive reading, there have been those who thought that I would somehow endorse it. And what highlights the naivety of this reading is that they project onto me the voice of a black male character; but no one does the same, for example, with the voice of the colonizer, present in other *Levante* poems.

So, to summarize: what I think is essential is, on the one hand, that the narrative instance maintains an organic relationship with the aesthetic proposal of the work; and that, on the other hand, any reading of the text pays attention to the complexities of this cleavage between the fictional or lyrical voice and the empirical author.



## **PALIMPSESTO**

7) And finally, could you share with us what your research process was like for writing the book *Uma Temporada no Inferno*? Was the transition from academic to literary writing challenging for you? What were the advantages and difficulties encountered on this journey?

## **HENRIQUE MARQUES SAMYN**

Sometimes I joke that writing *Uma Temporada no Inferno* was a way of liberation. I've been in academia for a long time, and you know how things work: we need to bring all the references, always make it clear who we're talking to... when it comes to literary works, the rules are different. I can, for example, freely rewrite excerpts from Lima Barreto's works, introducing the changes I want, based on what I deem aesthetically interesting, and leaving it up to whoever reads to interpret that. In fact, I did this in certain passages of *Uma Temporada no Inferno*; and there have been people who thought that I wrote excerpts that, in fact, were produced by Lima Barreto. I also inserted into the book many elements that came from academic research, such as treatises and scientific texts produced between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in which eugenic thinking is evident. A writer friend, Vinicius Neves Mariano, even mentioned this material in a very interesting story, in which he turns me into a character (!). There are also excerpts from journalistic articles, chronicles... I mean, it wasn't difficult; It was very funny, also because it allowed me to pose certain questions (and create certain traps) for those dedicated to literary criticism and academic research. Whether it worked or not, only those who read the book can say.

Thank you, once again, for the great conversation.

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**Prof. Dr. Henrique Marques Samyn:** Associate Professor and proscientist researcher at the Institute of Languages and Literature of the State University of Rio de Janeiro. His research addresses the representation of racialized and gendered subjectivities and bodies from an intersectional perspective. He develops the project “Experience as a foundation in Portuguese-Brazilian literature by black authors” (Prociência/Pibic UERJ) with the Letras Pretas extension project, aiming at the study and dissemination of literary, cultural and intellectual production by black and female authors, developed with black students and UERJ quota students. As coordinator of the Galician Studies Program at UERJ, he researches the historical process of construction of Iberian racism and develops the project (Contra) gender models in (neo) troubadour aesthetics: matrices and inheritances (Pibic UERJ). Since 2020, he has taught on black-authored literature at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, as an Affiliated Associate Professor. In 2023, he was invited to teach in person, in Tokyo, a seminar on black Brazilian literature and criticism. He was part of the Consultative Commission for the Machado de Assis Occupation, carried out by Itaú Cultural in 2023/2024. He is a member of the team at the Gender Studies Office at the University of Lisbon. As a writer, he has texts published in several anthologies published in Brazil and abroad, and has been invited to regularly participate in literary events such as the Paraty International Literary Festival, the Periferias Literary Festival and Primavera dos Livros, among others. In 2014, he received the Anísio Teixeira Teaching Award for Teaching, being elected by the students of the Center for Education and Humanities at UERJ, by direct vote, the professor who most contributed to their academic training. E-mail: [marquessamyn@gmail.com](mailto:marquessamyn@gmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2624-3487>.

**Bruna de Oliveira Sales:** She is a PhD student in Portuguese Literature at the State University of Rio de Janeiro and is a CAPES fellow. She has a master's degree in Portuguese Literature from the same institution and her studies focus on gender issues in Camilo Castelo Branco's novels. Furthermore, she is a specialist in Italian Translation also from UERJ. She has a degree in Literature: Portuguese / Italian from the State University of Rio de Janeiro, during which time she developed research in the area of

Linguistics, focusing on Discourse Analysis, and Portuguese Literature, having researched troubadour songs and the 19th century period.

Email: [b.oliveira2703@gmail.com](mailto:b.oliveira2703@gmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1494-8487>.

**Marcela Ansaloni de Azevedo:** PhD student in Portuguese Literature, at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ/CAPES), where she researches the short-story production of the writer Maria Judite de Carvalho under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Sérgio Nazar David. Master in Comparative Literature (UERJ), having as research object Raduan Nassar's *Lavoura Arcaica* and the silence that permeates the work. She also has experience in the Literature area, with an emphasis on Portuguese Language and Literature in Basic Education. General editor of *Revista Palimpsesto*, from the Postgraduate Program in Literature at UERJ, since May 2023. E-mail: [marcelaansaloni@hotmail.com](mailto:marcelaansaloni@hotmail.com) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7913-6960>.

**Pâmera Ferreira Santos:** She is a PhD student, FAPERJ scholarship fellow, in Portuguese Literature at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, since 2021, where she also completed her undergraduate degree in Literature (2004-2008) and her master's degree in Portuguese Literature (2009-2011). She worked as a Portuguese language teacher and in the pedagogical administration of Basic Education for the Brazilian Navy, in addition to guiding the completion of a specialization course in Neuroscience. Her research is focused on the aspects of verisimilitude and mimesis between the contemporary, philosophical and literary in the work of José Saramago.

Email: [pamera\\_santos@yahoo.com.br](mailto:pamera_santos@yahoo.com.br) | ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1488-7197/>.